

DISCUSSION

Early Prehistoric, by Timothy Darvill

The pair of parallel ditches and associated features in Area A provide a challenge to interpretation as numerous possibilities exist given the recorded ground-plan, the eroded nature of the interior surface, which may have led to the loss of significant and distinctive features, and the relative poverty of dateable material. The primary silts and lowest fills are undated, allowing the possibility that in origin they are rather earlier than the date suggested by the finds and mid 2nd millennium BC radiocarbon date from midway up the sequence of fills (which indeed might have been within a recut). Three possible interpretations are considered plausible, of which the first seems most likely.

First, that these are the quarry ditches of a medium-sized plough-levelled long barrow; the stones in the lower ditch fills being the remains of a central mound. While numerous stone-built long barrows are known on the Cotswold uplands (Darvill 2004) no certain examples are known in the lower Severn Valley or upper Thames Valley and it is unclear what earthen long barrows in these areas might look like. A pair of ditches broadly similar to those at Rudgeway Lane was recognised during excavations at Cleveland Farm, Ashton Keynes, Wiltshire (Powell *et al.* 2008, 23) although they are slightly shorter, at 22m, and rather narrower with a tapering plan some 4m apart at the northwest end and 5.5m apart at the southeast. Much the same was found at Wasperton, Warwickshire (Hughes and Crawford 1995, 9) where the pair of roughly parallel ditches were 15.5m and 13m long respectively and up to 5m apart. At Raunds, Northamptonshire, a pair of parallel ditches each about 20m long and set 10m apart cut into the top of a turf mound and were perhaps quarries for a low linear mound. The feature was dated to 3750–3620 BC (Harding and Healy 2008, 70–3). Larger and more widely spaced parallel ditches are well known among earthen long barrows in Wessex as, for example at South Street, Wiltshire, where the ditches were 43m long and about 28m apart. There was no evidence of a chamber within that barrow and apart from stakeholes representing the lines of hurdlework fences subdividing the barrow mound there were rather few sub-surface features (Ashbee *et al.* 1979, 250–98). Long barrow ditches are often non-symmetrical, as here, and are sometimes recut or their part-silted hollows become repositories for cultural debris in later prehistory.

A second possibility is that these ditches form two edges of a roughly square enclosure, the other two sides being either left open or closed by a light fence or hedge without a flanking ditch. Superficially similar features are known at Gwithian, Cornwall (Megaw 1976, fig. 4.1), although the linear boundaries east and west of the settlement area are probably best considered elements of a fieldsystem.

A third possibility focuses on land boundaries defining units within fieldsystems. At Perry Oaks, Middlesex, for example, short lengths of parallel ditch appear to have formed extensions to more substantial co-axial systems. The land-units were generally 30–40m wide and ditch segments less than 100m in length were fairly common (Framework Archaeology 2006, fig. 3.11). Against this interpretation is the apparent absence of a co-axial fieldsystem in the area and the size of the ditches, which are rather large for the boundaries/drainage ditches of typical prehistoric fieldsystems.