

Stonehenge and Megalithic Europe

Since the 17th century, antiquarians and archeologists have puzzled over Stonehenge and similar megalithic monuments. Our understanding of these monuments and their builders has, however, only recently gone beyond very preliminary speculation. With the advent of radiocarbon dating and the application of a variety of sciences, a rough picture of the monument builders is slowly taking shape.

The remains of deep sea fish in Mesolithic trash heaps indicate that northern Europeans had developed a sophisticated seafaring society by 4500 BC. The subsequent, simultaneous construction of megalithic monuments in Denmark-Sweden, Brittany, Portugal, and the British Isles indicates the geographic distribution of the society's origins, but eventually, monument construction occurred all across northwestern Europe.

The monument builders' way of life grew out of the mesolithic economy. Food was gathered from the forest, hunted, or collected from the sea. By 4000 they began clearing patches of forest to create an alluring environment for wild game as well as for planting crops. This marks the start of the Neolithic period.

Their material success produced the first great phase of megalithic construction (c. 4200 to 3200). The earliest monuments were chambered tombs, built by stacking enormous stones in a table-like structures, called "dolmens," which were then covered with earth. We call the resulting tumuli a "round barrow."

Local variations of this monument-type can be identified. Elaborate "passage graves" were built in eastern Ireland. Elaborate "passage graves" were built in eastern Ireland. These were large earthen mounds covering a corridor of stones leading to a corbeled chamber. Similar passage graves can be found in Brittany and on the Orkney Islands, with smaller versions found in Wales.

"Long barrows" were built in southern England. 250-300 examples have survived. These contain stone corridors (often cruciform) buried within a much longer mound of earth. Three magnificent examples are East and West Kennet in Wiltshire & Wayland Smithy in Oxfordshire.

Long barrows were frequently built near "causewayed camps," which were roughly circular earthen banks, built up from the spoil of an inner concentric ditch. Gaps (causeways) in the bank & ditch were left to allow entry into the enclosure. They usually were located on a hilltop.

The large quantity of exotic artifacts and human remains found at the camps suggests that the dead were ordinarily exhumed at these sites. Nearby long barrows likely served as a special exhumation site for the society's elite.

After about 3400, megalithic construction declined for several centuries, possibly due to an economic recession and an age of war and barbarism. Near the northern coasts of the Irish Sea, however, the stone circle, a new monument form, was being built, e.g. Castlerigg and Swinside in Cumbria (c. 3000). These circles prefigured a second great phase of megalithic construction (2800 to 1500 BC). Aubrey Burl recognizes the remains of 900 stone circles in the British Isles.

"Henge" monuments were also being constructed. The henge was a smaller version of the causewayed camp: a circular earthen bank and ditch with causeways leading into the enclosure. Their precise purpose is not clear. They are scattered across Britain, with a slightly higher concentration in the east, while stone circles predominate in the more mountainous west and north.

Henges were sometimes combined with stone circles as at Arbor Low in Derbyshire. This is also the site of two Bronze Age round barrows. One barrow was built atop the henge bank itself. A second was built on an older long barrow nearby.

The most spectacular complex of monuments was built at Avebury in Wiltshire. Avebury epitomizes the explosion of cultural creativity beginning in 2800. Its monuments included a gigantic henge, enclosing 98 very large stones in a circle, 1100 ft. in diameter. This in turn enclosed two more stone circles (each about 300 ft. in diameter.) Furthermore, two parallel rows of stones (an "avenue") were erected, stretching 1.5 miles from Avebury to two more concentric stone circles on Overton Hill. Some have suggested that a second avenue of stones led from Avebury in the opposite direction.

Avebury's stone rows are reminiscent of the great multiple stone rows at Carnac in Brittany. Here thousands of standing stones are arranged in enormous converging arrays, the largest of which contain 10 rows of about 100 stones each and stretches 1.5 miles. Also at Carnac is Le Grand Menhir: a 67 foot stone (now broken into four pieces.) It is the largest stone that the megalithic cultures ever attempted to stand upright. One author notes that erecting the stone would be like standing a fully loaded 747 jumbo jet on end.

Near Avebury is Silbury Hill, the largest artificial earthen mound in Europe. It is 40 meters tall and has a base that is 165 meters in diameter. Constructing it required 18 million person-hours of labor to dig, carry, and pile 35 million baskets of dirt and chalk. It was constructed at roughly the same time as the great henge at Avebury.

Finally, Stonehenge stands as a unique henge and stone circle monument. It combines numerous distinctive features and was constructed in several phases stretching from c. 2800 to 1600 BC. Its 10-30 foot stones are finely carved and placed in an interlocking circle of posts and lintels with a horseshoe shaped set of five "trilithons" within. The smaller stones (weighing 4-6 tons) were brought 200 miles from their origin in southwest Wales. The site's axis is roughly oriented toward the midsummer sunrise. (While other monuments have similar astronomical orientations, astro-archeological claims linking the stones and the sky have not been well established.)

After the construction of these great communal stone and henge monuments, the culture began constructing smaller stone circles and smaller round barrows for individual burials. These were sometimes placed on top of the older communal monuments as at Arbor Low. This new form of construction is thought to mark the rise of a new social ideology of individualism which accompanied the Bronze Age invasion of the "Beaker Culture" from the Rhine valley on the European continent