



The first cursus monument was discovered in 1723 by William Stukeley as he explored the landscape around Stonehenge. It is a ditched enclosure 100 m wide and an incredible 2730 m long. He decided it was a race course (a cursus) for the chariots that Julius Caesar had encountered during his military expedition in 54 BC. We now know that explanation is completely anachronistic – the monuments are three and a half thousand years older than he thought – but the name has been retained because we remain unsure of their real use.

Another much smaller cursus was discovered close by in 1819 but it wasn't until the invention of the aeroplane that others were added. These had all been ploughed flat and so were invisible on the ground but their ditches showed as marks in growing crops. Over 90 sites are now known, 24 of which in Scotland have posts, usually set close together, defining their edges rather than a ditch and bank.

Whether defined by ditches or posts, all are of the same basic form: parallel sided, usually straight, and closed at each end by ditches/posts laid out as convex or squared terminals of consistent plan at each end of the monument. Terminals rarely include an entranceway. These are usually set back from them in a side ditch. Many cursus monuments south of the River Trent are carefully laid out with straight, even ditches and precisely squared ends. Cursus size varies hugely but all are large: St Peter's basilica in Rome, the longest church in Christendom, would only just fail to fit inside one of the smallest cursus monuments (Barford, Warwickshire: 185 m), while 122 football pitches could be set out within the nearly 10 km long Dorset Cursus on Cranborne Chase (actually two monuments set end to end). Shorter elongated sites with the same plan repertoire also exist (Fig. 1). These are termed long enclosures because they are of comparable size to long barrows and can, in some cases, be shown to have originally contained a mound. Mounds also existed within some cursus monuments (e.g. Scorton, North Yorkshire and Stanwell, Middlesex).

Until quite recently dating cursus monuments was incredibly difficult since ditches are invariably barren and so are interiors. Prior to radiocarbon dates being obtained the nearest estimates were based on stratigraphy: some cursus monuments incorporated and overlay Early Neolithic long barrows (e.g. the Dorset Cursus) and others had Late Neolithic henges built across their filled ditches (e.g. Thornborough, Yorks and Maxey, Cambs.). Secure radiocarbon dates now range from 3600 cal BC to 3000 cal BC with most falling in the first half of that period. That places them firmly in the Middle Neolithic: 3500–2900 cal BC. Peterborough Ware – a ceramic bowl tradition bearing impressions of twisted cord and bird bone that appeared at this time and spread right across southern Britain – has been found in some of their ditches. Some post-built sites in Scotland have produced dates that are earlier by a couple of centuries but this may reflect the age of the trees used to build them.

During the later part of the Middle Neolithic (3300–2900 cal BC), when cursus monuments were still being built, burials began to be made under round barrows. They were quite different to the earlier collective, and usually fragmentary, burials under long barrows (3800–3500 cal BC). Bodies were now buried intact and were often accompanied by finely made flint or jet artefacts. As such burials have often been found in the same areas as groupings of cursus monuments (e.g. the Wolds of East Yorkshire and the Oxford region) a connection between the two seems probable, as it does with the unparalleled spread of Peterborough Ware.

Environmental sampling has shown that most cursus sites were built in open or semi-open grassland. The fact that many of the larger ones attracted considerable numbers of round barrows during the Early Bronze Age (2300–1500 cal BC) points to the chosen locales operating as very long-lived, seasonal pasture zones for widespread groups. It is difficult to understand the exact role(s) that cursus played, both in their own right and in the change from Early Neolithic mixed farming to a

predominantly pastoral economy. With a very few exceptions they are far too wide, and lack the terminal focus necessary, for them to have been primarily processional ways. Great width also precludes their use as fine astronomical sighting devices or as assembly-debating grounds: voices would not carry across the width of most, let alone along their length. And there are no scatters of distinct artefacts or bones that can be specifically related to cursus confines, inside or out, to help us find an answer. As they clearly had a ritual rather than a mundane function, it is worth recalling that ritual architecture worldwide is overwhelmingly symbolic; it is only ever crudely functional if that is perceived as a virtue (e.g. Methodist chapels). From that symbolic perspective it is surely significant that cursus plans exaggerate those of long enclosures, and that they in turn exaggerate those of houses (Fig. 2). Were cursus then symbolic house precincts of monumental size built to establish a new sense of collective

identity amongst assembling transhumant pastoralists, or did they emphasise the pre-eminent ancestry of newly emerged individual leaders?

Further Reading

Loveday, R. 2006. *Inscribed across the Landscape. The cursus enigma*. Stroud: Tempus

Brophy, K. 2016. *Reading Between the Lines. The Neolithic cursus monuments of Scotland*. London: Routledge

Barclay, A. & Harding J. (eds) 1999. *Pathways and Ceremonies. The cursus monuments of Britain and Ireland*. Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers 4. Oxford: Oxbow Books

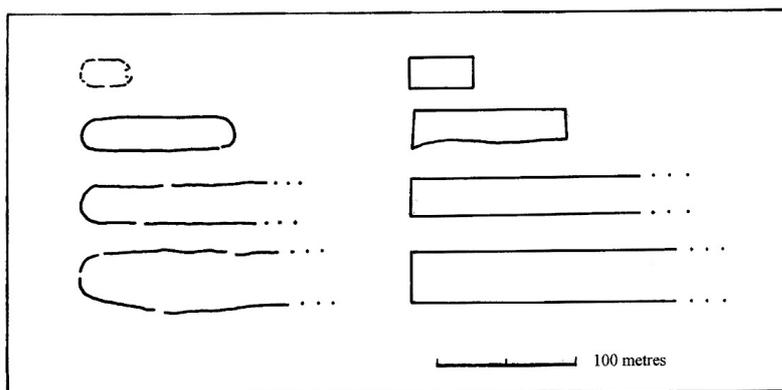


Fig. 1. Long enclosure to cursus

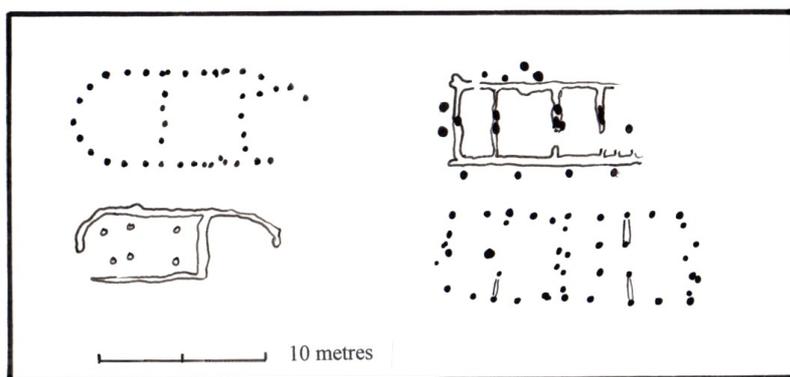


Fig. 2 Early Neolithic house sites (Lismore Fields, Buxton, Derbys. (bottom right) probably represents a double unit)

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