Stonehenge

Stonehenge is a prehistoric megalithic structure on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England, two miles (3 km) west of Amesbury. It consists of an outer ring of vertical sarsen standing stones, each around 13 feet (4.0 m) high, seven feet (2.1 m) wide, and weighing around 25 tons, topped by connecting horizontal lintel stones. Inside is a ring of smaller bluestones. Inside these are free-standing trilithons, two bulkier vertical sarsens joined by one lintel. The whole monument, now ruinous, is aligned towards the sunrise on the summer solstice and sunset on the winter solstice. The stones are set within earthworks in the middle of the densest complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in England, including several hundred tumuli (burial mounds).[2]

Archaeologists believe that Stonehenge was constructed in several phases from around 3100 BC to 1600 BC, with the circle of large sarsen stones placed between 2600 BC and 2400 BC. The surrounding circular earth bank and ditch, which constitute the earliest phase of the monument, have been dated to about 3100 BC.

FUNCTION AND CONSTRUCTION

Construction

Stonehenge was produced by a culture that left no written records. Many aspects of Stonehenge, such as how it was built and for what purposes it was used, remain subject to debate. A number of myths surround the stones.[44] The site, specifically the great trilithon, the encompassing horseshoe arrangement of the five central trilithons, the heel stone, and the embanked avenue, are aligned to the sunset of the winter solstice and the opposing sunrise of the summer solstice.[45][46] A natural landform at the monument's location followed this line,

and may have inspired its construction.[47] The excavated remains of culled animal bones suggest that people may have gathered at the site for the winter rather than the summer.[48] Further astronomical associations, and the precise astronomical significance of the site for its people, are a matter of speculation and debate.[citation needed]

There is little or no direct evidence revealing the construction techniques used by the Stonehenge builders. Over the years, various authors have suggested that supernatural or anachronistic methods were used, usually asserting that the stones were impossible to move otherwise due to their massive size. However, conventional techniques, using Neolithic technology as basic as shear legs, have been demonstrably effective at moving and placing stones of a similar size.[49] The most common theory of how prehistoric people moved megaliths has them creating a track of logs which the large stones were rolled along.[50]

Etymology

The Oxford English Dictionary cites Ælfric's tenth-century glossary, in which henge-cliff is given the meaning 'precipice', or stone; thus, the stanenges or Stanheng "not far from Salisbury" recorded by eleventh-century writers are "stones supported in the air". In 1740, William Stukeley notes: "Pendulous rocks are now called henges in Yorkshire ... I doubt not, Stonehenge in Saxon signifies the hanging stones."[12] Christopher Chippindale's Stonehenge Complete gives the derivation of the name Stonehenge as coming from the Old English words stān 'stone', and either hencg 'hinge' (because the stone lintels hinge on the upright stones) or hen(c)en 'to hang' or 'gallows' or 'instrument of torture' (though elsewhere in his book, Chippindale cites the 'suspended stones' etymology).[13]

The "henge" portion has given its name to a class of monuments known as henges.[12] Archaeologists define henges as earthworks consisting of a circular banked enclosure with an internal ditch.[14] As often happens in archaeological terminology, this is a holdover from antiquarian use.

Despite being contemporary with Neolithic true henges and stone circles, Stonehenge is in many ways atypical – for example, at more than 24 feet (7.3 m) tall, its extant trilithons' lintels, held in place with mortise and tenon joints, make it unique.[15][16]

BEFORE THE MONUMENT (FROM 8000 BC)

Before

Archaeologists have found four, or possibly five, large Mesolithic postholes (one may have been a natural tree throw), which date to around 8000 BC, beneath the nearby old tourist car-park in use until 2013. These held pine posts around two feet six inches (0.75 m) in diameter, which were erected and eventually rotted in situ. Three of the posts (and possibly four) were in an east–west alignment which may have had ritual significance.[17] Another Mesolithic astronomical site in Britain is Warren Field in Aberdeenshire, which is considered the world's oldest lunisolar calendar, corrected yearly by observing the midwinter solstice.[18] Similar but later sites have been found in Scandinavia.[19] A settlement that may have been contemporaneous with the posts has been found at Blick Mead, a reliable year-round spring one mile (1.6 km) from Stonehenge.[20][21]

Salisbury Plain was then still wooded, but, 4,000 years later, during the earlier Neolithic, people built a causewayed enclosure at Robin Hood's Ball, and long barrow tombs in the surrounding landscape. In approximately 3500 BC, a Stonehenge Cursus was built 2,300 feet (700 m) north of the site as the first farmers began to clear the trees and develop the area. Other previously overlooked stone or wooden structures and burial mounds may date as far back as 4000 BC.

EARLY HISTORY

History

Mike Parker Pearson, leader of the Stonehenge Riverside Project based around Durrington Walls, noted that Stonehenge appears to have been associated with burial from the earliest period of its existence: Stonehenge was a place of burial from its beginning to its zenith in the mid third millennium B.C. The cremation burial dating to Stonehenge's sarsen stones phase is likely just one of many from this later period of the monument's use and demonstrates that it was still very much a domain of the dead.[11]

Stonehenge evolved in several construction phases spanning at least 1500 years. There is evidence of large-scale construction on and around the monument that perhaps extends the landscape's time frame to 6500 years. Dating and understanding the various phases of activity are complicated by disturbance of the natural chalk by periglacial effects and animal burrowing, poor quality early excavation records, and a lack of accurate, scientifically verified dates. The modern phasing most generally agreed to by archaeologists is detailed below. Features mentioned in the text are numbered and shown on the plan, right.