

Greater Stonehenge

Cursus, Woodhenge, Bluestonehenge, Durrington Walls, Bluestonehenge





In the first part of our Stonehenge series we have explained these amazing ritual cult circles and even compared Stonehenge with other cult rings in Europe and the Middle East. We investigated when and in which sequence they were erected and who actually built them.

In part two we want to look at the surrounding landscape of Stonehenge which most of us are unaware of how many archeological treasures still lie below its surface. We call these here Greater Stonehenge.

Scanning Project

In a recent scanning project 16 square kilometers of ground were investigated up to three meters deep to detect previously unknown ancient structures.

This project revealed 17 new stone and timber formations plus dozens of new Neolithic tombs dated around 6,000 years old.

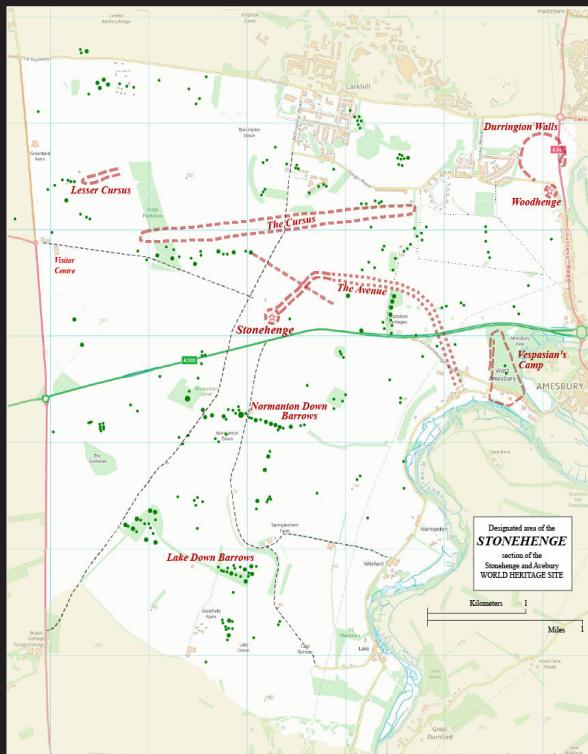
An amazing discovery was a 33 meter long wooden burial house a so-called long barrow. In addition hundreds of Bronze and Iron Age burial mounds were detected as well as can be seen on the fotos.

Huge Burial Site

What we already know is that the whole Stonehenge plains area was a pre-historic burial site. First burials were attested with an age of over 10,000 years. Various forms of burials were practiced and changed over time.

These might have also changed due to the immigration of various tribes at this holy site. At Stonehenge and Woodhenge which we will describe in more detail later on cremation burials in dug out holes took place. These were topped with wooden posts or stones as grave markers.

Thereafter secondary burial in long barrows were the norm. For these secondary burials only the bones were used. The wooden block houses were about 30 meters long and fully covered with earth. They were used for multiple burials and burial gifts were common. These mass tomb structures are about 6,000 years old. Then again with the beginning of the



Bronze Age a change took place and small burial mounds for single burials were preferred and erected in rows. Thereafter circle tombs followed.

Let's look at the most prominent Barrow group close to the two cursus explained further on. This line of barrows is about 1,200 meters long and about 250 meters wide and can still today be recognized in aerial photographs.

Both burial type's cremation plus grave marker and bones only in barrows were practiced in this area for over 7,000 years. But we also know that Stonehenge was a multifunctional ritual site also to predict eclipses, solstices and equinox.

Now let's look at the various structures archeologists have discovered over time and already investigated including the Cursus, Bluehenge, Woodhenge, Blick Mead and Durrington Walls.

Cursus

When first discovered its shape made experts believed they were looking at a Roman horse race circus. They based their first assumption on the fact that Vespasian had erected a camp site on the Avon River banks next to the beginning of the Stonehenge Avenue.

But at closer investigation they found out that this was a pre-historic ritual place built shortly before Stonehenge some 5,500

years ago. So it was the first huge structure constructed some 700 meters north of the later most famous Stonehenge cult circles.

With a length of close to three kilometers and a width of over one hundred meters it really was a huge ritual place at the time. Imagine this was still a forested area. So first all trees had to be felled with simple Neolithic stone axes.

Experts calculated that this job needed around 1,000 men to accomplish. The cursus had a ditch and bank all along running in east west direction. At both ends two huge pits were found which are thought to be linked to the solstices. And at the same time a Neolithic long barrow tomb was also erected at its open end where remains of a secondary human burial and an ox skull were found.

What was the purpose of this long open space? Was it the first procession alley? Or was it a sportive campus for competitive purposes? There is another interesting theory. Have two annual processions taken place - one for marking the longest day and one for the shortest day of the year?

Or have different immigrated communities and cultures practiced their different ceremonies and rituals worshipping different gods? Many questions with few concrete answers inspire





numerous adverse theories.

Lesser Cursus

We should not forget the Lesser Cursus. It was erected around the same time of the larger cursus about one kilometer northwest of its western start or end. This smaller version is only 400 meters long and 60 meters wide. It was extended in a second phase to double its length and open at its eastern end. Possibly to be extended the following year during the annual solstice festival visit?

Bluehenge vs Stonehenge

Let's follow the time line of construction activities at Greater Stonehenge. The next project after the Cursus and the first building activities at Stonehenge was Bluehenge.

We already know that Welsh immigrants brought along their blue dolerite stones from Preseli Hills over a distance of more than 200 kilometers and first placed them in a circle at Stonehenge. These were later removed and used to start Bluehenge about 5,000 years ago.

Bluehenge is situated two kilometers southeast of Stonehenge on the banks of River Avon and right next to the Roman Emperor Vespasian camp which is overbuilt by today's town of West Amesbury. Is it a coincidence that right here the famous Stonehenge Avenue ended or started? Bluehenge was only discovered in 2008.

Why the blue stones were moved back again to Stonehenge in antiquity is not clear. So only the foundations of 27 blue stones could be excavated here. The circle was small and measured only ten meters across. Today only a 25 meter wide ditch is left including its outer bank. There is no proof of any solar or lunar orientation.

Woodhenge

This is a very particular site right next to the south of the residential site of Durrington Walls. It was a ritual and burial site erected during the main construction period of Stonehenge around 4,500 years ago.

Here six oval shaped circles of wooden poles have been erected. In total 168 wooden poles have been attested. Selected poles were rather huge and measured over seven meters in height. The outer circle had a diameter of 40 meters.

The circles were surrounded by a two meter deep ditch or moat which was twelve meters wide at the top. The outer bank erected from the dugout material was only one meter high but ten meters wide and in total Woodhenge measured 110 meters across.

This was really a huge structure and had a similar size as contemporary Poemmelte in Germany. But it had no palisade walls like Poemmelte only

alone standing blank timber poles like a forest without branches and tree crowns. Woodhenge was certainly not an observatory because it had only one entrance in the northeast.

Was Woodhenge the poor man's burial site right next to the builder's quarters of Stonehenge? Well it must have been also a ritual site, because in its center a human sacrifice burial was discovered during early excavations.

It is assumed it was a sacrifice because the child engraved here was buried at the center and in addition was found to have a split skull. After all the ceremonial sites let's now look at the fascinating residential sites.

Blick Mead

It really is the oldest site in the Stonehenge prehistoric landscape and also called the missing link. Because it bridges the gap so far missing between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic period. And Blick Mead proves permanent occupation starting 10,000





years ago and lasting uninterrupted for over 3,000 years. This is an amazing early hunter-gatherer camp and a well-chosen site too.

Here a spring produces continuous water flow with a permanent temperature of ten degrees. So it never freezes even in winter. But what makes this spring special indeed? Have you heard the story of the purple stones? It is an algae in the spring water which covers the stones. Once taken out and drying in air they turn bright red and somewhat purple after few hours.

Excavations also revealed thousands of sharp flint stone tools and animal bones mostly from aurochs. We also know how our pre-historic ancestors cooked. They knew how to handle fire for over 500,000 years. Cooking meat over fire is easy. But how do you cook a soup or prepare medicine when you do not yet have any pottery pots?

It is real simple. Make a small hollow in the ground lay a fresh piece of animal skin in it. Then fill it with rests of meat, herbs, roots etc. Top it up with water

and put heated up stones from your fireplace in it and ready is your hot soup within minutes. And the animal skin can be reused many times.

Blick Mead is the oldest attested settlement in the area and is situated only two kilometers east of Stonehenge and right north of modern West Amesbury. It is definitely linked with the oldest cremation burials in the area dated 10,000 years ago. Unfortunately not much has been published about the oldest Stonehenge site in comparison with all other sites.

Durrington Walls

Unfortunately there is little left today of this intriguing ancient settlement site about



three kilometers northeast of Stonehenge. Agricultural activities have destroyed the area to a great extent. Further two modern roads run across and in addition military barracks had been erected in the northeast and some houses in the west on this site. Durrington Walls was the home of the Stonehenge builders but prehistoric visitors for solstice festivals stayed here as well.

It was excavated in 2004 and found to go back 5,000 years. The site was occupied uninterrupted for over 500 years. Experts investigated seven ancient house floors and calculated that up to 1,000 houses could have covered the area and over 5,000 people might have lived here at peak times. Experts established that this amount of man power was needed to build the ditch which was not dug out in phases but in one effort.

The said Stonehenge visitors have come as far as from the Scottish Highlands and brought along cattle to be slaughtered for solstice festivals. Same is true for

many pig bones excavated which were so to speak imported from many areas of the island. Isotope analysis of the animal teeth proved this.

Durrington Walls was built on a slope stretching southeast down to River Avon and had two entrances. One was situated few meters from the river bank the other pointed northwest. It is necessary to understand that River Avon was meandering through the landscape like a snake. First running north south at Durrington Walls and then turning east west to pass Stonehenge.

Like Stonehenge Durrington Walls was surrounded by a huge ditch about six meters deep and seven meters wide at its bottom. With the dugout material a three meter high and nearly 30 meter wide bank was created. On the inner side rests of a wooden palisade with about 200 poles were discovered.

Just to give you a comparison its surrounding wall was close to two kilometers long and so it is five times bigger than the Stonehenge ritual circles. It is also the second largest in



the island after Hindwell in Wales. This also shows that Wales was another important settlement area on the island and explains also why Welsh clans played an important role in Stonehenge construction.

Later the residential area extended all around the walled area of Durrington Walls. It was also found that on the river banks huge ceremonial fires were lit up. And this was possibly the same time when a second avenue was erected near Durrington Walls from River Avon following the midsummer sunset direction.

Southern Circle

In a second development step a large wooden circle was erected within the walled area called Southern Circle. It consisted of four large circles with rather

large tree stems. Its entrance was oriented southeast precisely to the midwinter solstice sun rise. Interestingly this opposes the solar alignment of Stonehenge. But similar to the Stonehenge heel stone a single large wooden pole was positioned at the exit towards the second avenue.

Western Enclosures

We already know that Durrington Walls was the residential area and Stonehenge the ceremonial site of this area. But recent findings give new fruit for thought and theories. To the west of the Southern Circle the so-called Western Enclosures were discovered during excavations.

They consist of a raised group of six small round structures erected around a terrace close to eastern entrance. Two houses with a wooden palisade and ditch around them were identified. Hundreds of years later two additional ring structures were added.

What purpose did they serve? Were they houses





worthy to protect for the elite or shamans? Were they important cult meeting places or shrines? Were here different gods worshipped than in Stonehenge? All is possible.

But it proves that the Greater Stonehenge area was not just a simple ritual place for primitive Neolithic people. Our prehistoric ancestors were much more developed and sophisticated than we still imagine today.

Conclusion

When planning to visit Stonehenge little information is given about what is called Greater Stonehenge archeological landscape. Unfortunately little can be visited today as much of the prehistoric structures fell victim to modern agriculture and expanding villages

and road construction. In this article we tried to give you an overview how intense and extensive the ceremonial building activities of our ancestors were.

And again it shows that these Neolithic communities were so unbelievable sophisticated and skilled at a level we can not imagine. How they acquired their knowledge about farming, construction, metallurgy, weapon and tool making, astronomy, medicine and many more subjects is still a mystery to us.

But such visits to Stonehenge and other prehistoric sites make us think and hopefully help us understand the importance of nature to survive.

