

Don't knock the ancestors

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"Too many ancestors?" said James Whitley. Mike Pitts responds.

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James Whitley (2002) complains of 'omnipresent' and 'universal' ancestors, invading archaeological theory and student essays. All is not necessarily as bad as he believes. In the British Neolithic, the subject area from which he draws many of his examples, invoking ancestors has proved productive both for thinking about the past and for engaging the public in the stories. In particular, far from 'circumvent[ing] the tedious business of undertaking contextual analysis' (Whitley 2002: 120), reference to ancestors in the Stonehenge landscape has occurred in an atmosphere of enquiry, discovery and the positing of varied ancestral models.

Whitley is of course right to say that in societies where one can enquire directly after these things the concept of 'ancestors' is highly flexible and varied. It does, however, also have a simple colloquial sense well exemplified in the BBC television strand 'Meet the Ancestors'. Visiting excavations, archaeologist Julian Richards sought to engage viewers' interest by depicting an ancient world through the eyes and minds of its people represented by their material remains. The BBC is acutely aware of the need to be seen to be multicultural, so even if careless of the deep history of migrations and ethnic mixing in the British Isles, it knows that some of its viewers are very recent immigrants. The titular 'ancestors', then, meant little more than 'people who came before us'. There is nothing wrong with this. A handy reminder, to both academics and the public, that the subject matter of archaeology is people should not be sniffed at.

On the other hand, at least at Stonehenge, Whitley is wrong to say that the 'universal ancestor has gone from becoming an orthodoxy without ever having had to suffer the indignity of being treated as a mere hypothesis' (2002: 119). There is no doubt that the paper by Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina (1998), which emphasises ancestral roles, has had a big impact on thinking about Stonehenge. It has not, however, gone uncriticised (e.g. Barrett & Fewster 1998; Whittle 1998) or untested. In *Hengeworld* (Pitts 2001) I selectively adopted and developed the Parker Pearson-Ramilisonina hypothesis. This book was written for a general readership, so the winnowing of the original model was only briefly explained. By touching on some of the details here, I hope to show that the concept can be validated against archaeological data and a variety of contrasting ancestral models can be proposed and tested (see also Pollard & Reynolds, 2002: 122, 129).

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Stonehenge as a landscape of ancestors

Although the vegetation cover on the chalk around Stonehenge tends naturally to mixed deciduous forest, the first known structures at the site (a ditch and bank enclosing a circular space dating from 2975 BC) were created in grassland that had developed over centuries of anthropogenic interference. This grassland was encroached upon by arable at various times. For example there are apparently 1st millennium BC fields west of Stonehenge between the A344 and A303, and to the east small areas of medieval fields north of Vespasian's Camp (Figure 1; Barchelor 1997 and unpublished air photos mapped by English Heritage).

However the dominant landscape character appears to have been pasture for many generations, with major settlement focussed on the river valleys to west and east. That part of the reason for this may have been limited availability of water is suggested by a deep well at Wilsford, 1.5 kilometres from Stonehenge. This well was in use around 1450 BC but was possibly excavated before 2300 BC (Ashbee *et al.* 1989; weighted mean of four samples from near base 3189 ± 34 BP/1465 cal BC, wooden bucket at bottom OxA-1089 4640 ± 70 BP/2370 cal BC). Over 30 metres deep, the well was surrounded by grassland and thus presumably serviced stock (finds included grass cropped by grazing sheep, sheep dung and two aborted lambs).

While relatively thin on human settlement, the area has accumulated funerary monuments, burials and memorials from almost all eras. These include substantial Early Neolithic long barrows, scattered Late Neolithic burials and the exceptional cremation burial cemetery at

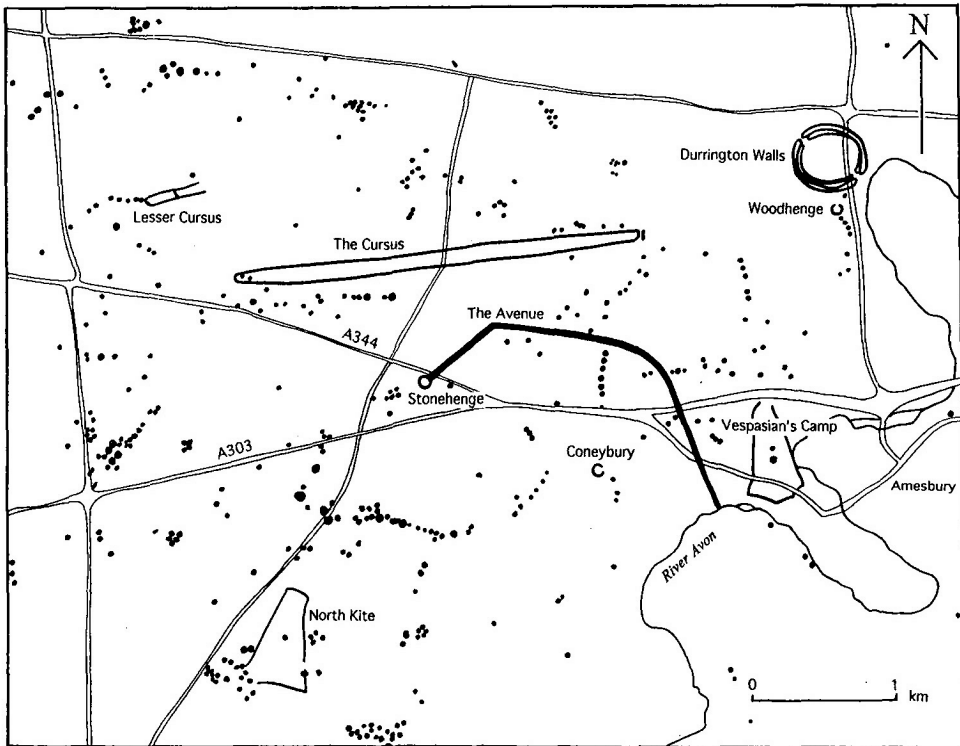


Figure 1. The modern Stonehenge landscape.

Stonehenge itself, Early Bronze Age round barrows, later Bronze Age cremation burials in and around these mounds, an Early Iron Age inhumation near Stonehenge, Anglo-Saxon burials in earlier barrows and an execution burial at Stonehenge itself, two early 20th century memorials to airmen killed in flying accidents and at Stonehenge, if the Office of Works files are to be believed (Chippindale 1994: 190), cremated remains of recent Druids and, without doubt, the unrecorded scattered ashes of a few modern visitors' loved ones.

To say then that Stonehenge is a 'landscape of ancestors', at least in the colloquial sense noted above, is to do more than pose a hypothesis. It is to label the perception many tourists and people who live nearby have of the Stonehenge downland, crossed by heavy flows of road traffic but otherwise remote from modern life. This is a relatively a-historical perception that shares more with, say, the insights of Sir William Colt Hoare writing in the early 19th century – "HOW GRAND! HOW WONDERFUL! HOW INCOMPREHENSIBLE!" (Chippindale 1994: 123) – than with the analytical theories of academic archaeologists. For all that, however, it is nonetheless a 'true' perception, and the latest incarnation of what I suggest has been a regular, if not necessarily continuous, theme for several millennia. Let us go to the beginning.

Early Neolithic: long barrows

A good chronology is essential for the proper understanding of the landscape. Despite an exceptional radiocarbon programme for the monument itself (Cleal *et al.* 1995; Bronk Ramsey & Bayliss 2000), the Stonehenge environs remain poorly dated. There are still chronological problems at the Stones (Pitts 2001: 142–4 and *passim*). This means, for example, that the large timber 'henges' at Woodhenge and Durrington Walls that Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina (followed by myself) would wish to join with Stonehenge in a symbolic timber/stone dichotomy, cannot in fact be shown to have stood at the same time as any particular one of the identified megalithic structures. This does not invalidate the models. To the contrary, it allows for ready tests as components of the landscape come to be better understood.

There are around 20 long barrows around Stonehenge, but there has been no significant modern excavation at a well-preserved mound and very few are even approximately dated. Nonetheless, we can reasonably propose that most of these mounds, dating from approximately 4000–3000 BC, were the scenes of ceremonies at which the remains of dead people featured prominently (Thomas 1999: 169–71). The mounds were likely to have had stone or wood chambers at the eastern end (they tend to be aligned in an easterly direction, though there is much variation; Ashbee 1970: 29), into which human remains and other items could be placed and later handled or removed. Stone chambers, made with local sarsen boulders, would naturally survive longer than wood.

British archaeologists often associate long barrows with early farmers and an ancestral attachment to land (e.g. Bradley 1998). People invested much in creating monuments for the dead, monuments that accumulated as physical reminders of such investments made by earlier generations (Bradley 1991). It would be perverse to deny that people must have been aware of their own ancestors and that these ancestors were important to them.

Middle Neolithic: the Stonehenge Cursus

The two cursuses at Stonehenge (Figure 1) are poorly dated, but the type in general seems to be a Middle Neolithic monument, overlapping with long barrow use but appearing when some barrows were already ancient. Both share an approximately east-west alignment with the barrows, and the larger has a barrow at its east end, eccentrically aligned parallel to the north-south closure of the cursus. The association between long barrows and cursuses is well attested (Thomas 1999: 171). It seems reasonable to infer that these linear earthworks saw processions connected to the life/death transition. Mirroring the east-west movement entering long barrow chambers, the three kilometre journey from the barrow at the east end of the Stonehenge Cursus to the west end, crossing a depression between two low ridges, may have mapped out a route from life to ancestorhood: the passage of the living, whose bodies can cross back and forth between the outside world and underground, from death to the world of the ancestors in the direction of the setting sun.

Later Neolithic 1: Stonehenge earthwork

Precise radiocarbon dating revealed that shortly after the ring ditch was dug (2975 BC) at least four ancient bones (two ox skulls, an ox jaw and a red deer tibia) were placed on the bottom. Dating from between 70 and 420 years before ditch excavation (Bronk Ramsey & Bayliss 2000), these bones, contemporary with earlier barrows and cursus monuments, echo the ox bones found in the barrows, including that at the east end of the Stonehenge Cursus (Ashbee 1970, 158–9). Here is an unequivocal link with the past and the resting places of true ancestors expressed in material form at the initiation of Stonehenge's sanctity.

Well over 200 people may have been cremated and buried at the site between earthwork construction and megalith erection (though the cremation cemetery is strictly speaking undated; Pitts 2001: chapter 15). Apparently following shortly after the removal of the ring of Aubrey posts, and possibly in some cases occurring while posts were still standing, the burials closely follow the Aubrey Hole circuit and would appear to be the local origin of the link between circular timber structure and funerary ritual.

Later Neolithic 2: megaliths and posts

Central to the Parker Pearson-Ramilisonina hypothesis are the associations wood/living, stone/ancestors, manifested particularly in the structures at Woodhenge and Stonehenge. The dating of both monuments is equivocal, but Woodhenge and the major sarsen monument (Stonehenge Phase 3ii: Cleal *et al.* 1995) may be precisely contemporary at around 2300 BC (Pitts 2001). However the latter was preceded by a megalithic bluestone arrangement. This may have once stood a kilometre to the north west: carved joints in the stones suggest an earlier arrangement elsewhere (Cleal *et al.* 1995: 207), and bluestone chips have been found near the west end of the Stonehenge Cursus (Stone 1948: 18). While the westerly pointing cursus approximately indicates both sunset and the geological source of the bluestones, the north side of the cursus is aligned to the east on the centre of Woodhenge. This could be an early representation, from wood circle to stone, of the later journey proposed by Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina from Woodhenge to Stonehenge via the river Avon and the Avenue

earthwork. A similar arrangement is suggested at the Springfield cursus, where a simple wooden post ring stood inside the east end (Buckley *et al.* 2001).

Early Bronze Age: barrows

Over nearly two millennia it is possible to see the complex mid third millennium BC 'transformation from life to death' and wood/stone journey as envisaged by Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina, slowly emerge in the ritualised landscape. Throughout this time depositions and structures contain material references to earlier eras back to the initial entombment of human remains in mounds of stones under chalk that also contained upright posts. It is possible to imagine traditions of place extended back considerably further, with the almost unique Mesolithic posts close to Stonehenge. Though Thomas (1971: 167) finds it difficult to believe in a 'special location' with such a depth of antiquity, it is curious that what may be a Mesolithic pit was also found at the west end of the Stonehenge Cursus (Christie 1963: 379) – the pre-round barrow 'oval hollow' that some 'considered to be of natural origin' but which contained 'sizeable sticks' of pine charcoal.

Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina's chronology is confused: the earlier landscape in their Figure 6 combines probably Middle Neolithic cursus and Peterborough ware pottery, and Late Neolithic Woodhenge and Grooved Ware; and their later Figure 7 combines Neolithic Woodhenge, Stonehenge and Avenue earthwork with Bronze Age barrows. The latter is particularly significant. With the inception of the round barrow era, Stonehenge enters a very different world. Previously the location for a community-wide interaction between the living and a generalised world of ancestors, the Stones seem to be re-invented as a funerary monument at the highest level in a collection of cemeteries celebrating ancestral family lineages (Pitts 2001: chapter 29).

In what is conventionally known as Stonehenge Phase 3vi, a pair of pit rings (the Y and Z Holes) were excavated around the stones some time between 1900 and 1600 BC. This is several centuries after any megalith erection; sarsen stones eight and nine may already have fallen (Pitts 2001: 294). Once thought of as pits destined to hold megaliths that never materialised, it is surely better to envisage the Y and Z Holes complete in themselves. The only comparable features in the contemporary landscape are grave pits. The Y and Z Holes then become symbolic graves, and the dagger and axe carvings on the sarsens mirror actual copper and bronze artefacts in contemporary 'Wessex' graves under round barrows.

In their analysis of the Stonehenge round barrows Exon *et al.* suggest that 'each cluster [which developed over several generations] represented a different kin group and ... clusters within a whole cemetery represented a series of connected kin groups' (2000: 92). Set in this barrow landscape, the Early Bronze Age Stonehenge is then a conceptual 'prime barrow', perhaps even with a late Beaker-associated grave at its heart (Cleal *et al.* 1995: 354; Pitts 2001: 297). This contrasts with the powerful man who was buried centuries before with five early Beakers, at possibly the very moment of sarsen circle construction, across the river to the east without a monumental mound (Fitzpatrick 2002).

Anglo-Saxon: hanging stones

Around AD 640 a man was decapitated and buried close to the Stones. There is no written evidence for this event, but Reynolds and Semple have argued for a judicial act at a time when prehistoric monuments were associated with 'supernatural entities, such as the god Woden and other monsters, demons and elves', Stonehenge being located in a remote location in a boundary zone (Pitts *et al.* 2002: 141–2). The origins of the name 'Stonehenge' may lie in the resemblance of the lintelled sarsens to early types of gallows (Chippindale 1994: 20). I have suggested that an alternative interpretation for the execution might be a political killing (Pitts 2001: 321), but in either case, Stonehenge was perceived to be a feared place of ancestral beasts and evil forces.

Medieval: origin myth

By contrast, five centuries later Stonehenge was placed at the core of an origin myth that proved the rightful owners of the land to be the British threatened by invading Saxons. In one of the first surviving literary references to the monument, Merlin is said to have raised Stonehenge as a memorial to slaughtered soldiers after a battle (Chippindale 1994: chapter 1). In this view Stonehenge was sited in a world of mythical and magical ancestors, the burial place of Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon (father of Arthur), a landscape marker that rooted present generations.

Conclusion

Whitley wants 'more distinctions ... between different kinds of ancestor. British prehistorians should also look at alternative hypotheses for the re-use and re-interpretation of monuments' (2002: 125). The long history of the Stonehenge region illustrates precisely the kind of variations that Whitley seeks: the development in the Neolithic from communal tombs to a complex and specific mapping of routines that facilitated the passage of the living to the ancestral world; a hierarchical lineage-based ancestry manifest in round barrows that may have partly functioned to demarcate inherited blocks of pasture and more distant arable; the Anglo-Saxon Stonehenge, the home of fearsome ancestral creatures, later appropriated for a glorious origin myth in the middle ages; and today the entire landscape loosely perceived to be a place of lost peoples, of remote but sympathetic ancestors.

None of this is 'orthodoxy'. It is a debate. Returning to a point I made at the beginning, when engaging the general public with Stonehenge, ancestors are a considerably more productive thinking tool than the more usual astronomers, priests and mathematicians, or half-naked savages. I see no reason why they should not also constitute a creative arena for archaeology students.

Endnote

All dates are calibrated BC/AD and unless otherwise stated, appear with full details in Pitts 2001, 323–45.

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Roman archaeology: crisis and revolution

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Roman archaeological research in Britain has undergone a revolution in recent years, becoming a theoretically-informed subdiscipline exploring exceptionally rich data sets in new ways. It has a great deal to offer the rest of archaeology: however, it remains unduly isolated, and some perceive serious threats to its future. These were issues discussed at the recent seminar, 'Whither Roman Archaeology?'

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