Surrounding Stonehenge

Stonehenge is a beautiful monument that has been around for thousands of years and is surrounded by not only a sea of emerald in the plains of Wiltshire, England; but also, a surfeit of myths and mystery. It is as old as the pyramids of Egypt and only recently have scientists been able to unearth trace amounts of evidence that help to explain its construction and the people who built it. To the naked eye Stonehenge is a cluster of huge sandstone rocks called sarsens and bluestones. But carefully examined, there are 150 of these stones placed in a decided pattern that consists of an outer and inner circle (Stonehenge). The outer circle has 17 of these huge sarsen rocks that surround the inner horseshoe shaped pattern. One of the amazing things about these stones is that some weigh upwards of 25 tons and still remain topped with huge lintels of the same size (Stonehenge). Even more amazing than its pure immense size, is the fact that it aligns perfectly with significant solar events such as summer and winter solstices and bi-annual rising and setting moons. The question that our modern world has been pondering since earliest recorded history is how was this built, by whom, and why?

It was once thought that it was the ancient society of the Celts that constructed this monument and described in writings by Hazel Richardson.

Ce\ls were the dominant civilization in Europe from 600 BC to 50 BC. From a few mining villages in what is now Austria, they expanded across central Europe and into the Iberian Peninsula in southwestern Europe. The Celts were fierce and fearless warriors, but they were also the most skilled and creative artists of their time (1).

Richardson states that the Celts are known for inventions such as chain mail armor and the iron horseshoe and that there were "fifteen different Celtic groups referred to with the same name as they shared the same language and way of life" (4). Each one of these groups had "their own kings or chiefs and sometimes fought [with each other]. Eventually all Celts were overthrown by the Romans" (4).

Richard Bulliet and Pamela Kyle establish that everything we know about the appearance of these ancient people comes from the records of the Greeks and Romans. They wrote about their strongly built
nature as well as their lengthy red hair and bushy mustaches along with their loud and deep voices. Also, they wrote about the clothing that the Celts wore that was much different from their own (70). This "strange apparel [consisted of] trousers (usually an indication of horse-riding peoples) and twisted gold neck collars. Particularly terrifying were the warriors who fought naked and made trophies of the heads of defeated enemies" (Bulliet 70).

Bulliet discusses at length about the prime of this ancient Celtic culture. He tells how many of these groups were ruled by kings, but that others had chosen political officials. He suggests that this is probably due to a heavy influence from the Greeks and Romans that eventually overthrew them (70).

Bulliet was pretty thorough in his description of the Celtic social structure.

The Celtic society was divided into an elite class of warriors, professional groups of priests and bards (singers of poems about glorious deeds of the past), and commoners. The warriors owned land and flocks of cattle and sheep and monopolized both wealth and power. The common people labored on their land. (70)

Bulliet also recounts that their houses were constructed with a wooden framework filled with a mixture of clay and straw and covered by a type of thatched straw roofing. He also suggests that each house was probably surrounded by a wooden fence that's purpose was most likely for protection (70).

The Celts were a very vigorous society but; in the same respect, not terribly complicated. "they RAIDED one another's flocks, reveled in drunken feasts, and engaged in contests of strength and wit. At banquets warriors would fight to the death just to claim the choicest cut of meat, "the hero's portion""(Bulliet 71).

It is also suggested that the Celts had a successful agricultural life, had accomplished metal-smithing skills, and built strong ships that they used in trade routes in both rivers and oceans (Bulliet 71). It is refreshing to learn that women apparently held significant roles in the Celtic societies where they were seen as equal intellectually. Not only were they valued for child rearing, food production, and craft skills, but they also were seen as strong, proud, and self assured in a culture where marriage was an equal partnership. Women were also able to inherit and own land (Bulliet 71).

"Their ancient beliefs and practices regarding matters of health and disease and its treatment, seem to have corresponded very closely to those of other peoples in the early stages of development toward civilization; when misfortune and disease fell upon them they looked to the gods for relief and appealed to them through the medium of their priests" (Jayne 504). Walter Jayne also asserts that any known history of them "is barely sufficient to reconstruct even an approximately satisfactory outline of their religion and religious customs" (504). He also states that what we do know about the "Celtic Deities [was that they] were assimilated with Roman divinities and were given Roman names. [Also,] Roman ritual was introduced, [and] shrines and temples were erected on Roman models" (504). Because of this, and the fact that the Celts left no recorded history, our current day understanding of the Celtic structure is diluted.
What we do know about the ancient Celtic Religion was that it was centered on nature and deities of growth and fertility. Jayne asserts that the more important aspects of nature were seen as definite gods and goddesses. According to him there were spirits of vegetation and harvest which were feminine. He also suggests that this may have evolved as the men in the society began to join the women in the tilling of the soil (504).

Natural objects, such as trees and forests, wells and springs, streams and rivers, mountains and sky, sun and moon, had indwelling deities who presided over them; and there were civilization divinities of the arts and crafts, of music, of commerce, and of war. There were also spirits of the earth and of the "other world"; and these, occurring singly or in groups were beneficent, maleficent, or of mixed character like human beings. They were believed to have magic skill and to live in forests or in caves and other recesses of the earth, whence they emerged to manifest themselves, preferably at night" (505).

Jayne refers to another postulation that it was the Ancient Druids and their leader Merlin (the magician) who constructed it. Many years ago historians thought that the Druids were a group of people that came before the ancient Celtic people, but this theory has been tossed aside with the new one that ascertains that the Druids were a part of the Celtic religion in much the same way as Monks are to Buddhism and Priests are to Christianity. In his book, Walter Jayne states that Druids were the priests and teachers of the Celts. They acted as judges and arbiters in their social order. He asserts that they had great political power within their societies and were referred to as many things including nobles, doctors, wizards, magicians, and soothsayers. (507)

It is thought that the Celts were afraid of disease and that they may have used Stonehenge as a place of healing and prayer to the gods that were the cause of whatever ailment that they may have suffered. This idea comes from the discovery of several ancient burials found around the site. There were those of the Boscombe Bowmen, Amesbury Archer, and several others. These were probably some of the earliest Celts to visit the site and these appear to be dated around the same time. The reason that it is thought that Stonehenge was used as a place of healing for the Celts is because (especially in the case of the Amesbury Archer) the remains dictate that their owner was born afar and traveled with many injuries to this site where he eventually died (Underhill). Timothy Darvill of Bournemouth University in England claims that "like a great medieval cathedral, all sorts of things would have happened at Stonehenge, but its principal draw was a sacred place of healing" (Underhill 53). In the same article William Underhill says that the findings of these ancient people "support the idea that Stonehenge was mainly a place of healing, a destination for the sick who traveled hundreds of miles in the hope of a cure". (53)

As stated earlier, people once thought that Stonehenge was built by the ancient society of the Celtic people. It has only been in the last couple of decades that recent discoveries and carbon dating methods have proved this theory wrong. Radiocarbon dates the construction of Stonehenge back to 2500 BCE, which would make its builders from the Neolithic era. Parker Pearson says it well when he states that Stonehenge is a "monument of brute force, naked power at its rawest" (Stonehenge Decoded). To these
Neolithic builders, Pearson suggests that it wasn't a monument to the gods, but a monument to the dead. "Further evidence came in 2009, when the Stonehenge Riverside Project uncovered the site of a circle of 25 bluestones two miles from the monument, beside the river Avon- a site quickly dubbed Bluehenge" (Underhill 52).

The idea of Stonehenge as the focal point of a much wider ritual landscape is not new-one glance at a map shows a rich scattering of tombs, some predating Stonehenge, across the surrounding countryside. And aerial photography revealed the site of a timber henge called Woodhenge as far back as 1925. But slowly the evidence is accumulating that allows archaeologists to speculate on how the ceremonies that governed life and death might have fitted together. (Underhill 52)

Stonehenge is literally from the stoneage. It was built before writing and the wheel. Evidence of the lost city of the builders has been recently unearthed and is the largest stoneage settlement found in Northern Europe. Apparently, it was not a full time permanent settlement as there was no evidence of farming even though it was an agricultural people (Stonehenge Decoded). Pearson indicates that Stonehenge was a monument to the ancestors of the builders and that twice a year during the mid winter and summer solstices there was a ceremony here to honor them. In the summer they would gather at dawn at Stonehenge then travel down the river Avon to Woodhenge to celebrate the sunset and then party on into the night. He asserts that the inverse happens midwinter where they began at Woodhenge and continue to finish their ceremony at Stonehenge (Stonehenge Decoded). Pearson asserts that just as Stonehenge is a monument to the dead, Woodhenge is a monument to celebrate life. His theory suggests that as stone is eternal so are the dead, and as wood is impermanent so is life (Stonehenge Decoded). The evidence around Stonehenge that supports his theory are the cremated remains of many (of which 240 have been unearthed), and the evidence around Woodhenge are heaps of remnants of animal bones that suggests feasts and revelry. All in all, the building of this is the largest religious complex of the prehistoric era and it suggests that its foundation was attributed to religious and political aspects of this vastly unknown group of people. What is for sure is that it took years and years, possibly up to a century of planning and considerable hardship to design, plan, and erect this wonder of the world (Stonehenge Decoded).

To the Neolithic people, stone was the most precious commodity. It is unclear if these ancient people were overthrown or enmeshed into the cultures of the very beginning Celts that had migrated into Europe from the south. What is apparent was that as the Celts began to arrive, they brought with them new technologies. The originators of Stonehenge had only stone, wood, and antlers as tools and the new people brought with them Pottery, gold, and copper. With these new innovations, it was inevitable that the peoples of this era adapt to the new set of values that come with these advancements. This process of change was beautifully reenacted in National Geographic's Stonehenge Decoded.
So, as the people around Stonehenge have evolved, so have its hidden truths. No, Stonehenge was not built by aliens or by the magic of the wizard Merlin. Stonehenge was built by an amazing group of our ancestors and stands eternally against time. "Today presumably as it did then, Stonehenge impresses the onlooker more for its engineering than for its cosmic qualities, but it too was in a very real sense a cosmos, a geometrically ordered monument aligned on the universe of stars, Sun and Moon, and an embodiment of the spiritual forces they represented to most of mankind (North XXXIV). Stonehenge was built by the prehistoric, used by the Ancients, and still enjoyed and gathered at, and theorized about, and until recently in the 1980's, partied at. Just as its builders may have dedicated these massive stones to the memory of their own ancestors, we can dedicate it to them. As Parker Pearson states "Death isn't the end, but the beginning. The soul lives on" (Stonehenge Decoded). It isn't just the wonder of Stonehenge, but the wonder of humanity that demonstrates this.
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