



Book Reviews

STONEHENGE: THE STORY OF A SACRED LANDSCAPE BY FRANCIS PRYOR

Head of Zeus, London. 2016. 208pp, extensively illustrated, ISBN 9781784974619, hb, £16.99

Wow! This is a real book. You know, one with a hard cover and dust jacket and agreeable paper. It smells and feels like a book should: the kind that is nice to receive as a present. The colours are warm and golden and provide the volume with a homely aura. And Pryor has a way with words that somehow simplify complex data and make it interesting and intelligible for the general reader. Thus, he easily establishes in a sentence or two the nature and function of, for example, microliths, and clarifies how ancient belief systems will have been dissimilar from those of the modern day with the consequence that religious buildings will have been used completely differently.

If you want to be critical there are of course a number of points that could be touched upon and I'll run through a few of these, but they are of little consequence, for the *raison d'etre*, quite a difficult one, of explaining Stonehenge to its global admirers is well achieved.

There is, of course, something for everyone in the story of Stonehenge and it's more a question of what to leave out in a volume of any reasonable length. Pryor starts with some general points; recounting that prehistoric populations were much larger than previously thought, using the example of 200-400 occupants at Starr Carr with around 1000 living around the shores of Flixton Lake. He does not estimate the numbers that lived alongside the River Avon at a similar date but notes the presence of settlement activity at Blick Mead, Amesbury, where quantities of wild cattle were consumed, the participants of which may have been responsible for the erection of pine posts, evidence of which was found in the former Stonehenge car park.

In terms of the landscape he sees the rivers as boundaries and floodplains and higher ground as neutral areas. Presumably this is a gross simplification for it is not easy to see how this would work in the upper and middle reaches of the Avon, although little is known about Wiltshire's prehistoric floodplains, often now hidden beneath water meadows, beyond the fact that barrows were sometimes built on them. When it comes to the position of Stonehenge, the periglacial landscape and the availability of sarsen may indeed have influenced location, construction methods and the nature of local structures, but the stones were not left behind by retreating glaciers, for the ice didn't get as far south as Wiltshire.

While fresh influences brought new tool forms, belief systems and methods of subsistence around 4000 BC, Pryor points out that it was the indigenous population that was largely responsible for adopting and implementing the changes and peopling the landscape; according to DNA evidence only 1 in 3 or 1 in 4 being new arrivals. Actually that seems to be quite a high percentage and it maybe that these arrivals carried undue influence. They will have brought stories and made it clear for anyone that remained uncertain following the flooding of the Channel that there was another land over there.

Construction of the earthwork enclosure is suggested to have occurred around 3300 BC which it may well have been, although for the moment radiocarbon dates and modelling stick doggedly to the time a little either side of 3000 cal

BC. Here, this early period is described as a 'Formative' phase, the earlier date being based on similarities of construction to that of causewayed enclosures which went out of use from about that date. Pryor himself uses dates without the complexities of ranges or degrees of certainty or Bayesian modelling and for those who have tried to simplify dating for general consumption and appreciate the problems, this is as good a way as any. Phase 1 at 3000 BC, then commences with the digging of the Aubrey holes.

Since Stonehenge is invariably perceived as 'planned', construction is usually envisaged as taking place over a short period of time. Here, erection of the sarsens is thought to have taken place over about 10 years, with each additional stone placed while the site was in use as part of its purpose. Consequently, he revisits the question asked by others in recent times 'Was Stonehenge ever finished?' and concludes that it was not, although considers the sarsen settings to have been completed as a circle. The Inigo Jones image of a circle is mentioned, as is work at St Pauls, Covent Garden, though not his remarkable fieldwork or its influence on later investigators. Similarly, John Wood's outstanding survey and description, not to mention his Stonehenge-like architecture in Bath, is ignored.

When it comes to the stones, rather than see the large pit at the base of the Trilithon Stone 56 as a ramp and brace for the stone, it is considered to have been a post-construction event that resulted in the falling of the stone. Other stones are given standard Atkinson-like treatment, the significance of the station stones, for example, being considered enhanced by semi-circular ditches with mounds known as the north and south barrows, despite the problems inherent in that interpretation. A welcome illustration of astronomical alignments that incorporate the station stones is unfortunately unexplained.

The interesting question of whether people from Stonehenge travelled to Preseli in order to obtain stone, or whether it was brought to Stonehenge by people living in Wales is outlined and the analogy of individuals travelling to stone axe factories invoked. He believes it unlikely that a large proportion of Cumbrian occupants travelled across Britain carrying axe-heads from Great Langdale with them, and indeed why would they? But equally, given the numbers of such axe-heads throughout the country, we could hardly imagine the reverse happening either.

The West Amesbury henge (Bluestone henge) story is recounted whereby stones were taken from a site adjacent to the River Avon to be reused at Stonehenge, again a simplification as there is presumably more to this. If brought from Wales why split them at Amesbury, taking some to Stonehenge, but leaving others at Amesbury, only for the latter to be reunited at a later date. Was some bluestone less important? Was there initially too many at Stonehenge? The link of course was the Avenue, a feature long been considered an integral component of the Stonehenge landscape being known to Aubrey and Stukeley in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was only the levelled portion that was newly discovered (by air) in 1920s.

In terms of use, he recounts Mike Parker Pearson's now well-known model whereby the River Avon and the Avenue provided a funerary course from the realm of the living at Durrington to the realm of the dead at Stonehenge, following which he suggests that corpses may have been taken and deposited in a barrow within the vicinity. Somewhere one feels, as a result, there must be a Neolithic round barrow with a huge quantity of burial remains beneath. So far and despite Cunnington and 'Colt' Hoare's extensive trenching in the vicinity, no such mortuary deposit has been found.

The Beaker burial in the ditch is considered a symbol of ownership, presumably by the people who shot him. Whether this was by indigenous Grooved Ware users saying 'keep out' is unclear, but it's worth noting that other Beaker material is only found at a distance to the stones (Bowden *et al.* 2015, fig 3.15).

Of the extensive barrow cemeteries, and we hear that Stonehenge is largest cemetery of round mounds in Britain, only Normanton receives any real consideration, mainly on account of Bush Barrow and based entirely on the finds of 19th-century excavations.

An illustration of the landscape at around 1600 BC seems sparse, depicting some of the barrows, selected palisades and linear ditches but surprisingly none of the ancient fields. This is curious as Pryor suggests that they were present from around 2000, which they could well have been, although unfortunately so far dates are in the mid-second millennium BC.

The afterlife of the monument is of considerable importance and given that pottery of the Roman period is the most commonly found ceramic type at Stonehenge the comment of its presence is useful to remind readers that there was a, potentially significant, Roman phase? Exactly how this had impact on the site however is avoided.

An appendix provides a timeline, interesting for its inclusion of events in the Middle and Far East, while a second appendix providing more detail on the digging of the Stonehenge ditch. Why this was not incorporated into the main text is unclear and the impression is of an afterthought.

For the serious reader or student there is little here that has not been recounted in other recent publications (eg, Parker Pearson 2012; 2015) and indeed as acknowledged in the Prologue the account leans heavily on Mike Parker Pearson's recent work. This, however, is the view from the fens, a valuable one uninfluenced by the minutiae familiar to Stonehenge scholars and, given some of his past work you might hope for a farmer's insight and perspective, but there is also a hurried feel, as if to meet a deadline. Aside from utilising data from the English Heritage laser scan of the stones, the work is excavation centred and ignores the advances made by aerial photography, lidar, geophysics, and ground survey, particularly during the last decade, all emphasised by the assertion that the ancient fields were plotted by Julian Richards rather than the RCHME. But no matter, what is important is the story telling. Pryor is excellent at it, using familiar terms and analogies – and popular characters such as the flintstones – that help get ideas across to the general reader. This is undoubtedly a most enjoyable read and will be a good addition to the Stonehenge catalogue.

References

- Bowden, M., Soutar, S., Field, D. and Barber, M. 2015. *The Stonehenge Landscape* Swindon: Historic England
- Parker Pearson, M. 2012. *Stonehenge: exploring the greatest Stone Age mystery*. London: Simon & Shuster
- Parker Pearson M., Pollard, J., Richards, C., Thomas, J. & Welham, K. 2015. *Stonehenge: making sense of a prehistoric mystery*. York: CBA

David Field

Review submitted: March 2017

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor