

Stonehenge essay



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Behind every great structure in the world, there are the people who made them, and who took the time and effort to design them. Those who made Stonehenge succeeded in creating an incredibly complex and mysterious structure that lived on long after its creators were dead. The many aspects of Stonehenge and the processes by which it was built reveal much about the intelligence and sophistication of the civilizations that designed and built the monument, despite the fact that it is difficult to find out who exactly these people were. They have left very little evidence behind with which we could get a better idea of their everyday lives, their culture, their surroundings, and their affairs with other peoples. The technology and wisdom that are inevitably required in constructing such a monument show that these prehistoric peoples had had more expertise than expected. The planning and assembling of Stonehenge took a very long time (about one thousand years, from 2800 BC to 1500 BC*), and not one but many different groups of people were involved in the process. How they came about plays an important role in understanding them. Some of the first men to come to England that are connected to the Stonehenge builders came when the ice blocking Britain and France melted around 10, 000 BC (Souden, 104). After them, many more groups of people came from the mainland, and had great influence on those already living there. The first group involved in the building of Stonehenge was the Windmill Hill people. These people were semi nomadic farmers, mainly just keeping their flocks of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs, and growing wheat, who had arrived as some of the last Neolithic (or New Stone Age, 4300 - 2200 BC) newcomers in England. Not only were they farmers they also hunted, mined flint, made and traded axes, and could almost be called industrialists. The Windmill Hill people had a very

strong religion with a great respect for their dead and their ancestors. They have exceptional collective graves, in the form of long barrows, or long manmade piles of dirt, sometimes 300 feet long. Many riches such as food, tools, and pottery were buried with the dead (Hawkins, 36). The next group to contribute to Stonehenge was the Beaker people, known for the beaker-like pottery they would frequently bury with their dead. These people did not practice the ritual of collective burials, rather single or double burials, and the dead were accompanied by more weapons such as daggers and axes. These single burials were in the form of round barrows. The Beaker people were well organized, active, and powerful, and also probably more territorial (Hawkins, 36). They practiced commerce with other cultures, and their graves give an impression of there being an aristocracy in the society (Niel, 84). The last major group to put time into the construction of Stonehenge was the Wessex culture group. They arrived on Salisbury plain around 1400 BC, and were involved in building the most prominent part of Stonehenge—the great stone circles (Niel, 86). These people were well organized, and probably less aggressive than their predecessors, while more industrious. The people of Wessex were less concerned with war than they were with art, peace, and trade. In the graves of their chieftains (the only members of society who were preserved for afterlife), were goods such as daggers, bows, and various other ornaments. Their access to such treasures can perhaps be attributed to their great international traders who probably traded with people from the Mediterranean Sea area (Hawkins, 37). They built the final phase of Stonehenge, and perhaps brought about many cultural changes to the monument such as giving the monument visual magnificence and more astronomical precision (Service + Bradbery, 255). It is necessary, in order to

understand the complexity involved in the assembling of Stonehenge, to know the process by which and the environment in which the monument was built. By the time Stonehenge was built, the landscape around the area on Salisbury Plain was rather open with more farmland and grazing land, and less forest. Underneath the first few feet of soil on Salisbury Plain there was a substantial layer of hard chalk, which made building rudimentary structures somewhat easier for the people of the era. The first phase in building Stonehenge was that of the earth monument, which consisted of a circular bank of dirt (originally about 6 feet tall, now barely 2 feet tall) with a ditch running along the outside of the bank. There are two breaks in the ditch and bank, forming two entrances, and in addition there are 56 Aubrey Holes, named for John Aubrey, their discoverer, in a circle just inside the earth bank (Souden, 30). This first phase, Stonehenge I, built by the Windmill Hill people, took from about 2950 to 2900 BC to construct. Slightly more detailed than the first, the second phase of building Stonehenge involved the creation of a wooden monument. The postholes scattered about the floor of the monument are evidence for this stage. There seem to have been a roughly corridor shaped structure at the southern entrance of the earth monument, and a more detailed setting around the northeastern entrance (Souden, 32). The Avenue, made up of a pair of long, straight, and parallel ditches, was also said to have been part of this second phase of Stonehenge. Stonehenge II could be credited to the Beaker people, approximately between the years 2800 and 2300 BC. The third and most impressive stage of the monument is that of the stone monument. Since the building of this phase extended from about 2500 to 1600 BC, it was the longest and most complex of the three, and was so divided up into six sub phases. First in the

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sequence was the arrival of the bluestones (the first, and smaller, type of stone involved in Stonehenge III), and then the arrival of the sarsen stones (the larger, bulkier stones in Stonehenge III), followed by a possible bluestone arrangement, then the stones were erected to their final settings (after a little rearranging), and finally small holes called the X and Y holes were dug around the outside of the stone circles (Souden, 35). The builders of Stonehenge III were the people of the Wessex Culture, most likely in alliance with other peoples. It is understandable, through all of the complexity shown in the monument, that it many long hours to build and much patience and persistence to complete the construction. The bluestones had to be carried 200 to 250 miles from their source in the Prescelly Mountains back to the Stonehenge site. They were probably carried by waterways for most of the route because waterways are safer, quicker, and less difficult. One probably route was that the stones would be dragged to the coast nearest the Prescelly Mountains, then along the coast of the Bristol Channel, and then into the river systems of England, to the Stonehenge Avenue, and then the stones may have been carried up the Avenue toward the monument. (Hawkins, 65). The most simple was to transport the stones over land is by having a crew of men to haul the stones on rollers. Similar transport methods were used for the sarsen stones, however their location was much more close as the source of the sarsen stone was in the Marlborough Downs, only about 20 miles north of Stonehenge. There was somewhat of a clear land path for these stones to be carried on, so water transport was minimum. But these stones weighed about 30 tons each, and hauling these stones over 20 miles of hills could have easily used a total of 1,000 men and 7 years to be completed (Hawkins, 66). The sarsen stones were

put into large holes in the ground, and joined to their lintels by a mortise-and-tenon joint, and the lintels joined to each other (in the outer circle) with a tongue-and-groove joint (Souden, 88). Much organization skills are needed to coordinate such a large number of men to perform the physical labor of constructing such a monument. The effort put into fabricating this monument is incomparable to anything that would be done today. When all of the constructing, refining, and arranging was finished, the resulting structure was extraordinary. There is an outermost circle (still considerably inside the ditch and bank) of 30 of the sarsen stones, each averaging 13 feet 6 inches tall (Niel, 28), and each connected by a lintel stone to each stone on either side. Just inside that circle of sarsens is a circle of bluestones, smaller stones which are usually not too much more than 6 feet tall. Inside of the bluestone circle is the trilithon horseshoe, or a horseshoe-shaped setting of sarsens in trilithons, or two sarsens standing next to each other with one lintel across the top. The open end of the horseshoe faces the northeast. Inside the trilithon horseshoe is a bluestone horseshoe. Inside the bluestone horseshoe, somewhat towards the center, is the altar stone, which might not have been used for that purpose. At the entrance to the monument, the heel stone stands just south of the line that runs down the center of the avenue, and not far off lies the slaughter stone, laying on the ground in the break of the circular bank. There are four station stones just inside the earth bank- one that points north, one that points to the south, and two that together make a line perpendicular to the axis of the avenue. The faces of all of the sarsen stones were dressed and shaped, and they were mostly given a convex shape to exaggerate the impression of grandeur one gets when looking up at the monuments. Being that there is little evidence for what

Stonehenge could have been created, other than the people buried in and what we directly observe about the monument, there have been many hypotheses about its purpose, and many of these hypotheses seem to be appropriate. Among the most accepted of these conjectures is that the stone monument was meant to be a temple, a burial ground, and, seemingly the most apparent of these, a solar/lunar observatory. The main entrance of Stonehenge that has the Avenue's opening, towards which the entire stone monument is situated, points directly at the sunrise on the summer solstice. When standing in the center of the monument, on the longest day of the year, one can see the sun rise directly over the heel stone. This seems to force a viewer to notice the sunrise on the longest day of the year. The original four "station stones" placed around the circle make many alignments to point to rise and set points of the sun and moon on winter and summer solstices. Noteworthy is that the combination of sun and moon solstice rise and set points could only be collectively arranged in a perfect rectangle at the latitude at which Stonehenge is situated. A few miles north or south and the combination would have to be a parallelogram. (Cohen, 8). In addition to the station stone alignments, each trilithon in the center horseshoe corresponds to certain alignments, as there are two sunset trilithons, a sunrise trilithon, and two for lunar alignments. (Hawkins, 109). Not only does this show that the builders and planners of Stonehenge had a great regard for the heavens, but also that they had great knowledge of geometry and science to be able to find exact angle measurements and proportions. It can also be seen that the Aubrey Holes could be used as a system of predicting eclipses. The 56 Aubrey Holes correspond to 3 cycles of the moon's orbital wobble (The moon's orbit wobbles in cycles of 18.66

years) and these could be used to line up with various solar alignments in Stonehenge to predict when the sun and moon would be at the same point in the sky. (White, 194). By a system of moving three markers around the 56 positions of the Aubrey holes, when all three were in the same spot, an eclipse was to occur. (Dimitrikopoulos, file: enigma. cfm). Within places in Stonehenge, such as the Aubrey Holes and the outer ditch, cremation remains of almost hundreds of people were found. This infers that Stonehenge was used as a primary burial site in the Stone and Bronze Ages*. Remarkable is that a great amount of cremations were found on the southeast side of the circle, which is where the moon rises at its most southerly point (Bragard, Ancient Voices). The many cultures of the Neolithic and Bronze ages seemed to have a preoccupation with death and the afterlife, and consequently took great regard to having the dead buried properly. In addition, since it is not possible to give each member of a society a proper burial in such a small area, the people must have had a hierarchical society in which some individuals had precedence over others for a glorious afterlife. As a place of worship, Stonehenge shows much detail and substance. Many of the celestial alignments put focus on things that are greater and more eternal than human beings, and these things could very well be the basis of the religion of the prehistoric cultures in the area. When seen from above, the lintels on the outer sarsen circle form a perfect circle that is impeccably level with the ground. Since this cannot be appreciated by people standing on the ground, it seems as if it is meant to be seen by someone above. (Niel, 33). The fixation with death and the afterlife among the peoples of Salisbury Plain seems to be a religion in itself. Perhaps the sun and moon gods, in being born and dying within their own cycles of rising and

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setting (and especially the moon's cycle of growing dark and then bright again), could aid the soul of the human in being reborn in the afterlife. (Bragard, Ancient Voices). The strategy for showing their gods of their worth was clearly well thought-out and well planned by the builders and peoples of the Stone Age. The complexity and intelligence of the peoples of Stonehenge can also be seen in surrounding monuments created by them and their neighbors. Most of the enclosures and round barrows in the vicinity of Stonehenge were created for burial purposes, with one or two people buried within them, usually accompanied by valuables such as daggers, pottery, and in some cases, gold ornaments (Souden, 44). These treasures often represent high status or high political position, indicating a structured government and system of beliefs that the cultures of Salisbury Plain possessed. Stonehenge represents the evolving and changing society of prehistoric times that gradually changed into a well-developed society with rulers, priests, and a working and farming class, as well as relations with other cultures from far away with which to engage in trade and associate. The idea that men from the Stone Age were unintelligent, ill-mannered barbarians is far from the truth in the case of Stonehenge. The cultures of Windmill Hill, the Beaker people, and Wessex all thoroughly demonstrate organized systems and communities of the Stone and Bronze Ages.

Stonehenge, one of the great Seven Wonders of the World, but what do we really know about it. What was its purpose, how was it built and by whom. Many different answers come up when asking the question " What is Stonehenge?"

Behind every great structure in the world, there are the people who made them, and who took the time and effort to design them. Those who made Stonehenge succeeded in creating an incredibly complex and mysterious structure that lived on long after its creators were dead. The many aspects of Stonehenge and the processes by which it was built reveal much about the intelligence and sophistication of the civilizations that designed and built the monument, despite the fact that it is difficult to find out who exactly these people were. They have left very little evidence behind with which we could get a better idea of their everyday lives, their culture, their surroundings, and their affairs with other peoples. The technology and wisdom that are inevitably required in constructing such a monument show that these prehistoric peoples had had more expertise than expected.

The planning and assembling of Stonehenge took a very long time (about one thousand years, from 2800 BC to 1500 BC*), and not one but many different groups of people were involved in the process. How they came about plays an important role in understanding them. Some of the first men to come to England that are connected to the Stonehenge builders came when the ice blocking Britain and France melted around 10, 000 BC. After them, many more groups of people came from the mainland, and had great influence on those already living there.

The first group involved in the building of Stonehenge was the Windmill Hill people. These people were semi nomadic farmers, mainly just keeping their flocks of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs, and growing wheat, who had arrived as some of the last Neolithic (or New Stone Age, 4300 - 2200 BC) newcomers in England. Not only were they farmers they also hunted, mined

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The next group to contribute to Stonehenge was the Beaker people; known for the beaker-like pottery they would frequently bury with their dead. These people did not practice the ritual of collective burials, rather single or double burials, and the dead were accompanied by more weapons such as daggers and axes. These single burials were in the form of round barrows. The Beaker people were well organized, active, and powerful, and also probably more territorial. They practiced commerce with other cultures, and their graves give an impression of there being an aristocracy in the society.

The last major group to put time into the construction of Stonehenge was the Wessex culture group. They arrived on Salisbury plain around 1400 BC, and were involved in building the most prominent part of Stonehenge- the great stone circles. These people were well organized, and probably less aggressive than their predecessors, while more industrious. The people of Wessex were less concerned with war than they were with art, peace, and trade. In the graves of their chieftains (the only members of society who were preserved for afterlife), were goods such as daggers, bows, and various other ornaments. Their access to such treasures can perhaps be attributed to their great international traders who probably traded with people from the Mediterranean Sea area. They built the final phase of Stonehenge, and

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The first phase in building Stonehenge was that of the earth monument, which consisted of a circular bank of dirt (originally about 6 feet tall, now barely 2 feet tall) with a ditch running along the outside of the bank. There are two breaks in the ditch and bank, forming two entrances, and in addition there are 56 Aubrey Holes, named for John Aubrey, their discoverer, in a circle just inside the earth bank. This first phase, Stonehenge I, built by the Windmill Hill people, took from about 2950 to 2900 BC to construct. Slightly more detailed than the first, the second phase of building Stonehenge involved the creation of a wooden monument. The postholes scattered about the floor of the monument are evidence for this stage. There seem to have been a roughly corridor shaped structure at the southern entrance of the earth monument, and a more detailed setting around the northeastern entrance. The Avenue, made up of a pair of long, straight, and parallel ditches, was also said to have been part of this second phase of Stonehenge.

Stonehenge II could be credited to the Beaker people, approximately between the years 2800 and 2300 BC.

The third and most impressive stage of the monument is that of the stone monument. Since the building of this phase extended from about 2500 to 1600 BC, it was the longest and most complex of the three, and was so divided up into six sub phases. First in the sequence was the arrival of the bluestones (the first, and smaller, type of stone involved in Stonehenge III), and then the arrival of the sarsen stones (the larger, bulkier stones in Stonehenge III), followed by a possible bluestone arrangement. Then the stones were erected to their final settings (after a little rearranging), and finally small holes called the X and Y holes were dug around the outside of the stone circles. The builders of Stonehenge III were the people of the Wessex Culture, most likely in alliance with other peoples. It is understandable, through all of the complexity shown in the monument, that it many long hours to build and much patience and persistence to complete the construction. The bluestones had to be carried 200 to 250 miles from their source in the Prescelly Mountains back to the Stonehenge site. They were probably carried by waterways for most of the route because waterways are safer, quicker, and less difficult. One probable route was that the stones would be dragged to the coast nearest the Prescelly Mountains, then along the coast of the Bristol Channel, and then into the river systems of England, up the Stonehenge Avenue, and toward the monument. The most simple was to transport the stones over land is by having a crew of men to haul the stones on rollers.

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