Book Reviews

STONEHENGE: THE STORY SO FAR BY JULIAN RICHARDS

Historic England. 2017 (2nd edition). 281pp, 300 B&W and colour illus, hb, ISBN 978-1-84802-100-6, £25.00

I was once told that if you put a photograph of Stonehenge on the front cover of your book you can expect sales figures to double; but put it in the title as well and you can add a zero to the end of those figures. Stonehenge sells. It is, as Julian Richards points out in this engaging new edition, the most famous prehistoric site in the world; an international icon attracting over a million visitors a year and a significant cash-cow for the organisation that manages it.

This is the second edition of Richard's 'big book of Stonehenge', 10 years after initial publication, which itself came 17 years after his first book on the subject (Richards 1990). Perhaps like Stonehenge then, this book is a process – an ongoing developing project with subsequent additions and subtractions. Published by Historic England, the country's leading heritage agency, with exclusive access to the Stonehenge gift shop, and written by the presenter of the much-missed television series *Meet the Ancestors*, this book will no doubt sell well. Richards, of course, has been involved with Stonehenge for three and a half decades and has every right to pronounce on it. He also tells us that he is an archaeologist with his feet 'firmly on the ground' – a 'pragmatic prehistorian', but also an enthusiast 'with a genuine passion for Stonehenge' (p.viii). This enthusiasm certainly comes through in the book.

The book is divided into twelve chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 examine in absorbing detail the Stonehenge of today, emphasising its uniqueness, and provides an introduction to the main prehistoric monuments that lie close by. This represents something of a guide to these monuments, which are often overlooked by visitors. Chapters 3 and 4 look at the more recent history of Stonehenge, from the 12th century through to the studies of 17th- and 18th-century antiquarians such as Aubrey and Stukeley, through to Sir Richard Colt Hoare and William Cunnington in the 19th century.

Chapters 5 to 6 provide an in-depth study of 20th-century investigations, from the excavations of Williams Gowland and Hawley, to the major campaigns and restorations of Richard Atkinson and Stuart Piggott. Chapter 7 takes a detailed look at more recent projects, such as the work at the Wilsford Shaft, Durrington Walls and the Coneybury Henge, as well as two recent university-led projects: the Stonehenge Riverside Project and the Stonehenge Hidden Landscape Project.

‘Understanding Stonehenge’ is the title of Chapter 8; a ‘journey through the latest ideas of Stonehenge’s sequence and dating’ (p.172). It pulls together much of the earlier work and describes the two most recent excavations within Stonehenge, both in 2008 – the first by Darvill and Wainwright, the other by the Stonehenge Riverside Project Team. Usefully, and in some detail, it sets out what these projects have added to our understanding of Stonehenge’s sequence of construction and development.

The following chapters go for the ‘three big questions’ (p.xi). ‘Who built Stonehenge?’ (Chapter 9), looks at the Neolithic people themselves, through, for example, skeletal evidence, isotope analyses, artefacts and evidence for buildings. ‘How was Stonehenge built?’ (Chapter 10) covers such practicalities as how the monument was designed, and how the stones were quarried and moved (both the bluestones and the sarsens), how the stones were shaped and raised and so on. Practical themes for a ‘pragmatic prehistorian’. It also outlines various modern experiments to move and raise the stones (either of concrete blocks or foam); often the result of television programmes. These are useful practical experiments, led by pragmatic engineers that presumably fit the author’s vision, but it left me wondering the relevance to a small-scale society like the Neolithic. A useful addition to this chapter, in order to counter these various experiments, would have been a discussion of the anthropological literature on how large stones are moved and raised in small-scale societies around the world. Colin Richards has usefully outlined this in his book *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North* (2013), which to me brought home the gritty (let’s say pragmatic) reality of stone moving more than any modern experiment has done.

Chapter 11 asks the final of the big three questions: ‘Why was Stonehenge built?’. A good question and one that the author tells us requires ‘going beyond the hard evidence’ and stripping away the jargon (p.236). Interpretations, we are told, often ‘fall neatly into the category, beloved by archaeologists, of ‘ritual’ or ‘ceremonial’’ (p.237); ‘the very antithesis of functional’ (p.238). Amongst the interpretations discussed in this chapter are celestial alignments and archaeoastronomy, Darvill and Wainwright’s ideas around the healing powers of the bluestones (Darvill & Wainwright 2009), and Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina’s oft-cited article (1998) associating the stones at Stonehenge with the ‘Domain of the Ancestors’ and the area around it, including Durrington Walls, as the ‘Domain of the Living’; a theory that has become something of the orthodoxy for Stonehenge now (repeated in, for example, Pryor’s recent book of Stonehenge for the general reader, 2016). By the time I had finished this chapter I was still none the wiser as to the author’s own interpretations – having criticised others for using the words ‘ritual’ and ‘ceremonial’ in place of a workable theory, he provides none himself. Although Richards does admit that ‘perhaps we are wrong to look for function, perhaps the very act of building was enough.’ (p.253). The book ends on a narrative story of Stonehenge (Chapter 12).

Not everyone likes this style of archaeological writing but I'm rather partial to them. 'Archaeologists should be storytellers' (p.254) says Richards. And he is right.

Taking the book as a whole, interpretations, as I have mentioned, are thin on the ground, and the ones that are put forward are the view of a handful of people, mostly (but not always) from academe and nearly all from men of a certain age. These are the people that get to interpret Stonehenge. There is a broader point here about the diversity of voices at Stonehenge, about the people who get access to excavate at the monument and whose voices are heard in books like this one. This exclusivity and elitism may be all very apt for the Neolithic, but it means we (and more importantly the public) are always presented with the standard fair. Why does Barbara Bender's extraordinary, visionary book (1998) receive so little space or recognition? Why is so much made of relatively small-scale university-led work around Stonehenge while the huge amounts of development-led archaeology just outside the boundary of the World Heritage Site remain largely ignored? Apart from a few of the more famous discoveries, such as the Amesbury Archer or the Larkhill Causewayed Enclosure, the work of commercial archaeologists is hardly discussed at all. Their voice is lost. And yet factor this into the equation and this work is changing what we know about the Neolithic in this part of Wiltshire. Not simply adding context to Stonehenge but re-writing the story of the landscape, of which Stonehenge is but a part. The story has changed and no one seems to have told the handful of archaeologists working inside the Stonehenge bubble. As Mike Pitts says in a brilliant article in *British Archaeology* 'clearly there is something wrong with the way we think about Stonehenge' (2018, 22). Quite simply this is not the complete picture, and surely the author has missed a trick by not including it in this new updated edition.

Widen the search even further and the story changes again. Marden and Wilsford henges are missed out entirely, despite being only a few kilometres upstream on the same river. Indeed, the Vale of Pewsey, so often missed out in discussions of this area, is only mentioned in relation to the movement of the sarsen stones to Stonehenge. There is nothing unusual in this – in fact it is fairly standard for Stonehenge interpretations, which emphasise the uniqueness of Stonehenge and therefore justify the lack of description of elsewhere. All other landscapes and monuments become handmaidens to the iconic little ring of stones on the Salisbury Plain. If we include Marden and Wilsford henges in any discussion of Stonehenge and Durrington Walls we break the neat dualism these latter two sites are so often bound by – stone/wood, inanimate/animate, ancestors/living. No wonder some have a vested interest to exclude them.

Part of this discussion has also got to be: why do we give Stonehenge so much publicity anyway? It is an important site, but anyone who has been to Newgrange in Ireland, Maeshowe in Scotland, or indeed the Hypogeum in Malta, to say nothing of the thousands of other stone

circles around the UK, know that it is, well, so-so. Important – yes, but just not all that. And yet it still dominates discussions of the Neolithic period from Orkney to Ireland. It is unfair to blame all that on this book and author, but Stonehenge gets more than its fair share of airtime, and I am not alone in resenting it receiving any more.

All that said, this is a splendidly readable account of a familiar story. It does not pretend to be academic, but is for a broad audience – for those 'fascinated by Stonehenge but who want more than the excellent site guidebook can offer' (p.vii). It is by no means a light-weight book too; it is fully indexed and with a short 'Further reading' section (although I found the lack of references throughout frustrating), and has much to offer the seasoned Stonehenge know-it-all. It is a luscious book too; printed on thick glossy paper and beautifully illustrated throughout, with a gorgeous, textured front cover that makes me want to rub it on my face. Richards – archaeologist, presenter, serial award-giver, and collector of Stonehenge tat – brings to bear his decades of experience of this monument and writes with gusto. He has done an excellent job of explaining 'the story so far'. For all that though, the story has changed, and we now need a diversity of new voices picking it up and moving it forward.

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