

Reseñas

Reviews

Parker Pearson, M., Pollard, J., Richards, C., Thomas, J., Tilley, C. and Welham, K. (2020): *Stonehenge for the Ancestors: Part 1. Landscape and Monument. (2022) Stonehenge for the Ancestors: Part 2. Synthesis.* Sidestone Press, Leiden. 602 pp. and 387 pp. Part I; ISBN 978-90-8890-702-9 (softcover) ISBN 978-90-8890-703-6 (hardcover) ISBN 978-90-8890-704-3; Part II; ISBN 978-90-8890-705-0 (softcover) ISBN 978-90-8890-706-7 (hardcover) ISBN 978-90-8890-707-4 (PDF e-book)

The publication of these two fine volumes on the Stonehenge Riverside Project (known as the SRP, running from 2003 to 2009) are the first of a projected total of four, amply rewarding the patience of the public, the funding bodies who supported the work, and archaeologists. They mark a notable step-change forward in understanding this most remarkable of monuments, and for the first time, provide policy-makers in government, and those engaged with the knotty problems of regional development for SW England, conservation, heritage management, and many other legitimate interests, with reliable data from which to make decisions. Ignorance of the value of this landscape can longer be an excuse for its destruction or damage. At last we know what is *really* under the soil, and where it is. This has been lacking until now, despite the plethora of small excavations, regional studies, non-intrusive surveys, and politically motivated debates about the desirability (or not) or boring a long tunnel nearby to alleviate the modern road traffic on the A303. We are now at the stage, finally, of removing some of the confusing muddle caused by the misunderstandings of Stonehenge's real sequence, its neighbouring monuments and settlements, and the landscape to which it belongs. In a nutshell, the landscape is obviously every bit as important, and remarkable, as the Stonehenge structure itself. The authors' remark modestly... "All of these investigations over

the centuries, and especially within the last few decades, have helped to make the Stonehenge landscape perhaps the most thoroughly researched prehistoric complex in the world. It is also one of the most written about, both by archaeologists and the media, having generated thousands of research reports and hundreds of books. We hope that the syntheses that follow in the next chapters will do some justice to this remarkable collective achievement by generations of archaeologists." (Pt. II, p. 16, Acknowledgements). A modest claim, indeed.

Notably, this achievement is a collaborative effort, involving many different Heritage and funding agencies, Universities, independent Archaeology Trusts, specialist survey teams, including ones from the EU, (notably Austria and Germany); organising this has been a major task, and it is to the managers' great credit that they have been so successful in harnessing so much talent and goodwill. And overcoming the inevitable adversities and setbacks. The result is impressive. The days of the single leader, such as Col. Hawley or Professor Richard Atkinson, controlling the digging and the interpretation of the results, are long past. Atkinson's work was finally published properly, in a Herculean effort of documentary recovery from a defective archive, by Dr. Rosamund Cleal and her team, in a landmark study in 1995, thirty-eight years later (Cleal et al., 1995).

Despite the great size of each part, the organisation makes it easy to navigate, and the information is clearly presented, and the interpretations sharply marked out, for clarity and later discussion. This means there are over a hundred sections, and not all are equally important. In this review, I shall concentrate on the areas of debate that I believe will be of most interest to the readers of the CuPAUAM, especially archaeology students. Part 1 has 11 chapters in its 602 pages, dedicated to the description of the site, finds, and contexts. Part 2 is shorter at

387 pages, also with 11 chapters, and is an extended synthesis, set out in numerous sub-sections. At least half the volumes are concerned with the earlier and contemporary monuments that cluster thickly on Salisbury Plain. They include long barrows, more than one cursus, causewayed camps, settlements, henges, mortuary structures, wooden circles, alignments, The Avenue linking Stonehenge to the River Avon, and much more. While these are deeply interesting in their own terms, it is the Stonehenge monument that I think deserves most attention here.

A revised chronology of 5 construction phases is proposed, spanning the period from around 3000–1600 BC, modifying the previous one in Cleal et al. (1995). There are significant changes in the construction sequence. Most importantly, the Bluestones are an early component of the architecture. In the new periodisation, the Bluestones appear in Phase II in the Q and R holes, and may well be older, in Phase I. They were probably first incorporated in the Aubrey Holes (Phase I), which were used afterwards for cremation burials.

However, the settings we can see today are the last ones to be completed, preceded by at least four or five different schemes and arrangements. The huge sarsen trilithons and the circular setting belong to Phase II as well, and can be confirmed to be stones that originated from the northern part of the Salisbury plain. In Phases 3 and 4, the Bluestones are re-arranged, dismantled and re-set until reaching their present appearance. The Avenue was dug at this time. In Phase 5, the Y and Z holes were dug. The stones were now used as a source of raw material and quarried. The axe and dagger carvings were added to the sarsens around 1700–1600 BC. These phases are precisely set out in Part I, Introduction, p31–32, along with the absolute date ranges provided by ¹⁴C samples. In Part I, Chapter 11, there is a further statement of these phases.

All the Bluestones surviving at Stonehenge derive originally from small volcanic outcrops in the Preseli Hills, in West Pembrokeshire, in Wales. In the monument, they belong from Phase I of its use, judging by the structural evidence, and stone-holes. They were set up and pulled out several times, as new settings were desired. A new, and intriguing, argument

is proposed that at least 25 of them were originally set up in a different stone circle on the banks of the River Avon, at the end of the Stonehenge Avenue; this is known now as “Bluestonehenge” (Pt. 1, Ch. 5, pp. 215 ff.). This would date to the early third millennium BC. Later, this was dismantled, the holes backfilled, and the Bluestones removed for re-use at Stonehenge.

The 43 Bluestones that survive today have at least 30 different mineral compositions, and are notably eroded and weathered, unlike freshly quarried stone. The question arises as to how they came to be in the Stonehenge landscape. One argument proposes that these stones were transported by glacial action, which plucked them from the Preseli Hills, and eventually dragged them to the Salisbury Plain, where there remained after the ice melted. However, geomorphologists have been unable to find similar sized bluestones among the rare glacial erratics on the Salisbury Plain, despite intensive searching (John, 2018). Is it reasonable to suggest that every usable Bluestone erratic on the Salisbury Plain was collected in the Late Neolithic? I think that is unlikely. In which case, it leaves the alternative hypothesis, that these stones were transported by human agents, perhaps on sledges overland, or perhaps by a sea-route. It is at this point that the Professor Mike Parker Pearson introduces a spectacular novelty.

Parker Pearson believes that the Stonehenge bluestones originally formed a stone circle (now long lost and invisible) in the Preseli Hills, at a place known today as Waun Mawn. His partial excavation of this site (2017–2019) revealed what he believed to be empty “stone sockets”, indicating a dismantled circle of bluestones, of the same diameter as the one at Stonehenge. He proposed these stones were transported to the Salisbury Plain, and then re-erected on the banks of the River Avon at “Bluestonehenge”. It is not clear why Waun Mawn was chosen for this prehistoric removal. The two Bluestone quarries sampled and excavated by Parker Pearson in the Preseli Hills were dated by radiocarbon to be around 400 years *older* than the first phase of Stonehenge (around 3100/2900 BC), and therefore most unlikely to have been used to extract stone to take to Salisbury Plain. Recently, a challenge, amounting to

a refutation of this idea, was published by Dr. Brian John, a Welsh geologist with intimate knowledge of the area (John 2018, 2024). Brian John thought the whole idea was wrong, and the product of what he termed “interpretive inflation”, “driven by the desire to demonstrate a Stonehenge connection”. A similar scepticism was voiced by Professor Tim Darvill (2022), and by Dr. Mike Pitts (2022), both of whom thought the claimed “stone sockets” were too shallow to have held large upright Bluestones, and were unlikely to be stone sockets at all. It may well be the case that the most parsimonious hypothesis, that of glaciation, will eventually prove to be correct. At the moment, neither theory can be shown to be better than the other. This is an engrossing and well-conducted debate between qualified scholars, and one I would encourage readers to follow up. Students will learn much to their advantage.

In Part 2 (Synthesis) Chapter 5 discusses Stonehenge in its British context, and more widely in Western Europe. This is really the choicest part to read of the entire volume, well organised, illustrated, and clearly written. The parallels with other parts of Britain, notable the Orkney Islands, and the great Irish tombs in the Boyne valley, are explored with skill. The references are all up-to-date. It is good to see prehistory discussed on a larger European scale, including Brittany and the Iberian Peninsula.

One thing is missing. It is important. There is very little attention paid to the astronomical alignment(s) of Stonehenge, which is understandable given the already large physical scope of this project. Fortunately, there is new volume by Professor Clive Ruggles and Dr. Amanda Chadburn (2024) on exactly this subject, which is explored in depth.

One of the first decisions of the incoming Labour government in the summer of 2024 cancelled the projected road tunnel. The estimated cost was put at £1.7 billion in 2020 (This sum of money is probably more than the entire research archaeology budget

spent in the UK for the last fifty years). Fortunately, it has been halted.

The volumes I reviewed were the electronic version. The quality of text, illustrations, typesetting and design is uniformly excellent. It sets a high standard. But the printed paper versions are more useful when checking data back and forth, and reading in depth. These books should be essential purchases for all archaeology and University libraries. They are a lasting tribute to the decades of the “Early 2000s”, and are fine examples of scholarship, research and fruitful collaboration; we should be grateful for Professor Mike Parker Pearson and his team for a splendid achievement that will stand the test of time. They set high standards for the future.

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