

An Early Neolithic Ritual Structure on Sejerø

by DAVID LIVERSAGE

Sejerø is an island 11 km long and 1½ km wide situated about 11 km off the NW coast of Zealand in Sejerø Bay. Despite its relatively isolated position it was inhabited at many different periods and has produced many archaeological remains (Liversage 1974). A new discovery was made in 1977. The site was situated on the southern slope of a prominence called Lundehøj on the Geodætisk Institut maps, more precisely at the place where a shoulder of Lundehøj begins to fall steeply towards the area of raised beach below. Part of it (Feature A) was discovered during agricultural operations in November 1977. First some stones were taken away and then the remainder were exposed in place by some of the islanders, who called in the National Museum as soon as there was reason to suppose it was an archaeological feature. The rest of the feature was cleared under my supervision.

The excavation was basically very simple and consisted of uncovering the stones of the entire feature, planning and photographing them, removing them carefully while looking for possible slots or alignments, and finally searching the natural subsoil for features dug into it. The upper plan, fig. 1, shows all the stones visible when the overburden was removed, while the lower plan, fig. 2, shows the stones and other features in the end thought best to reveal the original plan of the structure after fallen and displaced stones had been taken away.

There were two separate features, called A and B. After the islanders' clearance Feature A showed as an irregular heap of stones about 2,6 m long and 0,5 m wide, running in an E-W direction and already somewhat disturbed by cultivation (fig. 1). In it were field stones, broken stone fragments the size of a fist, and scattered pieces of shattered flint. Removal of these showed that the basal layer was a rough paving of stones laid with a flat face upwards. Some were cloven and others were not. The paving is seen in fig. 2. It

rested on a thin humic layer immediately above the till, and must have sunk to this level through the effect of earthworm action after being built on the surface. Under the western part of the paving was found a pit about 10 cm deep, whose edges are shown freely reconstructed with a stippled line in the places where they had been destroyed during the initial clearance. The fill of the pit consisted of the same humified clay as found elsewhere under the paving. Two querns were included among the stones of Feature A, but there were no other finds.

Feature B was much larger and more complicated. It was a complex heap of stones with a length of 8–9 m and a width, disregarding outlying stones, of nearly 4 m. The stones had obviously been piled on the original ground surface or had fallen on to it, and in the course of time the sod had grown up between them. In the end the whole heap had been buried by soil creep resulting from the cultivation of the slope above. There was no trace of any transported earthen fill.

As fig. 1 shows, Feature B was roughly symmetrical about a long axis. The northern side consisted in its western 6 m of a continuous arc of stones two to three stones wide (more outlying stones are presumably displaced). They were arranged rather curiously, in that most of them had their long axis at right angle to the direction of the arc and they were pitched with their northern ends low and their southern ends higher. The farther south a stone lay in the belt, the higher it lay, so that the whole arc rested on a bank of soft earth that sloped up from north to south under it. An impression of the lie of the stones is given by fig. 3. The matching southern arc was laid differently. The long axes of the stones were mainly vertical and the stones were packed very closely. We will return later to a possible reason why the stones were laid differently on the two sides of the feature. It is not clear what

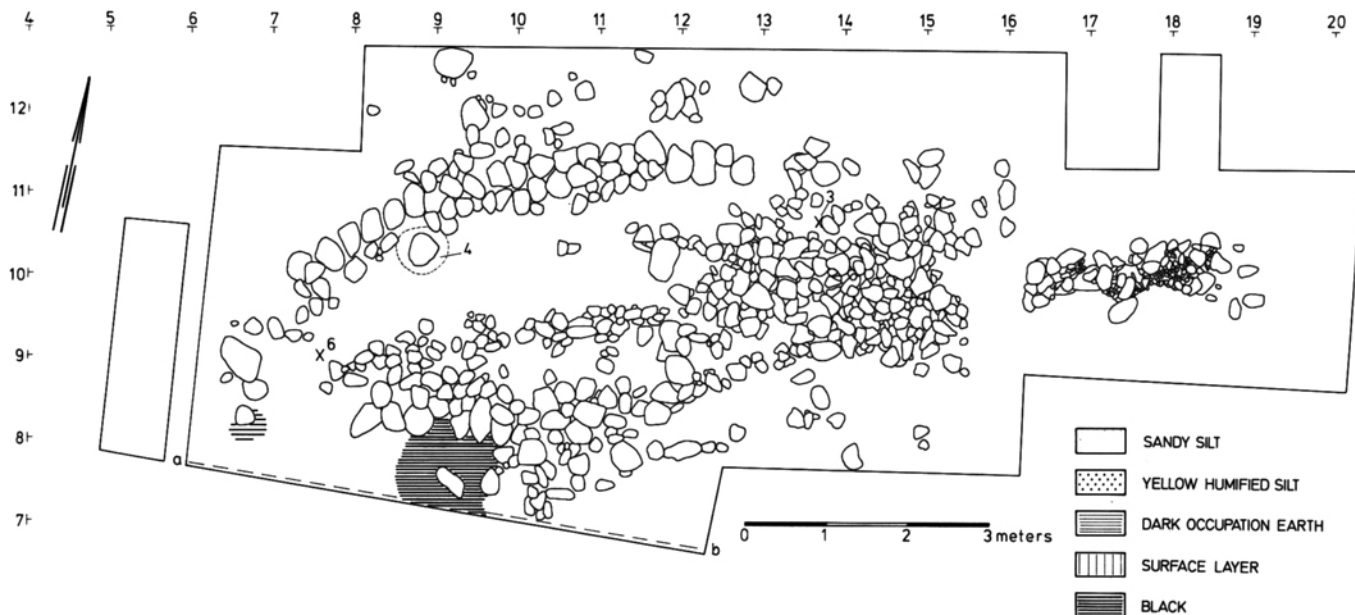


Fig. 1. Lundeheøj, upper plan showing all stones in place.

happened at the western end of Feature B, as the stones here had been disturbed.

Where the continuous arcs of larger stones ended at the east there lay a flat heap of somewhat smaller field stones two or three deep. This part of the feature is seen before removal of any stones in fig. 1. The heap was well demarcated to the south and reasonably well demarcated to the east and north, but less so to the west, where it ran out as an irregular wedge between the northern and southern arcs. The northern and southern edges ran into the stone arcs but had a slightly different direction from them. Because of the planigraphic continuity between all parts of what is called Feature B, and because of the way all the stones interlocked, the whole thing must be regarded as a single complex structure.

Further west there was a good deal of empty space between the two arcs, but a belt of stone from about 8/9 to 12/10 on the excavation's co-ordinates lay parallel with and slightly south of the long axis of the feature. These stones were somewhat smaller than those of the northern and southern arcs, and, surprisingly, lay slightly lower, definitely sunk into the humified material immediately above the natural; this had not, however, been dug into. The stones could have been inserted at this depth by digging a

shallow trench in the then existing soil, or by removing the soil from the whole interior of the structure to give a clean floor. Fig. 2 shows this belt between the two arcs after loose and presumably displaced stones had been removed. There was nothing about the placing of the stones in the belt that suggested the earlier presence of either horizontal or vertical wood, so the feature remains something of a mystery.

South of the southern arc, from approximately 11/8 to 13/8, ran an extra row of stones. They appeared to have been carefully set, and it is suggested that they supported reinforcing timbers on the downhill side of the structure.

Fig. 2 also shows the positions of the five postholes found. Three lay close together between the eastern end of the two arcs. Their diameters were all about 30 cm, and when sectioned they were found to extend only 10–15 cm into the sandy silt of which the bedrock in this area consisted (sections e-f, g-h, and j-k in fig. 1). A further posthole of similar dimensions had been dug at about 15,5/11, where the bedrock was hard till. This one was filled with humified grey clay. A little over a meter south of it was a slightly larger hole, into which stones from above had sunk. There is a clear planigraphical connection between these holes and the stones of Feature B as a whole. In particular the two

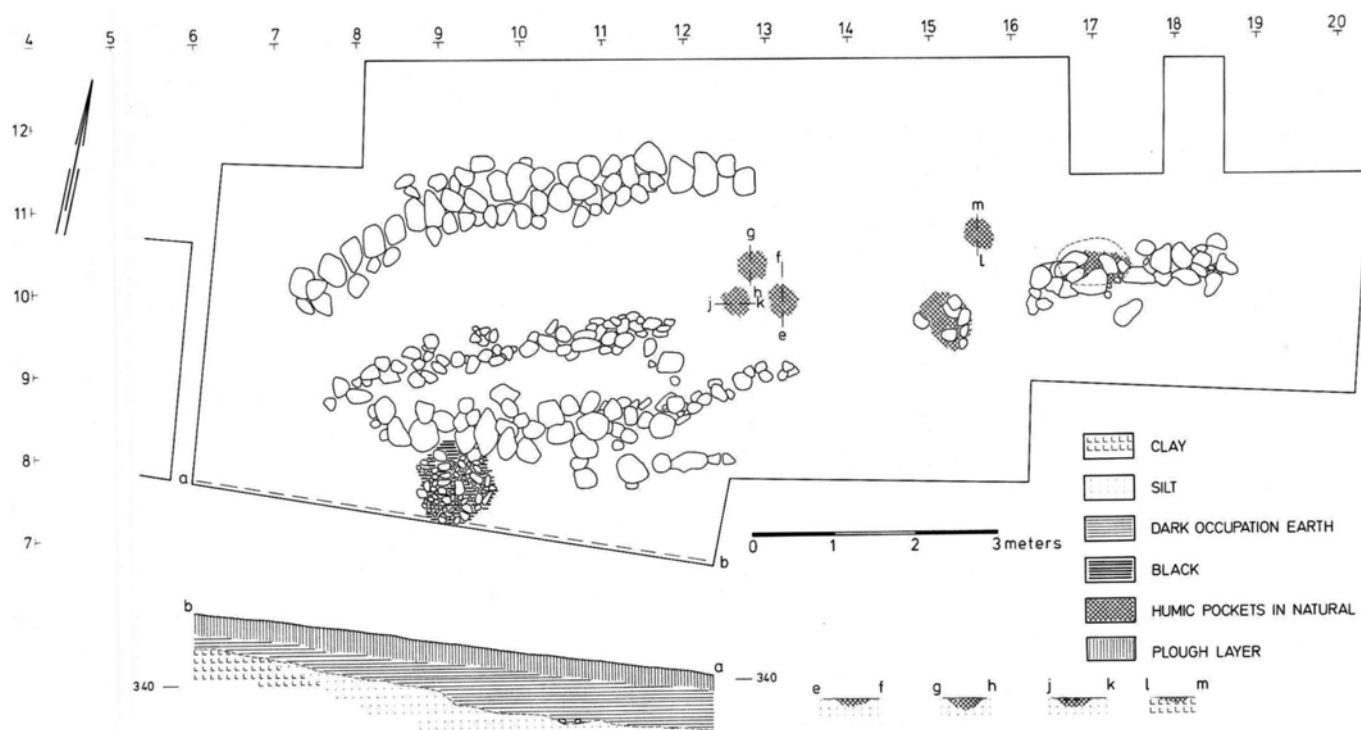


Fig. 2. Lundevej, lower plan showing only structurally significant stones.

last mentioned holes lay near its NE and SE corners. Among the stones of Feature B were found 2 querns and 3 fragments of querns.

FINDS

The date of these structures was implied at an early stage by the presence of shattered flint and of the relatively many quernstones (which in the author's experience at Lindebjerg on the mainland of Zealand close by are both early Neolithic traits (Liversage 1981)). Confirmation came with the discovery of the two pots illustrated in fig. 6. They were found when the stones were taken up, both in sherds and incomplete, but no doubt originally deposited intact. The smaller beaker was found at the point marked "3" in fig. 1 and the larger one at the point marked "4", where a stone from the northern arc had evidently fallen on it in prehistoric times and crushed it. The smaller beaker was 10 cm high and the large one's estimated height was 15 cm. Both were of dark grey-

brown ware rather sparingly gritted with angular pieces of crushed stone. They originally had a smooth, slightly burnished surface, but this had deteriorated in most places. Each was decorated close to the rim with two rows of horizontal cord impressions. The cord had two strands and appears to have been wound of fibres. Except for the quernstones mentioned earlier, there were no other finds that could be connected directly with Features A and B. The two pots date from an early stage of the Funnel Beaker culture.

A LATER SETTLEMENT

There were also signs of later settlement on the spot. With centre at 9,5/8 was found a round hearth about 90 cm in diameter (Feature C). It was floored with small shattered pieces of stone resting on the natural surface. It is seen on the right in fig. 4. There was no recoverable charcoal in it but over and around it the soil was considerably darkened. It lay at so deep a level because the surface soil was removed from a small area

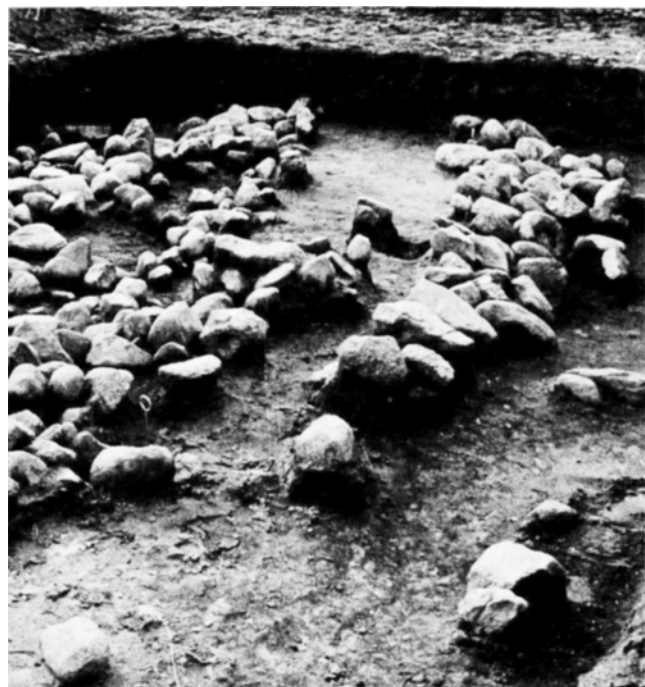


Fig. 5. Feature B partly uncovered from NE before removal of any stones. Note the arc of sloping stones on the north side of the structure (above).

Fig. 3. Feature B from the W before removal of any stones (above, left).

Fig. 4. The western end of Feature B after removal of loose stones. Note secondary hearth on right (below, left).

when it was built. The scarped edge of this intrusion is seen in section a-b about a meter uphill from the hearth, whose position in the section is revealed by two small stones. Furthermore the northern edge of the hearth had been dug in among the bases of the stones of the southern side of Feature B. This was not a purely temporary hearth, but one which had been prepared with some care, and it may very well have belonged to some sort of hut or shelter, which however had not left much trace except the hearth and the scarp. At some date a group of people had laid their dwelling beside the grown-over heap of stones on a hillside that Feature B by that time had become, and the stones at the western end of B were presumably disturbed at this time. The date of the settlement must be indicated by the only find of any significance from the dark layer. This is the thick-butted axe of Late

Neolithic type shown as fig. 7, which was found at the point marked "6" in figure 1. A little burned bone found during the excavation of Feature B and later identified by J. Balslev Jørgensen as probably human, is likely also to be from this period of settlement.

INTERPRETATION

It is natural to ask what Features A and B were originally. As there was no fill, there cannot have been a barrow on the site, and as there was no occupation layer from the primary period there cannot have been a normal settlement either. It seems natural to look for the answer in a ritual feature. Feature B must have been a building, but its curved plan suggests that it was built of flexible materials. The author suggests that

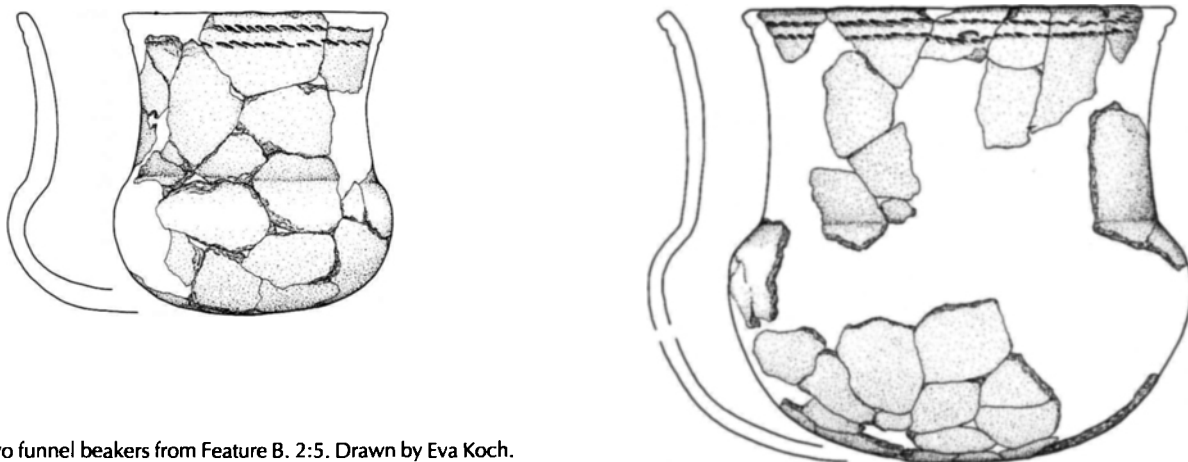


Fig. 6. The two funnel beakers from Feature B. 2:5. Drawn by Eva Koch.

this may have been closely set wooden rods stuck into the topsoil along its northern and southern sides in a curve, bent inwards to meet in the middle, and stabilised at the foot by stones. Such a framework would presumably have been crudely thatched. On the uphill side the stones had been set on end in two to three courses leaning against the wooden rods and possibly filled out with sods. When the wooden framework decayed the stones pressed the wall over, but in the meantime so much earth had accumulated below them that they never came to lie completely flat, but assumed the position seen in fig. 5. On the downhill side an inward-leaning revetment of this kind would have been in danger of slipping, and therefore the second course of stones was placed outside instead of on top of the first to steady it. The eastern part of the structure must have been otherwise constructed. The two posts at the corners suggest the jambs of an entrance. Access may therefore have been through a sort of porch, whose floor was covered with 2–3 layers of stones when the building was abandoned. They were perhaps a sort of symbolic blocking, or perhaps they had rested on the roof of the supposed porch and collapsed when the wood rotted. The three postholes close together between the eastern end of the stone arcs presumably held supports for the roof either of the porch or of the main part of the building. The size of the structure and its content of originally complete pots suggest an obvious analogy with the so-called cult houses, of which published examples are known from Tustrup (Kjærum 1955), Ferslev (Marseen 1960), Herrup (Becker 1969), and Engedal (Faber 1977).

The Sejerø structure differs in its flimsier character and fewer pots, which might be attributed either to its earlier date or to its isolated geographical position.

Features A and B were obviously closely connected. This emerged not only from their planigraphy, but also from the shattered flint and quernstones in both. It is suggested that Feature A was the floor paving of a wooden cist which originally stood free on the surface. The author has proposed elsewhere that the prototype of the *Urdolmen* was a wooden cist (Nice proceeding forthcoming). Like many urdolmens it was found empty.

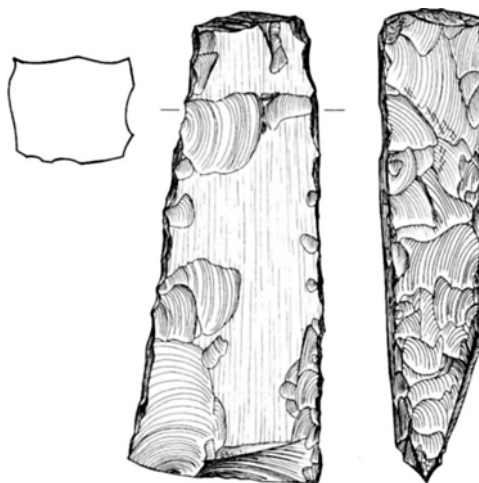


Fig. 7. Secondary flint axe found at west end of Feature B. 2:3. Drawn by Eva Koch.

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