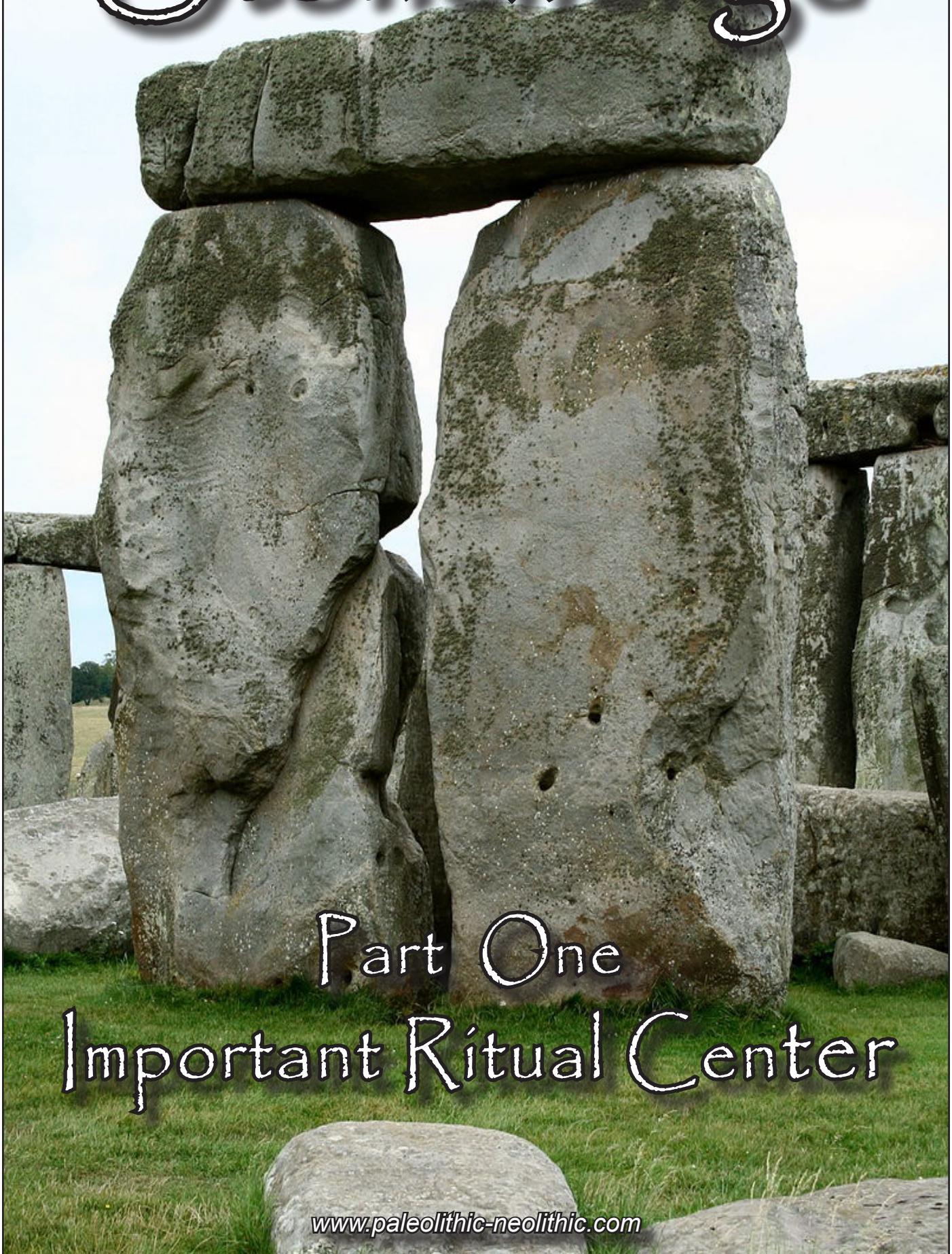


Stonehenge





Because of its impressive stone circle built of tall massive monolith, which were capped by equally heavy stone lintels, Stonehenge is regarded in Europe as the most important archeological cult circle site. In addition such pre-historic structures always have inspired various aficionados of ancient cults and esoteric thinking. But Stonehenge is not the only cult ring sanctuary and also not the oldest.

Those circular spiritual structures were erected in many places in Europe and Middle East. Just to name a few such as Goseck and Poemelte in Germany same as Almendres in Portugal as well as Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. And there are many more some thereof we will refer to in more detail further on.

Migration & Cultural Interchange

So an interesting question arises. Do these cult circles really have anything in common? What made men start to build these spiritual structures in different places more or less at the same time? And for what purpose did they undergo these enormous efforts to erect such megalithic stone rings with extremely heavy monolith blocks?

Are these temple like monuments the first places of religious worship to gods and/

or ancestors? And which ceremonial rituals were practiced here? Did they include human sacrifice?

Let's first look at the big picture of pre-historic developments and following migration. About 15,000 years ago animal domestication began in the Fertile Crescent in northern Syria, Iraq and western Iran. In the same region about 5,000 years later first organized farming took place when groups of hunter-gatherers became sedentary.

This is called the Neolithic Revolution because it brought about many developments and an enormous push in modernization. It took another 5,000 years before farming arrived in Europe and a bit later on the British Isles.

New Settlement Theory

But there is an interesting new theory how hunter-gatherers might have learned to settle down which I want to share with you. All ancient cult ring structures were erected by non-sedentary communities. To build them many clans needed to join forces to be able to achieve their important plan. Construction activities included first quarrying huge stone blocks, then transporting these heavy monolith over quite some distances and finally their skillful and neat erection.

Tests have shown that at least 400 to 600 men were needed to do the job at Stonehenge. All these activities also needed a long time if not years. Experts assume that groups assembled here for several month during the year to build up the envisaged ritual ring.

During that time they needed to be fed on site and this might have started somehow organized farming. The rest of the year they roamed around as hunter-gatherers.

Long Distance Trade

5,000 years ago already an active long distance trade took place. Some experts believe that regular trading started already thousands of years earlier. We know that amber from the Baltic Sea was transported over thousands of kilometers to Egypt. There it was believed to be a holy stone and highly sought after.

Set trade routes on foot and by ship existed. Trading led to intensive cultural exchange and knowledge transfer such as metal working and construction abilities. Only on the British Isles it arrived the latest.

Immigration Waves

At the time Stonehenge was erected archeologists assume that only 200,000 people lived on the British Isles. For solstice festivals it was established that thousands of participants congregated at Stonehenge some coming even from the Scottish Highlands.

Now who were these immigrants and where do they all came from? Modern DNA and isotope analysis helped to find this out.

Mediterranean Farmers

11,000 years ago first occupation traces were found in the area. This does not mean that the Stonehenge plains were not inhabited before. We know the landscape at that time was covered nearly entirely by forests. But it is surprising, that 6,000 years ago farmers from the East Mediterranean with Aegean ancestors moved in via Iberia.

But why did they do that? Were they attracted by the gold and tin finds? Or did they fled competition for resources and conflicts? Did they experienced in their home land first signs of overpopulation?

What we know is that they did not mix much with local hunter-gatherers who came here from Wales before they arrived. To those belonged the Boscombe Bowman who was buried close by. He was part of the Welsh clan.

The newcomers from afar were possibly the first to build up Stonehenge to an important ritual site. The necessary knowledge to erect complex stone monuments they certainly had as they came from a very developed and advanced region the Mediterranean.

Bell Beaker Culture

1,500 years later the





Bell Beaker people arrived from Germany. They were experienced long distance traders and imported metal smelting and gold production techniques.

They started also to export tin and gold they found and mined locally. Just remember that the amazing Sky Disc discovered in Nebra Germany was produced and decorated with tin and gold from Cornwall.

And we know the Bell Beaker people of the Aunjetitz Culture in eastern Germany created it. This was the first representation of an annual calendar synchronizing both lunar and sun calendars with their different number of days. Definitely this unique so-called sky disc was a very helpful instrument for farming communities.

Amesbury Archer

The famous Amesbury Archer who was buried in the vicinity belonged to this culture. He was a copper smith and died at the age of approximately 40. His burial gifts included arrow heads, five ceramic bell beaker vessels plus a stone anvil. Tests revealed that he was born on the northern slopes of the German Alps and moved to the island as young man.

Ice Man “Ötzi”

The legendary Ice Man from the same period discovered in the Italian Alps at an altitude of 3,200 meters is another interesting example of ancient mobility and advancement of daily life utensils.

He was carrying rather refined tools and weapons made out of a dozen different materials each with the best properties for their intended use. He as well was a metallurgical expert and used to travel long distances including difficult mountain crossings such as the Alps.

Stonehenge Beginnings

Let's now start to look at Stonehenge. About that time Stonehenge turned from an ordinary burial site to a special ritual place. But before that in a first step the Welsh people created a simple circle with about 50 so-called blue stones.

If they also dug out the huge ditch measuring 110 meters across is unclear. But the dark blue shaded dolerite stones had acoustic properties when banged against like bell stones. Close to 120 cremation burials were attested from that period.

Burial Rituals

That leads to an interesting question. Who was buried here and how? Tests showed that equally men and women were cremated and buried here including a few children. Ashes were filled in small dug out holes and topped with a wooden pole.

Possibly these were the oldest form of tomb stones. This practice was used in other





European burial sites as well. Stonehenge was certainly a multifunctional ritual site as deer and oxen bones as well as flint tools have been deliberately buried in the ditch. But predominantly it was an important burial site.

Change to Stone Circles

With the arrival of the Bell Beaker people Stonehenge cult structures changed from timber to stone circles. This so-called third period lasted for thousand years and brought about an ongoing activity of major rebuilding and numerous enhancements. At first two circles with about 80 stone monolith were erected. The outer ring measured 33 meters across and the inner 14 meters.

The inner circle had a horse shoe shape and five trilithons were erected around the center. Trilithons are a pair of free standing monolith topped by a cap stone. The highest reached up to seven meters. Imagine some of the monolith have a single weight of 25 tons.

These stone were engraved with many axes plus few daggers. About 70 engravings were only discovered recently when the stones were scanned. Most of these engravings measure nearly half a meter so they are not really small.

What was the meaning and message of those engravings? We actually do not know yet.

Assumptions exist plenty. Were these axes indicating military strength as they are engraved in numbers? Or were they a sign of burial sites as they were used to fell the trees previously used as tomb markers? Remember Stonehenge was not the only site with those symbols marked in stone. I have seen these also at the Cemmo circle in Capo di Ponte northern Italy.

Solidary Stones

Furthermore four so-called station stones were positioned alone on the ditch border, two of them on small mounds. Surprisingly those mounds compared to many others were not burial barrows. If these solidary stones had a reference to each other than that of the only square or double cross symbol in this circular focused ritual place. But we do not know the reason of the placement of these single stones. Certain theories exist but could not yet be archeologically proven.

An altar or slaughter stone was laid down in the center. At a later stage this stone was repositioned upright. The name giving and supposed use of this stone is still a pure assumption but the probability



is nevertheless high. The reason for installing it at later stage upright also is difficult to explain and can only be attributed to changing rituals.

In addition a so-called heel stone was positioned outside the northeast entrance plus three portal stones just inside. Was this done to restrict entrance to a few such as shamans and leaders? Or just to object the view on those key ceremonies taking place inside? The heel stone at first also had two companions which today are missing. Had this to do with the solstices?

Intriguing Blue Stones

We have already mentioned the intriguing blue stones transported here over more than 200 kilometers from Preseli Hills in Wales. They have been erected, removed, re-used at Bluestonehenge and again re-erected in a bigger concept during the last phase of constructions at Stonehenge. Even a second load has been brought from Wales towards the end to Stonehenge. In this last effort they were placed creating their own two additional rings between the outer and inner circle.



Stonehenge Avenue

In this period also the key Stonehenge Avenue was constructed leading from the heel stone three kilometers down to River Avon. To reach the river the avenue needed to be built in a half moon shape with two slight bends. But we can be certain that the procession actually led visitors from the river banks to Stonehenge. This Avenue was a wide procession alley with ditches and banks on both sides. Shortly after the river it took two turns and then followed the solstice line to the northeast entrance of the Stonehenge cult site.

Stonehenge History

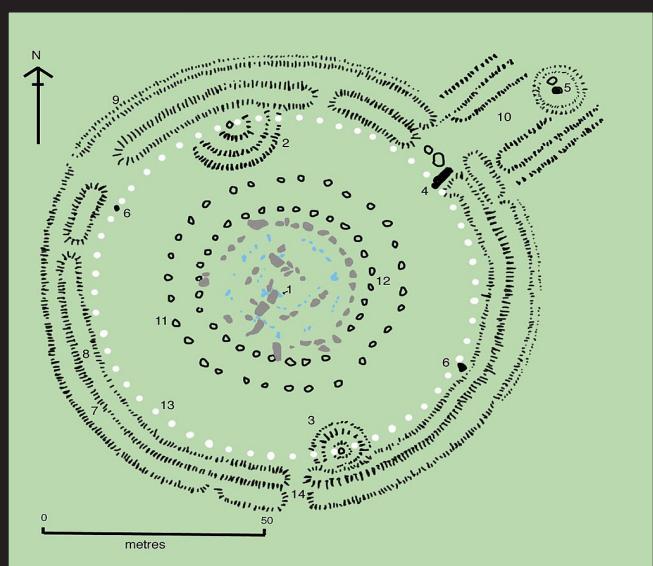
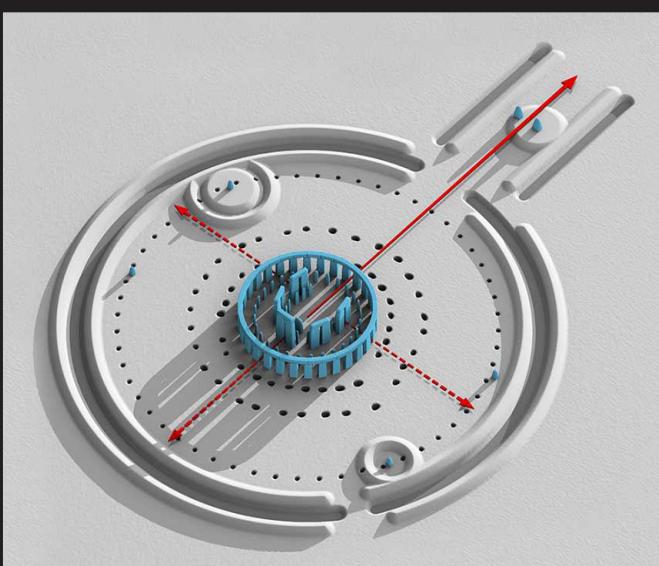
The area was used for over 3,000 years as ritual cult site. Various groups of pre-historic communities from different

cultures came to Stonehenge. But all did not leave any written records. This is the reason why there is no archeological evidence of the used construction techniques. The selected position for this important cult site is based on its closeness to river Avon and the various warm water springs.

Possibly these springs were the main and only reason for selecting this place. And then there are the amazing purple stones. When taken out of water the fungus they are covered with turn purple when drying out. Was this seen in antiquity as a sign given by gods?

Today's Structure

Unfortunately today only 40 percent of old structures are still in situ. And this after various existing but fallen stones were re-erected. The rest might have found their way into local medieval city wall, castle and later church constructions. Visitors today can see the two concentric stone monolith rings. The large circle with about 30 monolith plus five cap stones. And the





inner horse shoe type circle with three pairs of trilithon looking like massive gates. In addition many medium sized blue stones are spread in two uneven circles between the large monolith. Unfortunately some blue stones have very much disintegrated to rather small pieces.

Why was it built?

What we can say with certainty Stonehenge was pre-historic burial site. First for all and later possibly for the selected few. And it was a multifunctional site and used for astronomical observation purposes including prediction of eclipse, solstice, equinox and other celestial events. Its entrances are precisely directed to the midsummer and midwinter solstices. But was it also a place for sacrifices to gods? Various facts point into this direction too.

And was it a place of healing too? The place of healing theory has been confirmed through recent excavations. Blue stone were already an integrated part of the first ditch and timber constructions at Stonehenge. After being removed and used elsewhere they became later again

part of the central circle. They were believed to have healing properties. The use of their acoustic properties is unknown but certainly played an important ritual role. Now let's look at similar sites to Stonehenge.

Goebekli Tepe

Let's start with the oldest known cult site Goebekli Tepe in Turkey going back 9,000 years. Here again hunter-gatherer communities erected over 20 impressive cult rings with massive T-shaped monolith weighing between 40 to 60 tons each. These were skillfully sculptured with 20 different animal species and also few human figures. In total there are 200 beautifully decorated monolith pillars. Goebekli Tepe is believed to have been a fertility cult center as well as a burial site. Only

that the dead in a ritual were offered here to feed vultures.

Megalithic Portugal

Only a thousand years later huge cult rings were erected in Portugal. Almendres close to Evora is the most important site with a huge double circle of 200 menhirs of which 100 are still in situ. Various stones were also richly decorated. The area around Evora has about ten cult rings of which I have visited several. See the article with pictures on this website.

German Sun Observatories

Another thousand years later around 7,000 years ago the first known sun observatory was erected with a circular timber palisade at Goseck. But this was still 2,000 years earlier before Stonehenge began. When Stonehenge took shape the impressive cult

ring and observatory at Poemelte was built more or less contemporary. Its size is identical and its design with ditch and multiple rings looks so similar. So much so that in 2019 Stonehenge archeologists started new excavations there with their German colleges. It will be interesting to see the results.





Cemmo in Italy

Val Camonica in northern Italy offers nine cult sites and hundred thousands of stone engraving. But the Cemmo cult ring site is the most interesting with 27 natural monolith and first use is attested to 10,000 years ago. Its boulders are richly decorated with human, animal figures and arms. They are nearly fully covered with engravings in rows leaving no empty space. One stone shows an interesting solar image and human figure with solar halo. Please see the two Val Camonica articles on this website for more information and pictures thereof.

Arabian Rajaeel

We know that the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited at a very early stage already. First human traces found here are over a million years old. So it is no surprise to find next to many archeological site also a prehistoric cult ring site. Rajaeel is dated 6,000 years old and consists of about 50 smaller half circular groups of tall hewn stone stelae.

The site has not yet been seriously excavated. It is assumed that cremation burials have been taken place here. For more information and pictures please see the article on this website.

Conclusion

Stonehenge is spectacular and definitely worth a visit. Through various interesting reports and amazing pictures expectations have been raised high. Yes the place has certainly a special atmosphere but be not disappointed by the many I mean really many visitors especially on sunny days. They might not give you the time and quiet to so to speak "inhale the spirit" of Stonehenge if there is any left.

But Stonehenge has to be seen in the overall pre-historic context of a vast ritual landscape including the Cursus, Durrington Walls, Woodhenge, Bluehenge, Blick Mead and the many burial barrows littering the landscape. All these monuments we will cover in a second article called Greater Stongehenge. Please let us have your comments on this intriguing site.

Travel Tips

Stonehenge can be seen in a day's trip. It can also be booked via a tourist organization and can be combined with visits to other tourist sites in the region. The normal visit takes you to the car park two kilometers away. There you can take the shuttle or walk up to Stonehenge. We recommend to book your entry ticket before. A very limited number of visitors can enter the ring on selected days with pre-booking. Otherwise you are only allowed to take the walkway around.

Weblinks

www.wikipedia.org/stonehenge
www.englishheritage.org.uk/stonehenge

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