

## Neolithic village found near Stonehenge

Archaeologists have discovered a Neolithic village in the vicinity of Stonehenge. It is now believed that hundreds of people, including the builders of Britain's most famous stone circle, lived in the settlement over 4,000 years ago.

In fieldwork financed by the National Geographic Society and English Heritage, the outlines of domestic homes and dozens of hearths have been excavated at Durrington Walls, the world's largest known henge. The houses were radiocarbon dated to 2,600-2,500 BCE. As these dates roughly coincide with the construction of the menhirs at Stonehenge, researchers have concluded that the residents of the village and the builders of what is now a very popular World Heritage Site were one and the same.

There is a long-standing theory that the site formed part of a larger ritual complex and was never completely isolated as it appears today.

In September 2006, during the Stonehenge Riverside Project, eight homes were unearthed of which six contained well preserved floors made of clay; each room measuring 25 sq m with a hearth at the centre. One trench reveals the remains of a track consisting of flint, broken bones and pieces of pottery.

The excavations were partly directed by Dr Mike Parker Pearson of Sheffield University, who described it not only as "the richest site," but also "the filthiest site of this period known in Britain." As Stonehenge and Durrington Walls are only 3.2 kms apart, Dr Pearson believes that the village received and prepared bodies for burial. The site has been declared as a candidate for one of the Seven Modern Wonders of the World.

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**Stonehenge timeline:**

- 8,000 BCE – A wooden structure is erected at the site
- 3,000 BCE – Ditches and timber circles are put in (for cremations?)
- 2,600 BCE – 43 megaliths erected
- 1,600 BCE – Last known construction at Stonehenge
- 1620 CE – Inigo Jones the Antiquarian concludes that it was a Roman temple
- 1640 CE – John Aubrey declares that druids were responsible for its construction
- January 2007 – Archaeologists discover an ancient village near Stonehenge

## **Archaeologists find evidence of the Battle of Tell Hamoukar**

Tell Hamoukar, one of the world's earliest cities, was destroyed in an ancient battle 5,500 years ago, according to archaeologists.

The excavations in Syria, in what was Northern Mesopotamia, have revealed some of the oldest known evidence of organised warfare, including a collection of “clay sling bullets.”

Since 1999, the joint team from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Syrian Department of Antiquities have found that the city had been surrounded by a 3 m thick perimeter wall. The main mound of occupation extends over 105 hectares, while pottery and obsidian flakes and cores are scattered in its southern outskirts across over 283 hectares. Ruins of storerooms revealed numerous clay seals, used to secure baskets. Two large administrative buildings destroyed by fire contained over 1,000 round or oval-shaped clay bullets fired from slings, at that time the weapon of choice. One bullet had pierced the plaster of a mud-bricked wall. Twelve inhumations are believed to have been casualties of this battle.

With the war in Iraq unabating, archaeologists have had to switch their research and fieldwork of Ancient Mesopotamia to Syria. Thus, such sites as Tell Hamoukar, Tell Brak and Habuba Kabira have had to

come to the fore, while the more thoroughly studied ancient sites of Southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) have become inaccessible. However, these northern sites have offered valuable insights, especially into the ancient economy of the Near East.

At around 4,500 BCE, Tell Hamoukar emerged as a manufacturing centre. Sharp and durable tools and blades were being produced from raw obsidian, a volcanic glass, brought in from Turkey, over 300 kms away, then exported in a highly lucrative long-distance trade network. This prosperity is what may have led to the site's fiery demise in c. 3,500 BCE.

Ironically, as they dug for traces of ancient war, the explosions of a more modern war could be heard several miles away from the other side of the border with Iraq.

## **Philistines not so philistine**

Excavations in Israel are revealing that the Philistines were more refined and not as uncultured as their reputation suggests.

Archaeologists now believe that the Philistines – a people from the region of the Aegean Sea who settled on the coastal areas of ancient Palestine at around 1200 BCE – were not only highly cultured but also a literate group.

Painted inscriptions on ceramic sherds discovered at the site of a Philistine seaport in Ashkelon, Israel, represent an undeciphered system of non-Semitic writing.

Frank Moore Cross Jr, an expert of ancient Near Eastern scripts at Harvard, proposed that these inscriptions represent a form of Cypro-Minoan script, that could be classified as "Old Philistine."

Moreover, some of the signs found at Ashkelon bear the hallmarks of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions found on artefacts unearthed in Cyprus, and at Ugarit, Syria. The script almost resembled "Linear A," a writing system used in the Aegean between 1650-1450 BCE.

Previous archaeological research has turned up weights and measures

for trading commodities, even precursors of coinage, so it is only to be expected that these inscriptions would eventually surface.

The biblical Philistines are generally thought to be just one group of the mysterious “Sea Peoples” who may have migrated to various coastal areas around the Mediterranean from somewhere amongst the Greek islands.

They were cast as boorish and uncultured by the neighbouring Israelites, when the Bible came to be written; typically, Goliath was portrayed as the bad Philistine.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, however, the Israelites and Philistines moved closer together socially and culturally, with the latter adopting Old Hebrew, but nothing could quell the unfavourable reputation that the Philistines had gained.

## **Clash of past and future in the Eternal City**

Progress on Rome’s new 25 km subway line is being hampered by its greatest asset – almost daily discoveries of relics belonging to its rich cultural heritage.

Archaeologists have moved in to see what they can find from the glory days of the Roman Empire as the perennial tug-of-war between preserving ancient treasures and developing essential infrastructure continues.

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No less than 38 archaeological sites have sprung up around the city, mostly around famous monuments or at key locations around the gridlocked streets, and reports present some important finds almost every day.

Working amidst one of Rome’s infamous traffic jams in front of the baroque church of Sant’Andrea della Valle, one team uncovered the 4-metre thick cement wall of a public building dating back to the imperial age. It is possible that it may have belonged to a temple dedicated to the goddess, Fortune, built in the area by Agrippa,

general and son-in-law of Rome's first emperor, Augustus.

Other finds emerging across the city include Roman taverns found near the ancient Forum; and 2,000 year-old tombs containing the remains of two children encased in amphorae.

The 3-billion-euro Metro project has finally had to be implemented as traffic and tourists had combined to wreak congestion havoc on the capital, taking its two subway lines to almost breaking point. Ironically, calls for construction of a third line were stalled for years due to the extended delays that archaeologists would cause in the pursuit of ancient treasures.

Under Italy's strict conservation laws, the state's archaeological office has to declare whether a find should be removed, destroyed or encased within the subway network.

Excavations are being carried out only to clear the way for stairwells and air ducts as the eventual 30 stations and their adjoining tunnels will be dug at a depth of 25-30 metres (80-100 feet), lower than any level of human habitation in the city's history.

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