

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

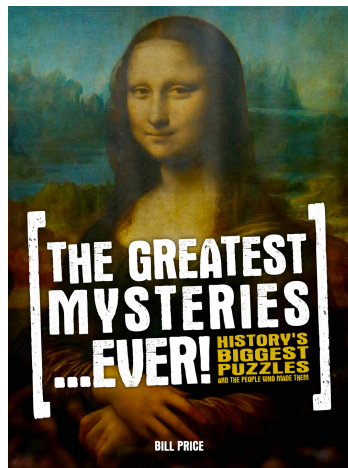
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Price, B. (2016). *The greatest mysteries...ever*. Brighton, England: Quid Publishing.

WHY WAS STONEHENGE BUILT AND BY WHOM?

ca. 2500 BCE

Clue: The giant stones are aligned with the solstices

Main players: Ancient Britons

Verdict: Lots of theories but no real idea.

Salisbury Plain in England's southwest can be a bleak place in midwinter. This may explain why far fewer people gather at Stonehenge to mark the setting sun on the winter solstice than they do six months later for sunrise on the longest day of the year, even though the people who originally built it aligned the stones with both.

On the summer solstice these days, a procession of druids in full druid costume enter the stone circle and perform rituals as the sun comes up while a crowd of onlookers get in touch with their spiritual side. In the 1970s and '80s, a much noisier free festival took place at the site. What any of this has to do with Stonehenge itself is difficult to know. The people who built it 4,500 years ago haven't left us any indication of what they had in mind. That they had a purpose is clear from the monumental amount of work it must have taken to build the stone circle. Nobody goes to all that effort without a very good reason and, while archaeology has been getting to grips with the identity of these people and how they went about erecting the stones, we still don't really have the faintest idea why they did it.

NEOLITHIC SHIFT

The megalithic monuments built in Britain and along the Atlantic coast of mainland Europe date to the Neolithic, or New Stone Age, a period of great change in the way humans lived. In Britain, this period began around 4000 BCE, and included the adoption of what has been termed by some archaeologists as the 'Neolithic package'. Exactly how and why this great change happened is an enduring question in archaeology, not least because the Neolithic period involved the single biggest shift in human society that has ever occurred: the move from hunting and gathering to farming. It led to a more settled way of life within a more stratified society, the use of more advanced tools and the first use of pottery.

One theory, first proposed by the French archaeologist Jacques Cauvin, suggests that the Neolithic transition was

Whoever built Stonehenge must have been highly skilled in working stone, with good organisational abilities to achieve what they did.

driven by changes in the way people thought about their place in the world. Put simply, hunter-gatherers live in the present, providing for themselves from what is available around them. Their belief systems draw on local features such as the landscape, animals and plants. Neolithic farmers, on the other hand, would have been more concerned with what the future might bring – a change in the weather could wreck their harvest. This uncertainty was reflected in their religions; offerings would be made in an effort to appease the gods and bring order to a chaotic world.

The people who built Stonehenge were farmers who lived in small, settled communities. It is, of course, impossible to know exactly what they thought or how they responded to the world around

them, but, at the same time, it is not unreasonable to suggest that their religious life would have been in line with that of other farming communities.

The fact that they expended such huge amounts of energy and resources to build Stonehenge, which surely can only have had a ritual purpose, shows they must have had a highly developed religious sense, presumably based on the worship of the dead and the ancestors. The placement of the stones also suggests an advanced awareness of the cosmos (universe), in which great importance was attached to the movements of the sun and to the changing of the seasons, which are, of course, vital components of the agricultural way of life.

THE PHASES OF STONEHENGE

Stonehenge, like Rome, wasn't built in a day. In fact, there were three phases of construction stretching out over the 1,600-year period that the site was in use. In the first phase, at around 3100 BCE, a

STONEHENGE

The site was in use for some 1,600 years and may have formed part of a complex of monuments.



circular ditch was dug, with the earth and chalk extracted from it used to form a bank. On the inside of the bank a series of 56 pits were dug at regular intervals. The purpose of these pits is unclear, but they may have been used to erect either wooden posts or stone megaliths. One theory suggests they were the original position of the bluestones, which were then moved to their present position within the main circle at a later date.

Nothing now remains of the second phase of work, which occurred over the course of the following 500 years. This saw the erection of wooden structures, most of which were then replaced by stone during the third and final phase of construction. This began in about 2600 BCE and continued in stages for the next few hundred years. The massive sarsen stones of the outer circle, each weighing 22.7 tonnes (25 tons), were brought to the site from the Marlborough Downs, 32 km (20 miles) away. They were cut to shape on site, with tongue and groove

BLUESTONES

These stones, which weigh between four and five tons, originally came from the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire, 240 km (150 miles) away, and were presumably either dragged on some form of sledge or taken most of the way around the coast by boat and dragged the remainder of the way. Whichever method was used, it would have been an enormous undertaking, showing just how important the site was to successive generations of people.

joints so that the ends connected together and each was slightly curved so that, when placed into position on top of the sarsens, they formed a ring. The impression given by this form of construction is of it being carried out by a highly skilled workforce.

Even larger sarsens of up to 45 tonnes (50 tons) were erected inside the circle to form five trilithons – two upright stones joined by a lintel – and these were arranged in a horseshoe pattern. The bluestones were also arranged within the circle in a similar pattern and a number of other stones erected, including one in the middle of the circle. This phase of building does not appear to have been fully finished, with one section of the outer circle left open, perhaps because the builders had run out of stones of sufficient size. Minor modifications were carried out while the site remained in use over the course of the next thousand years, until about 1500 BCE, after which it seems the site fell into disuse.

A RITUAL LANDSCAPE

Over the years, hundreds of theories have been put forwards to explain what these Neolithic farmers were up to at Stonehenge. One of these theories was proposed by Professor Mike Parker Pearson, who led a series of excavations at the site, and is one of the world's leading authorities on the subject.

His theory places Stonehenge within an interconnected complex of Neolithic monuments in the surrounding area known as a ritual landscape. Other parts of this landscape include contemporary features such as Durrington Walls, the remains of a wooden version of Stonehenge a few miles to the west,



where a Neolithic village of about 100 houses has also been excavated. Both Durrington Walls and Stonehenge are sited near the River Avon and were connected to it by avenues lined with earthworks. Parker Pearson envisages bodies being transported from the domain of the living, represented by the wood of Durrington Walls, to the domain of the dead, the stone of Stonehenge, via the river, which, he suggests, was considered to be a transitional zone between life and death.

Numerous burials have been found both in and around Stonehenge, including, most famously, the Amesbury Archer, the skeleton of a Bronze Age man found buried with numerous grave goods near the site. There is evidence of more than 200 cremation burials in the outer earthworks, lending support to the theory that the site was a place of burial.

STONE MONUMENT

The sarsen stones form the outer ring, with a horseshoe of trilithons at the centre.

One aspect of Stonehenge not addressed by Parker Pearson's theory is the fact that the stones are positioned to follow the path of the sun. It could be that the site had more than one purpose, much as a cathedral or temple has today.

Perhaps the best way of considering Stonehenge and the surrounding ritual landscape is to think of them as places where a community came together to honour the dead and to celebrate festivals at specific times of the year. These ceremonies may be long forgotten, but, in many respects, what they were doing is not so very different from how we behave today. They recognised their place in the world and sought to influence the future by asking their gods to interfere in worldly affairs in their favour.