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The chalk drums from Folkton and Lavant: Measuring devices from the time of Stonehenge

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In the 1950s and 60s, Alexander Thom believed to have identified a “Megalithic Yard” as the shared unit used in British megalithic monuments. His findings were criticized and generally dismissed (excepting possible use of the MY in some Scottish stone circles). Much more modest was the claim of Andrew Chamberlain and Mike Parker Pearson, advanced as “preliminary” in 20007, that the diameters of the circles of the early phases of Stonehenge and the neighbouring Durrington Walls site are multiples of a “long foot” of 32.19 cm. The maps shown in the present article are not *prima facie* convincing, but the underlying statistical analysis is likely to be more trustworthy than visual intuition.

The present article looks at four drum-shaped artefacts, three found in Folkton some 100 km from Stonehenge and one far away, in Lavant in North-Eastern England. They are beautifully decorated and carved in solid chalk. Their maximum diameters are ca 145, 126 and 103 mm (Folkton) and 115 mm (Lavant). The authors point out that these diameters correspond to circumferences of $10/7.1$, $10/8.1$, $10/8.9$ and $10/9.1$ long feet, and suggest that they may have been used to calibrate measuring ropes of 10 long feet by being rolled (or having the rope coiled around them), respectively, 7, 8, 9 and 10 times. However, as the authors point out, chalk is soft and would certainly have shown traces of wear if the drums had been used in this way. Instead they point to the documented creation of prestige replicas in chalk of such artefacts as stone axes; since at least the Folkton pieces served as grave goods in an infant burial, the chalk drums are indeed likely to be prestige replicas, perhaps of wooden barrels, and not to have been meant for genuine practical use. However, since the other replicas referred to may be in either full or reduced size,

there is no guarantee that the dimensions of the chalk drums correspond to those of the originals. All in all, given also the copious occurrence of such words as “could” and “possible” in the argument, the suggestion should probably be seen precisely as an interesting possibility, and not as anything coming close to established facts. It can hardly be considered solid evidence that the long foot was a widespread measuring unit