

Stone Worlds

The World of Stonehenge: British Museum 17 Feb – 17 July 2022

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From left: The Nebra Sky Disc, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany 1600BC; The Roos Carr figures, East Yorkshire, England, c. 1100-800 BC

What is Stonehenge?

Is it an altar to the sun? Is it a temple honouring an ancient god? Is it a shelter? A shrine? A monument to a great chieftain? Is it a place of sacred worship? A work of art? Is it a graveyard? A tomb? Is it an astronomical machine? A palace? Is it a festival site? Is it a locus of magic? Is it extra-terrestrial? Is it Mesolithic? Neolithic? Bronze Age? Druidic? Roman? How old is it? Was it created in one fell swoop or over centuries? Was it made only of stone? Whatever was it for? And how in hell did the pairs of silicified sandstones, known as Sarsen stones, up to 7 metres high and 2 metres wide, weighing up to 20 tons each, make their way to the site? What genius of engineering enabled this feat? And even more incomprehensible than this; how did the smaller Bluestones, quarried from the Preseli Hills in Wales, 240 kilometres away make the epic journey to Salisbury Plain?

Questions. Questions. Questions. Mysteries. Stonehenge is still a mystery.

The great archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes wrote that “every age has the Stonehenge it deserves or desires.” Our age of Aquarius has seen Stonehenge variously as a mystical nexus of woo-woo and lay lines. But it has also been celebrated as a numinous place of powerful cosmic connection. Even the most sceptical and agnostic of us humans feel that this pin drop on Salisbury plain is a point on the planet where our mortal earthbound selves can commune with the sun and the heavens. A place where the cycle of life and death is enacted before our very eyes by the rising of the sun on the winter solstice between the Sarsen stones. Crowds of people, hippies, Druids and civilians, dance round the stones at dawn in harmony and in freezing temperatures. Very like our human ancestors probably did 4,500 years ago.

But even more representative of our age is the role that science and social anthropology have played in enriching our understanding of Stonehenge in the 21st century. We understand so much more about the landscape through the geo-phys and aerial photography. We can more easily discern societal structures and understand the implements of ritual through the relatively new science of radio- carbon dating and DNA analysis. We can understand diet. We can understand migration. We can understand family groupings and clan membership. We can even understand how the stones made their epic journey. And the science has demonstrated that Stonehenge is much older than was previously thought and that the site has served many different functions through the mists of time. It is polymorphous.

It is an observatory. It has been a shelter. The stones line up and encircle human ritual. It is a tomb. It is a work of art in that so much communal energy and effort is embedded in its creation. More than 50,000 cremated bone fragments of men, women and children are buried near the stones. It is a shrine to the sun. It is a complex social nexus. There are tools. There is evidence of farming. It is everything. It is very very old. As old as the Sphinx at Giza. The focal centre of the show is a 4,000-year-old Bronze Age timber circle called the Seahenge. It sent shivers up my spine. This construction emerged after a storm on a wild Norfolk beach in 1998, when 54 oak posts set round a mighty oak tree with its roots facing the sky emerged out of the sand. An eloquent symbol of the desire for fusion between the earth and the sky.

Stonehenge seems to me, a symbolic structure that embodies the yearning for unification with the ineffable. Too great to be expressed in words. The stones mutely express our human desire for connection. For the earth to be connected with the heavens. For us mortals to be connected to nature. To commune with the sky. For the land to join up with the land. Many thousands of years ago Britain was joined to the continental mainland. Doggerland. This ancient land bridge, across which many creatures travelled, was swallowed up by the last melting of the ice cap. Climate change. Brexit.

We have the Stonehenge we deserve.