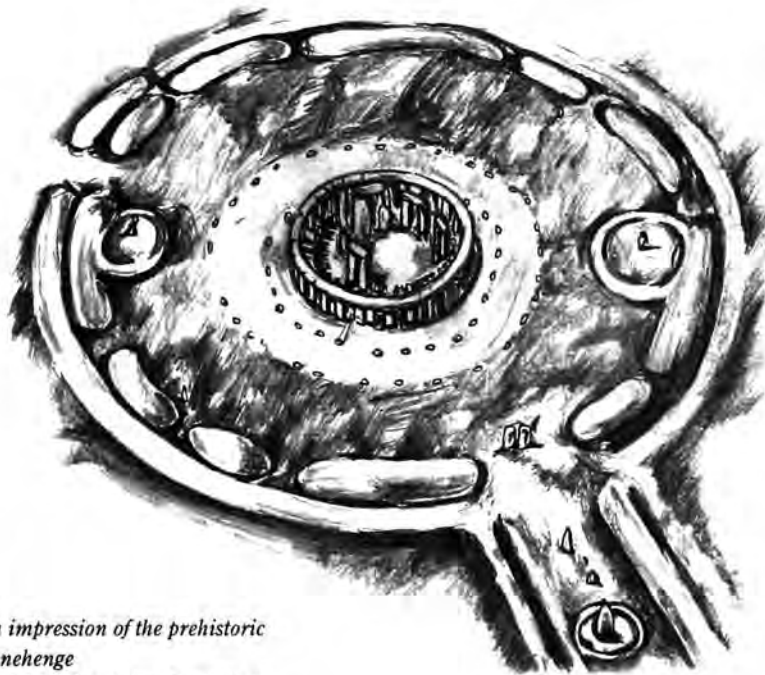


Stonehenge: still being dated and reinterpreted

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The secrets of the Stonehenge, the prehistoric monument that represents one of the wonders of the world, have never been completely unlocked. This is perhaps a “wonder” of history, ancient or modern, that makes the subject ceaselessly fascinating; with a “final” answer always remaining elusive, we can continue with a seemingly unending search for new knowledge. There have been continuous attempts at solving the mystery at Stonehenge, and new findings and theories on the prehistoric monument have emerged.



*An impression of the prehistoric
stonehenge
Sketch by Sakulchat Chatrakul
Na Ayuddhaya*

Composed of earthworks surrounding a circular setting of standing stones, the prehistoric monument is located in the English county of Wiltshire, about 3.2 kilometres west of Amesbury and 13 kilometres north of Salisbury. The site and its surroundings were registered, in a co-listing with the Aveburyhenge monument, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986. It is also a legally protected Scheduled Ancient Monument.¹ The Stonehenge proper is owned by the Crown and managed by the English Heritage, while the surrounding area is owned by the National Trust.²

The history of the Stonehenge complex can be delineated in various stages. It is believed to have been built in several construction phases. Archaeologists believe that the standing stones were erected around 2,200 BC, while the surrounding circular earth bank and ditch, believed to belong to the monument's initial phase, have been dated to about 3,100 BC. Moreover, there is evidence of activity before and afterwards on the site, hence extending its time frame to 6,500 years. Even more intriguing, however, is our search for an understanding of the human activity associated with it. That is, what function or purpose did it serve?³

The existence of post-holes during its second phase (ca. 3,000 BC) suggests that some form of timber structure was built within the enclosure of earth bank and ditch. Whatever the holes' initial function might be, the evidence from cremation burials indicates that it changed to become a funerary one during this period. The Stonehenge is, in other words, believed to have functioned as a cremation cemetery, and as such it is the earliest known cremation cemetery in the British Isles.

¹ A scheduled monument is an ancient monument which has been given legal protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. By this law, an ancient monument must be considered to be of national importance before it can be scheduled. "Monuments, Ancient Monuments, and Scheduled Monuments" (Heritage Policy Group, Historic Scotland, January 1998)

² This brief history of the Stonehenge has drawn specifically upon "Stonehenge", *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonehenge>.

³ See *ibid* for a summary of the recent efforts to interpret the human activity associated with the Stonehenge.



Sarsen stones
Sketch by Sakulchat Chatrakul
Na Ayuddhaya

In the next phase (around 2,600 BC), timber was abandoned and replaced by stone. Two concentric crescents of holes were dug in the centre of the site, which are believed to have held up to 80 standing stones. Of these, 43, the bluestones (volcanic rock of a bluish tint with white flecks), are thought to have probably been transported from the glacial deposits which had been carried from their northern sources down to southern England by the Irish Sea Glacier.⁴ Other standing stones may have been small sarsen stones (sandstone blocks found in quantity on the Salisbury Plain), which were later used as lintels. What was to be known as the Altar Stone standing as a single large monolith at the centre of the Stonehenge is supposed to have been derived from either South Pembrokeshire or the Brecon Beacons (a

national park in southeast of Wales). Moreover, the Heelstone (a Tertiary sandstone) may also have been erected outside the northeastern entrance during this period.

Later, supposedly during 2,600-2,400 BC, the 30 enormous sarsen stones were brought from a quarry on the Marlborough Downs, about 40 kilometres north of the site, to form the outer ring of the Stonehenge. The stones were dressed and fashioned with joints before being erected as a 33-metre diameter circle of standing stones, with a ring of 30 lintel stones resting on top. The lintels were fitted to one another through the use of the woodworking method of tongue and groove joints. Each standing stone is around 4.1 metres high and 2.1 metres wide, and it weighed around 25 tons. The average thickness of these stones is 1.1 metres and the average distance between them is 1 metre. Each lintel is about 3.2 metres long, 1 metre wide and 0.8 metres thick. The tops of the lintels are 4.9 metres above the ground. A total of 74 standing stones would have been needed to complete the

⁴ This was a huge glacier flowing about 700 kilometres from its source in Scotland and Ireland to southern England during the Ice Age. "Irish Sea Glacier", *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/Irish_Sea_Glacier



Trilithon
Sketch by Sakulchat Chatrakul
Na Ayuddhaya

circle; hence, unless some of the sarsen stones were removed from the site, it would seem that the ring was left incomplete.

Within this circle, once stood five trilithons⁵ of dressed sarsen stone arranged in a horseshoe shape 13.7 metres across with its open end facing northeast. These huge stones, all together ten uprights and five lintels, weigh up to 50 tons each, and were linked using complex jointing. Only one upright of the Great Trilithon (the tallest one) in the southwest corner still stands with 6.7 metres still visible and a further 2.4 metres below ground.

Constructed by a culture with no written language, the Stonehenge has left little or no direct evidence of either its construction techniques or function. There is thus a multiplicity of theories about its construction and function ranging from the use of supernatural or anachronistic forces to its being used as a sacrifice site associated with sun worship. However, despite the number of studies that have so far been undertaken, its exact nature and origins still remain a mystery.⁶

⁵ A trilithon is a structure consisting of two large vertical stones supporting a lintel.

⁶ See "Stonehenge", *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*

In March 2008, archaeologists began a new excavation at the Stonehenge. Funded by the *BBC* with full support of the English Heritage, which manages the site, this latest dig was the first inside the ring at the site in more than four decades. The men behind this new attempt to solve at least part of the mystery of the Stonehenge are Professor Geoff Wainwright of the University of Bournemouth and Professor Tim Darvill of the Society of Antiquaries. According to the *BBC*, Professor Wainwright said: "This small excavation of a bluestone is the culmination of six years of research which Tim and I have conducted in the Preseli Hills of North Pembrokeshire and which has shed new light on the eternal question as to why Stonehenge was built...The excavation will date the arrival of the bluestones following their 250-kilometre journey from Preseli to Salisbury Plain, and contribute to our definition of the society which undertook such an ambitious project. We will be able to say not only why but when the first stone monument was built".⁷

One theory, which has made much sense to most people, is to see the Stonehenge as a temple to the Sun. That is, it was built by a farming population for whom light and heat were vital for survival. However, recently, Professor Mike Parker Pearson of the Department of Archaeology, the University of Sheffield, offered a totally different



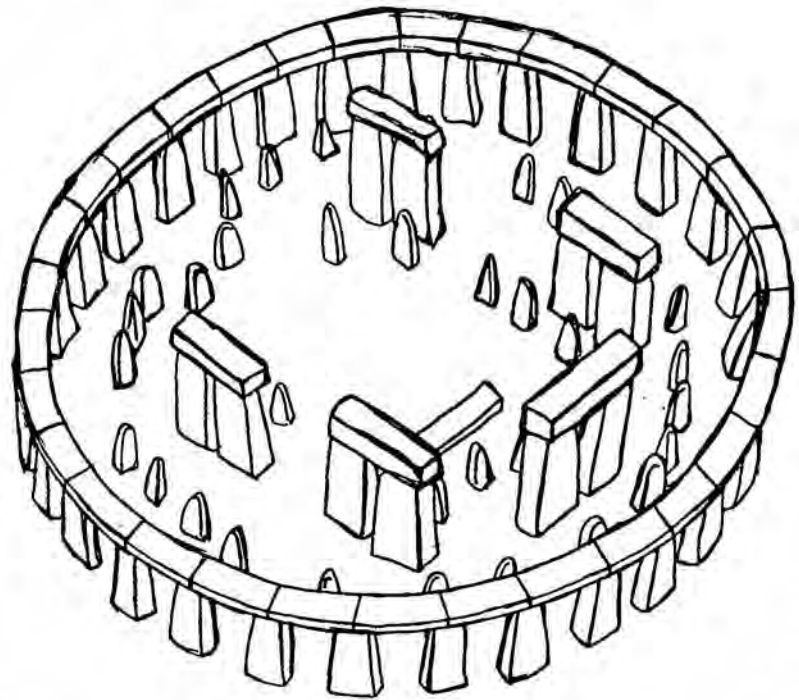
Sketch by Parinee Srisuwan

⁷ "Excavation Starts at Stonehenge", *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/science/nature/7322134.stm>

theory: his work at the nearby Neolithic settlement of Durrington Walls has led him to believe that the Stonehenge was a place not of life but of death – an opportunity for people to commune with the spirits of their ancestors.⁸

To shed further light on this puzzle, Professors Wainwright and Darvill believe it is vital that we know “when” before we can answer the question “why”. That is, finding out more about the history of the bluestones (the smaller stones, most now missing or uprooted, which formed the site’s original structure) could be key to answering why this prehistoric monument was erected. They believe that the bluestones, which were transported 250 kilometres from the Preseli Hills in Wales to Wiltshire, were brought to the site because the ancient people believed they had healing properties. The giant sarsen “goal posts”, which came from about 20 kilometres away, were thought to have arrived much later.⁹

Hence, it was not just chance that brought the bluestones to the Stonehenge, but rather their power to cure. The researchers have discovered extraordinary similarities between the local Bedd Arthur bluestone circle and the circle at the Stonehenge. This crucial piece of information, coupled with growing evidence of illness and injury from human remains unearthed around the Stonehenge,



*Inner circle
Sketch by Sakulchat Chatrakul
Na Ayudhaya*

⁸ Emma Parkins, “Unlocking Stonehenge’s Secrets”, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/science/nature/7322753.stm>

⁹ Rebecca Morelle, “Breakthrough’ at Stonehenge Dig”, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-2/hi/science/nature/7337292>

has led them to a new theory: the bluestones were healing stones that were carried to the site because people believed they had a magical ability to cure.¹⁰

With further successful corroboration, the new theory would result in a completely new understanding of the Stonehenge as an “ancient equivalent of a health spa”.¹¹ As Professor Darvill has put it, “[t]his was a place of healing, for the soul and the body”.¹²

While it remains to be seen if the new theory offered by the two experts would eventually solve the Stonehenge mystery, the team of researchers led by Professor Mike Parker Pearson, who have carried out radio-carbon dating of burials excavated in the 1950s that were kept at the nearby Salisbury Museum, suggests that burials took place at the site from the initiation of Stonehenge, just after 3,000 BC, until the large stones appeared about 2,500 BC. Moreover, the team has also speculated that it was an elite family burial site. Professor Parker Pearson said: “I don’t think it was the common people getting buried at Stonehenge – it was clearly a special place at that time...Archaeologists have long speculated about whether Stonehenge was put up by prehistoric chiefs – perhaps even ancient royalty – and the new results suggest that not only is this likely to have been the case, but it also was the resting place of their mortal remains”.¹³

Now with two completely different theories, the Stonehenge is likely to remain a challenging puzzle for experts to continue to solve, but perhaps the enduring puzzle is the most fascinating aspect of the prehistoric monument.

¹⁰ Parkins, “Unlocking Stonehenge’s Secrets”

¹¹ *Bangkok Post*, 2 April 2008

¹² Quoted in *ibid*

¹³ “Stonehenge’s Long-Term Cemetery”, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/science/nature/7426195.stm>