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Piper M. Lincoln

Univeristy of New Mexico, plincoln03@unm.edu

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Stonehenge: Not-So-Blank Slates

By Piper Lincoln

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Set upon the Salisbury plain in southern England, a megalithic structure made up of stones stands in a circular formation. This is a structure whose interpretations remains contentious even today, an iconic piece of ancient architecture seen in media throughout the ages whose history is steeped in a world of ever changing understanding; from fairy tales, and magic, to research and endless interpretation that expands with the centuries, Stonehenge (Figure 1). The magic of this site lies not in actual fairies and wizards, but instead in the fact that it has baffled and intrigued a wide onslaught of multidisciplinary scholars. Scholars have been investigating Stonehenge for centuries, the first record occurring as far back as c. 1136, and only recently, in approximately the last 50 years has an accurate interpretation begun to take form. Throughout the years, scholars and the interpretations they make are heavily influenced by politics and the ideas of the day and say more about the ideologies of the times, more so than the actual site itself. From being a Satanic religious structure, to astronomical alignments, to today's final verdict of Neolithic burials, each of the older interpretations have more to do with the people, morals, and politics of the ages who produced them than the facts found in the earth.

Stonehenge is a collection of concentric circles made up of megaliths standing in the center of a manufactured ditch (Figure 2). The monument is located in an area known as the Salisbury Plain, found in southern England, a landscape dotted with burial mounds. These stones that make up Stonehenge include both Sarsen and Bluestone, both of which were not from the surrounding area and instead had to be transported from quarries that were at immense length.

These stones then had to be set, to make up the monument known as Stonehenge¹, the stones consist of vertical stones topped by lintels. Age and wear leave the stones a mottling of blue, gray, and green. Today what remains is a Neolithic work of monumental architecture changed by time. The aesthetics of the site, however, are not the only aspects that have been altered by the ages, so has the general understanding of the site, beginning with its roots in fairy tales.

When discussing a site such as Stonehenge, it is impossible to discuss without acknowledging its basis in folklore. What do I mean by this? In the case of Stonehenge, there is a connection to the epic tales of King Arthur, more specifically with the wizard that is mentioned in the mythology—Merlin. It is important to note that folklore, or folk knowledge is an invaluable aspect of looking at sites, artifacts, artworks, sacred areas because it has a strong effect on how people interpret or understand them. When it comes to the Arthurian Legends, it is said that the legendary tale is known to be first recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his work *History of the Kings of Britain*. In this tale the great wizard of Arthurian mythology, Merlin, is the one who placed the ring of stones upon the plain.² It was then, in the 12th century that only by the power of magic could stones of that size could be placed as they were, and it was Merlin who was responsible (Figure 3). This magical interpretation for the creation of the monument is one that was carried out throughout Britain. The trend of explaining the site as a magical phenomenon remained as the kingdoms became progressively linked to the Catholic church, and Christianity as a whole. These interpretations took a darker turn, with the ideas of Merlin being replaced by blood sacrifices on the stones by moonlight.

¹ Hill, "Sarsen Stones of Stonehenge." *Science* 133, no. 3460 (1961): 1216–22.

² Grinsell, "The Legendary History and Folklore of Stonehenge." *Folklore* 87, no. 1 (1976): 5–20.

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Viewing this site as something with a magical connection, has been ongoing since the 12th century and it is tied to quite a rich folkloric heritage, this was later turned to being interpreted as something of a cultist or pagan site. As Christopher Chippendale points out, Europe and more specifically Britain, has historically had a very intimate and strong connection with Christianity that plays into the idea that Stonehenge was used as ritual space.³ These ritual spaces were deemed “satanic” during the eighteenth century by Ethan Doyle White, as the idea that they were used by druids to perform rituals became more common.⁴ This viewpoint holds strong today, as it has also been adopted by the Neopaganism movement of our modern times. White also points out that while not the center of their practices, it is a link to the ancient past of the religion.⁵ As not just Britain but the world moved away from non-secular ideals to an increased focus on science the view that Stonehenge was tied to ritual did not change, but instead further research was done into looking at how it could in fact be a ritual space. New interpretations, without such a gory connotation, but still tied to religious ritual emerged. During [say exactly when] there was a turn to the stars, as scholars wished to understand the astronomical alignment of the site, and what exactly that had to say about its use.

The hypothesis that Stonehenge is used for an astronomical or mathematical purpose has been another long-held interpretation. Chippendale notes that while there has been much research conducted on this idea there has been no convincing evidence that the site is aligned with anything other than that its axis aligned with the sun.⁶ This denies that idea that Stonehenge

³ Chippendale. *Stonehenge Complete*, 264

⁴ White. “Devil’s Stones and Midnight Rites: Megaliths, Folklore, and Contemporary Pagan Witchcraft.” *Folklore* 125, no. 1 (2014): 60–79.

⁵ White. “Devil’s Stones and Midnight Rites: Megaliths, Folklore, and Contemporary Pagan Witchcraft.” *Folklore* 125, no. 1 (2014): 60–79.

⁶ Chippendale. “Stonehenge Astronomy: Anatomy of a Modern Myth.” *Archaeology*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1986

was erected for any purposes of mathematical or astral reasons, beyond its solar alignment. This solar alignment though, is something that continued throughout the phases of the structure beginning during its earliest phase in prehistory. Stonehenge was then altered in what is now called Stonehenge II later, and more phases followed (Figure 4).⁷ This alignment is specifically to the rising of the midsummer solstice. Chippendale mentions that a connection with this particular alignment may allude to religious aspects regarding the sun, but he quickly mentions that, while there are buildings, modern and of antiquity, that are aligned with the sun for worship purposes, but there are also buildings aligned that are purely secular.⁸ There is not much evidence for this mix of magic and science, but strictly science has brought in added information regarding the mystery.

With the new technology of the modern age, specifically radiocarbon dating, a more scientific look at the site has concluded that the site was built up and remodeled over the course of thousands of years.⁹ Since it was remodeled over such a long period of time, it shows that this site was in fact a place of importance to Neolithic Britons. Not only that, the movement of the stones and the placement of lintels would have been extremely labor taxing supporting the notion that this site was sacred (Figure 5). Each of these phases retained their concentric circular pattern but with different arrangements, adding on to or changing the parts of the past phases (Figure 4). This arrangement of stones is seen at other sites in the British Isles. Mike Parker Pearson and Richard Covington also note that several other societies erect megalithic constructions. They often share the goal of memorializing their ancestors.¹⁰ Looking at other examples of stone memorials, found in circles are found across the globe, in places including Arabia and Australia,

⁷ Chippendale. *Stonehenge Complete*, 267.

⁸ Chippendale. *Stonehenge Complete*, 267-68.

⁹ Chippendale. *Stonehenge Complete*, 267-72

¹⁰ Pearson, Mike Parker, and Richard Covington. "Sacred Stones." *Archaeology* 63, no. 1 (2010): 18-18.

this is discussed by Arthur Evans, who explores these other circles and describes them each the same, a circle of stones around a dolmen, which contains human remains.¹¹ Burials.

From being viewed as stones set by a mythological wizard, to a dark and gory satanic site, to then an astronomical calculator, or simply a graveyard, these are only a handful of the interpretations that surround Stonehenge, but they speak leagues to the times in which they were founded. Wizards and other folktales were in the minds of the masses, then the turn to a satanic viewpoint because of an England engulfed by Christianity to its very core. As time moved on, and science was up and coming, thus came seeing the site as astronomically or mathematically linked. Finally, with modern and scientific study, and with testing never available, comes the conclusion of a cemetery, still a ritual space, but not as fantastical as once believed. While it may be fun to think that the stones were laid by the hands of a wizard, that the altar was the place of blood sacrifices, or even that it sat in perfect alignment with the astral plane, we must rely on solid scientific evidence when coming to a final verdict and developing our understanding of Stonehenge.

Images

¹¹ Evans. "STONEHENGE" *The Archaeological Review* 2, no. 5 (1889): 312–30.



Figure 1. A side view of the stones found at Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England, 3100 BCE

Stonehenge: General View. 2000 B.C).

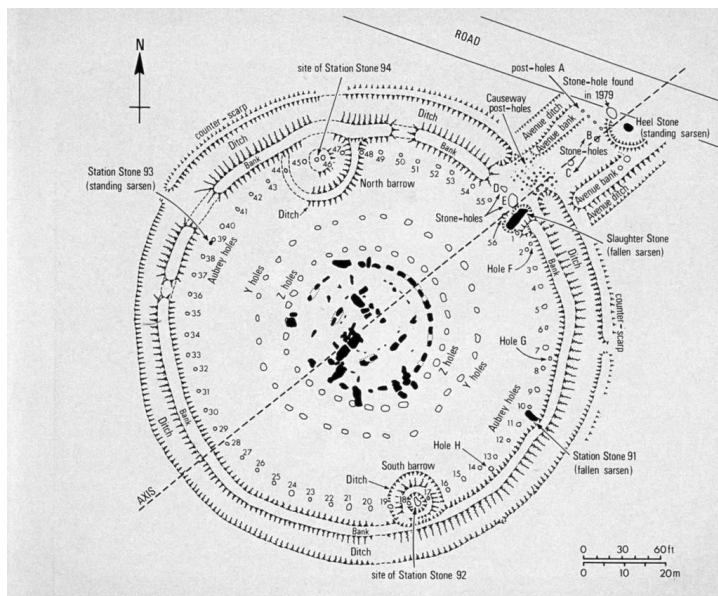


Figure 2. A diagram of the Stonehenge site (Stonehenge. Plan of Stones. N.d.).

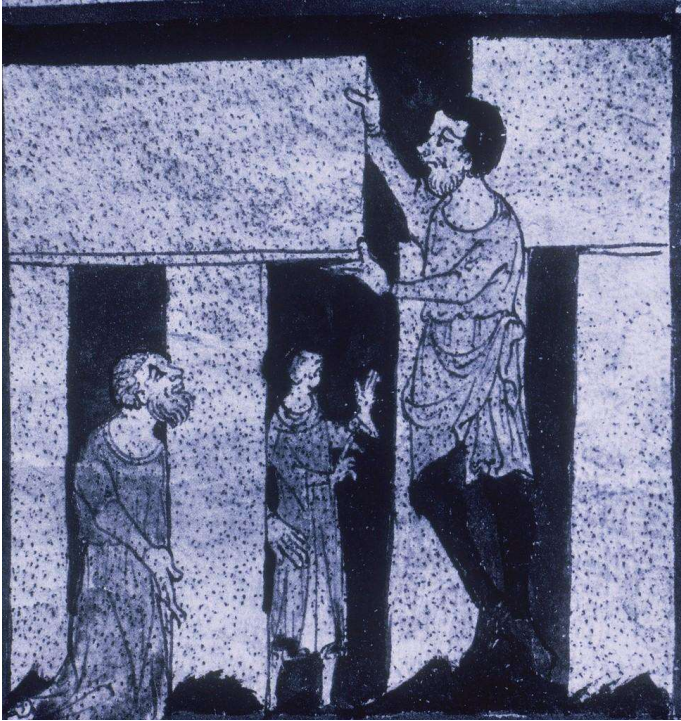


Figure 3. A manuscript drawing of the legendary wizard Merlin placing the stones of
Stonehenge (*Stonehenge: Ref.: Merlin Building Stonehenge. 2000 B.C.*).

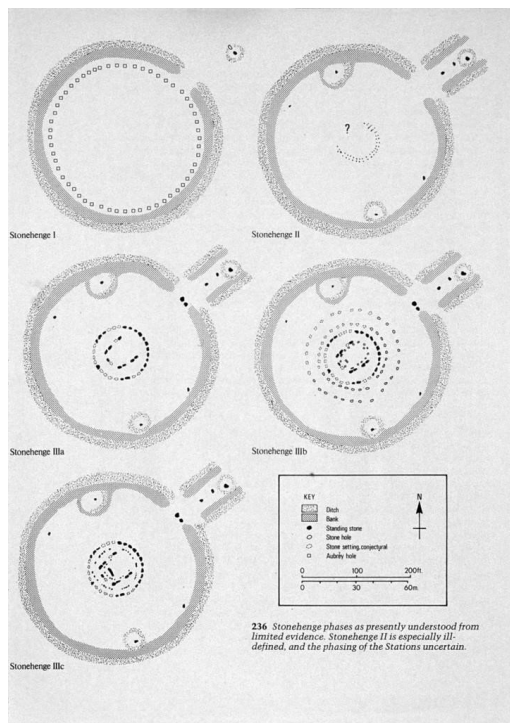


Figure 4. The distinct phases in which Stonehenge was built over the course of the years

Stonehenge. Plan of Phases of Construction. N.d.).

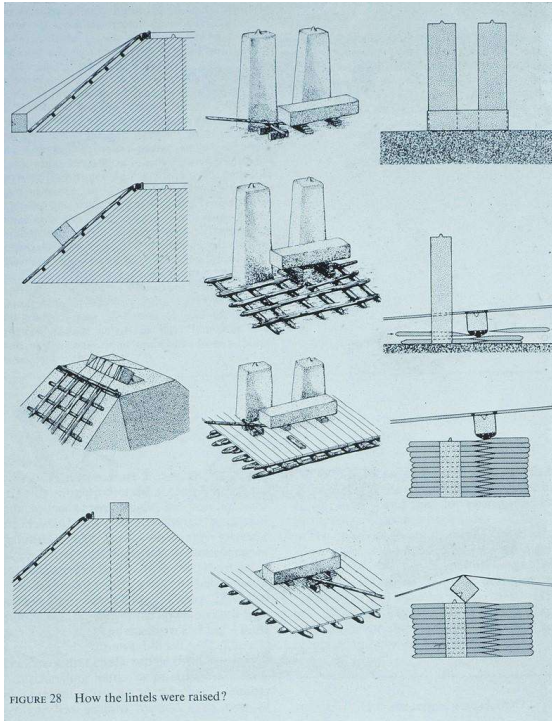


Figure 5. A demonstration of how the lintels may have been placed (*Stonehenge: Ref.: Diagram of How the Lintels Might Have Been Raised. 2000 B.C.*).

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