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| Historical Monument | | |
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# Stonehenge

**Stonehenge**, prehistoric stone circle monument, cemetery, and archaeological site located on [Salisbury Plain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Salisbury-Plain-England), about 8 miles (13 km) north of [Salisbury](https://www.britannica.com/place/Salisbury-England), [Wiltshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wiltshire), [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England). Though there is no definite evidence as to the intended purpose of Stonehenge, it was presumably a religious site and an expression of the power and wealth of the chieftains, [aristocrats](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/aristocrats), and priests who had it built—many of whom were buried in the numerous barrows close by. It was aligned on the Sun and possibly used for observing the Sun and Moon and working out the farming calendar. Or perhaps the site was dedicated to the world of the ancestors, separated from the world of the living, or was a healing centre. Whether it was used by the [Druids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Druid) ([Celtic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic) priests) is doubtful, but present-day Druids gather there every year to hail the midsummer sunrise. Looking toward the sunrise, the entrance in the northeast points over a big pillar, now leaning at an angle, called the Heel Stone. Looking the other way, it points to the midwinter sunset. The [summer solstice](https://www.britannica.com/science/summer-solstice-astronomy) is also celebrated there by huge crowds of visitors.

Stonehenge was built in six stages between 3000 and 1520 BCE, during the [transition](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/transition) from the [Neolithic Period](https://www.britannica.com/event/Neolithic) (New Stone Age) to the [Bronze Age](https://www.britannica.com/event/Bronze-Age). As a prehistoric stone circle, it is unique because of its artificially shaped [sarsen](https://www.britannica.com/science/sarsen) stones (blocks of [Cenozoic](https://www.britannica.com/science/Cenozoic-Era) silcrete), arranged in [post-and-lintel formation](https://www.britannica.com/technology/post-and-lintel-system), and because of the remote origin of its smaller [bluestones](https://www.britannica.com/science/bluestone) ([igneous](https://www.britannica.com/science/igneous-rock) and other rocks) from 100–150 miles (160–240 km) away, in South Wales. The name of the monument probably derives from the Saxon *stan-hengen*, meaning “stone hanging” or “gallows.” Along with more than 350 nearby monuments and henges (ancient earthworks consisting of a circular bank and ditch), including the kindred temple complex at [Avebury](https://www.britannica.com/place/Avebury-archaeological-site-England), Stonehenge was designated a [UNESCO](https://www.britannica.com/topic/UNESCO) [World Heritage site](https://www.britannica.com/topic/World-Heritage-site) in 1986.

In 1963 American astronomer Gerald Hawkins proposed that Stonehenge had been constructed as a “computer” to predict lunar and solar eclipses; other scientists also attributed astronomical capabilities to the monument. Most of these speculations, too, have been rejected by experts. In 1973 English archaeologist Colin Renfrew hypothesized that Stonehenge was the centre of a confederation of Bronze Age chiefdoms. Other archaeologists, however, have since come to view this part of Salisbury Plain as a point of intersection between [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) prehistoric territories, serving as a seasonal gathering place during the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE for groups living in the lowlands to the east and west. In 1998 [Malagasy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malagasy-peoples) archaeologist Ramilisonina proposed that Stonehenge was built as a monument to the ancestral dead, the permanence of its stones representing the eternal afterlife.