

Stonehenge

Over five thousand years ago the Neolithic people of Britain began to erect a monumental stone structure known as “Stonehenge” on the Salisbury Plain. The name likely means “hanging” or “suspended” stones. The structure underwent several changes over the years of its construction, reaching its final form around 2000 BCE.

The stones are of two kinds. The largest are the sarsens, which have their origin in the hills about 40 km north of Stonehenge. The word “sarsen,” first used at the time of the Crusades, comes from “Saracen” and essentially means “pagan.”

The smaller bluestones come from the Preseli Mountains in Southwest Wales 240 km away. Most archaeologists currently believe that these were transported across the Bristol Channel and then overland to Stonehenge. The bluestones may have been used in several ways during the different periods of construction. In the final form of the monument they are arranged within the outer circle of sarsens and within the inner horseshoe of larger sarsens.

The monument has long been a symbol of ancient Britain. Over the years, however, our understanding of it has changed radically. This posting considers how Stonehenge has interacted with the British imagination. Because of its striking appearance, images are given as much space as words.

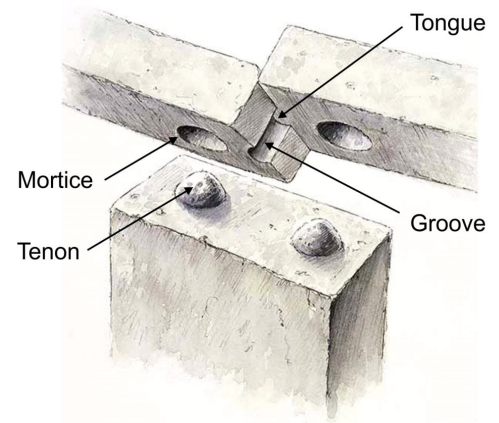
Past and Present Structure

The following figure shows a photograph of the monument taken from the Southwest by Diego Delso in 2014. A larger version of the photograph is available from Wikipedia.



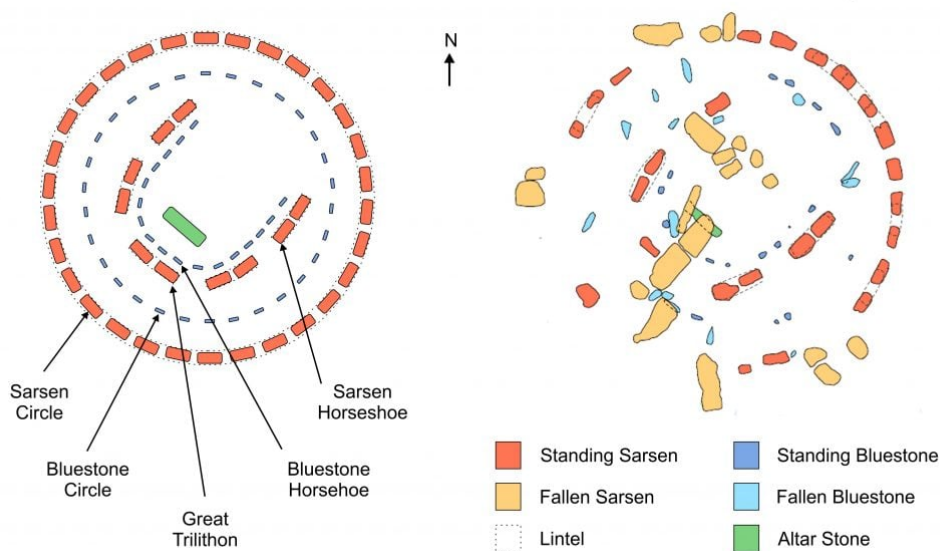
In the center of the figure is a large standing stone – the only stone still upright from the great trilithon (“three stones” – two erect stones with a superimposed lintel). At its top is a small peak representing the tenon of a mortice-and-tenon joint that served to maintain the lintel on top of the two uprights.

Behind and to the right of this central stone can be seen the surviving arches of the outer sarsen circle. The lintels on this circle are held in position using tongue-in-groove as well as mortice-and-tenon joints. These techniques are similar to those used in woodworking (Chippindale, 2012, p 12; Johnson, 2008, pp 142-148).



The figure on the right (modified from the English Heritage site) illustrates these procedures.

Many of the original stones have collapsed. Some fallen stones were probably long ago broken up and used for other buildings. Others lie on the ground; others are buried. Most of the sarsens on the south and west of the outer circle fell and vanished long ago. The following figure shows on the left a diagram of how the monument might have been in 2000 BCE (based on Johnson, 2008, p. 166). and on the right a plan of the present site (modified from the English Heritage Webpage).

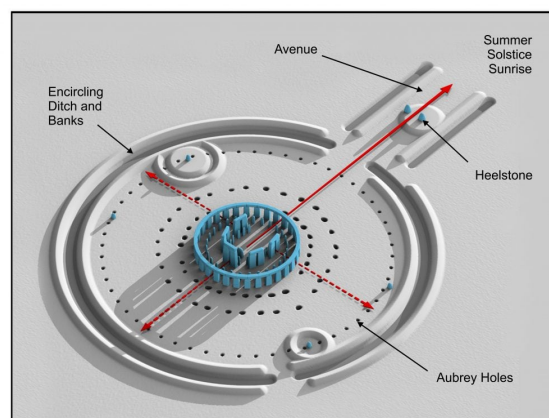


The outer ring of sarsens with the superimposed lintels rose almost 5 m above the ground. The trilithons of the inner sarsen horseshoe varied in height: those at the open end of the horseshoe were about 6 m high, the adjacent trilithons a little higher and the great trilithon at the center of the horseshoe almost 7.5 m. The bluestones are much smaller and quite variable in size and shape. The illustration below shows a digital model by Hypnagogia of how the completed monument might have appeared as viewed from the Northeast at sunrise.



The great

trilithon collapsed long ago. The eastern upright broke in two over the altar stone. The western upright fell only halfway and was for many years held up at an angle by the inner bluestone. It was re-erected and stabilized in 1901. The first set of stones whose fall is historically recorded is the southwestern trilithon which collapsed in 1797. It was re-erected in 1958.



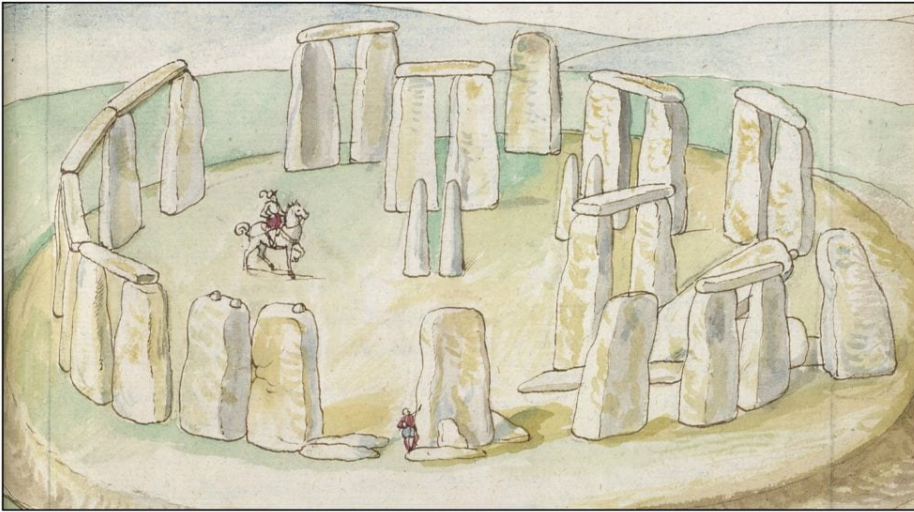
As shown on the right, the standing stones are at the center of a larger circle marked by a ditch and by the Aubrey Holes. These are the oldest part of the monument, predating the sarsens by several hundred years. Parker Pearson (2012, pp 181-186) has suggested that the Aubrey Holes may have been the original location of the bluestones, which were later removed and placed within the sarsen monument.

Early Views of Stonehenge

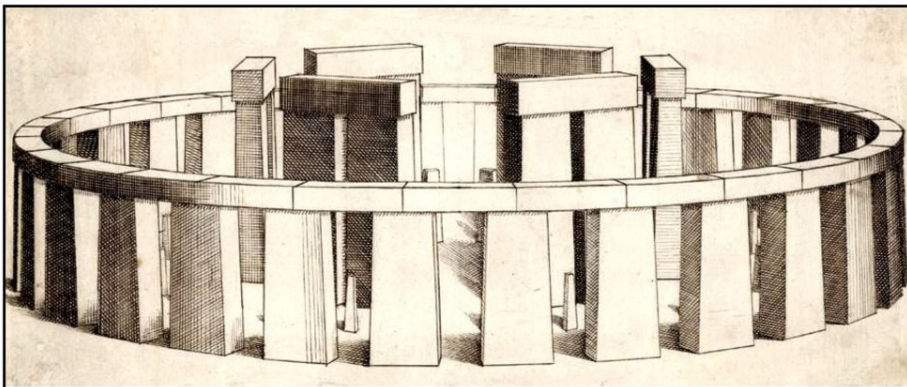


One of the earliest accounts of Stonehenge occurs in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136). Chapters 10 to 12 of Book 8 provide a fanciful tale of the stones being erected by giants under the supervision of Merlin, the sage of the Arthurian legends. The Egerton 3028 manuscript in the British Library contains an illustration of this story.

The first "realistic" depiction of Stonehenge was a 1575 watercolour by Lucas De Heere, a Flemish refugee in England. The painting shows the general size and arrangement of the stones as viewed from the Northwest but is woefully incorrect in its detail (Chippindale, 2012, pp 33-35). The most glaring error is that the monolith of the great trilithon is depicted as leaning outwards rather than inwards.



The great English architect Inigo Jones studied the monument in the 17th Century. John Webb collected Jones' notes and published them posthumously in 1655 in a book entitled *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly called Stone-Heng on Salisbury Plain*. Jones thought that the stones were erected as a temple by the Romans during their occupation of Britain. He considered the ancient Britons too savage to have built a monument of such perfectly classical proportions.



This idea was disputed by John Aubrey, the author of the famous *Brief Lives*, who published his *Monumenta Britannica* in 1665. He made a careful study of the Stonehenge site and noted the circle of chalk pits around the stone monument, which are still called Aubrey Holes (Johnson, 2008, p. 57). He pointed out that the Britain and Ireland contained multiple Neolithic monuments and stone circles, and that many of these were in areas where the Romans had never penetrated. He therefore suggested that they were erected by the Britons as "Temples of the Druids" (Hill,

2008, p 33).

Aubrey's proposal was promoted by William Stukeley, a friend of Isaac Newton. He published *Stonehenge, A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* in 1740. Initially he had made some accurate observations of Stonehenge: he was the first to notice the "avenue" leading to Stonehenge from the Northeast (Chapter 8), and he noted that the monument and the avenue were oriented along a line pointing to the sunrise at the summer solstice (Chippindale, 2012, p. 75).

Imaginative Interpretations of Stonehenge

However, Stukeley soon let his imagination take over, and he concocted a narrative of how the Jewish patriarchs had visited England in ancient times with the Phoenicians (Chippindale, 2012, Chapter 8; Lewis Williams & Pearce, 2005, pp 169-172; Hill, 2008, pp. 39-49). This was all part of a grand universal history of humanity, with the pure original religion being initially subverted by idolatry and then restored by Jesus. He considered Stonehenge as a temple of this primordial religion, where divine observances were conducted by the Celtic Druids. Stukeley was so enthusiastic about these ideas that he took to calling himself Chyndonax, Prince of the Druids. His work has exerted a tremendous influence on the popular views of Stonehenge. Modern dating methods have shown that Stonehenge was built by Neolithic Britons more than a thousand years before the Iron-Age Celts (who only became evident in Britain by after 1000 BCE). Nevertheless, to this day druids still conduct services at Stonehenge on the days of the summer solstice.

Some of Stukeley's ideas are present in William Blake's poem *Jerusalem*:

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,

On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land

Hubert Parry's 1916 musical setting of this poem has become an extremely popular anthem, traditionally sung with great fervor and flag-waving on the last night of the Proms.

Blake's poem is contained in the preface to his illuminated book *Milton a Poem* (1811). The poem deals with the need for the creative imagination to liberate mankind from slavery to established morality. Some illustrations of megaliths (e. g. part of page 4 shown on the right) are included in this long poem, and at times Blake seems to suggest these as evidence of religion's Satanic power over the people. Some interpreters have even considered the "Satanic Mills" of the second verse of the prefatory poem mean the established churches rather than the cotton mills of the industrial revolution.



However, Blake's view of Stonehenge was ambiguous. The last page of a later illuminated book *Jerusalem: The emanation of*

the giant Albion. (1821) contains a striking image:



The central male figure is Los, the personification of imaginative energy, with the hammer and tongs he uses to create. On the left is his spectre carrying the sun. On the right is his emanation, Enitharmon, the female personification of spiritual beauty. She holds what appears to be a spindle, from which descend the threads of life. Below them is a serpentine line of trilithons with a central circle similar to the Stonehenge. The meaning of this final image is not clear. In his notes to the facsimile edition of the book, Paley suggests that these structures may represent the creation of Jerusalem in England. However, the words of a prophet can be difficult to understand.

Romanticism

J. M. W. Turner visited Stonehenge in 1799. He made several drawings of the ruins. The following small sketch represents a view from the West.



In 1827 he created a watercolor based on his earlier sketches. The final painting depicts Stonehenge during a storm. Lightning strikes the ground in the middle of the ruin, killing many sheep and the shepherd who lies in the right foreground. The shepherd's dog howls disconsolately. An 1829 engraving of this image became very popular, appealing to the public's new romantic fascination with the unrestrained power of nature:



John Constable's 1835 watercolor of Stonehenge also sets the monument in a scene of great natural power. The view is from the South. In the North are dark storm clouds, onto which the sun has cast a double rainbow. At the time of this painting, Constable was grieving for his recently deceased wife. The

painting is imbued with sadness; the rainbows are drained of color.

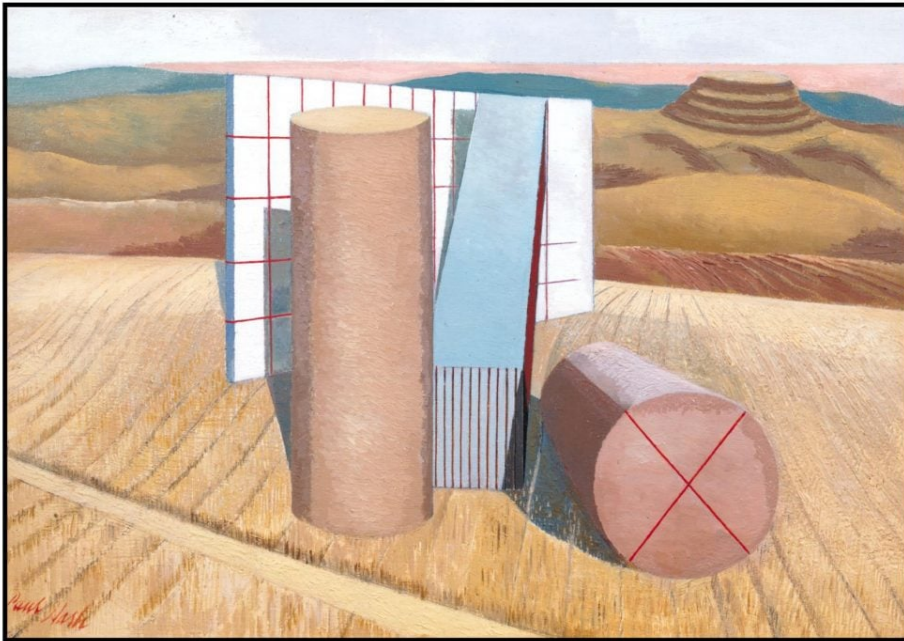


Constable (quoted in Chippindale, 2012, p 105) provided a caption when his painting was first exhibited:

The mysterious monument of Stonehenge, standing remote on a bare and boundless heath, as much unconnected with the events of past ages as it is with the uses of the present, carries you back beyond all historical recall into the obscurity of a totally unknown period.

Modernism and Stonehenge

The Romantic approach to Stonehenge does not do justice to its austere beauty. However, Modernism also fails to capture the essence of the site. The following is a 1935 painting by Paul Nash entitled *Equivalents for the Megaliths*. Large geometric shapes are set down in a stylized English landscape. The painting does not convey the power of Stonehenge or the other megalithic monuments, though it does suggest their incomprehensibility.



John Piper's ink-and-wash painting from 1981 is more successful. This considers Stonehenge from the point of view of a Romantic Modernist.



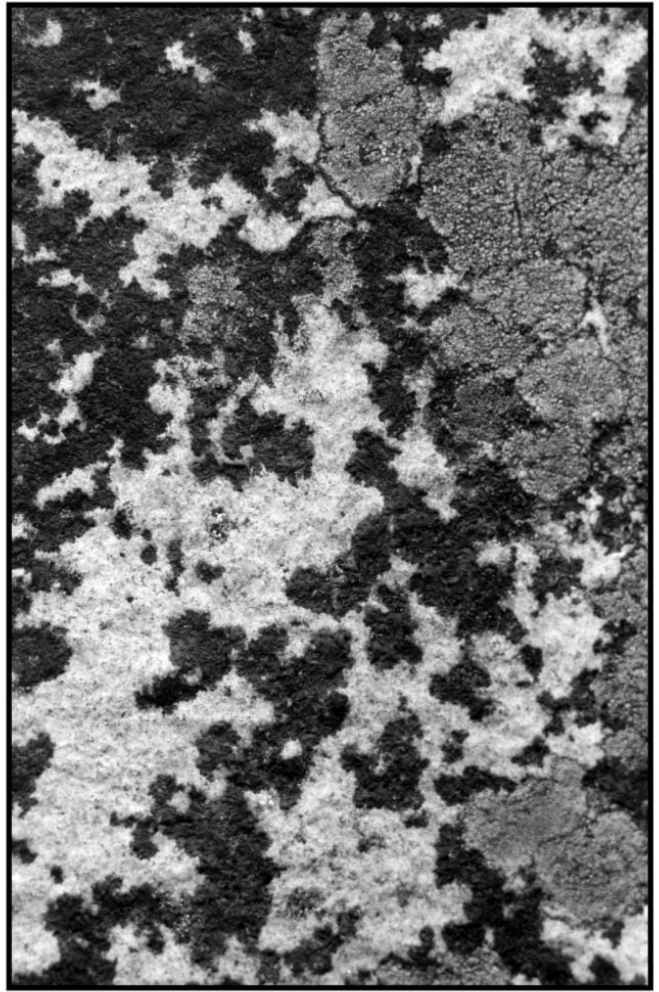
Photographs of Stonehenge

Photographs provide a realistic view of Stonehenge. The following is the first known photograph, a calotype by William Russell Sedgfield in 1853 (copied from Chippindale, p.149). The view is from the west. A carriage stands by the leaning upright of the great trilithon.

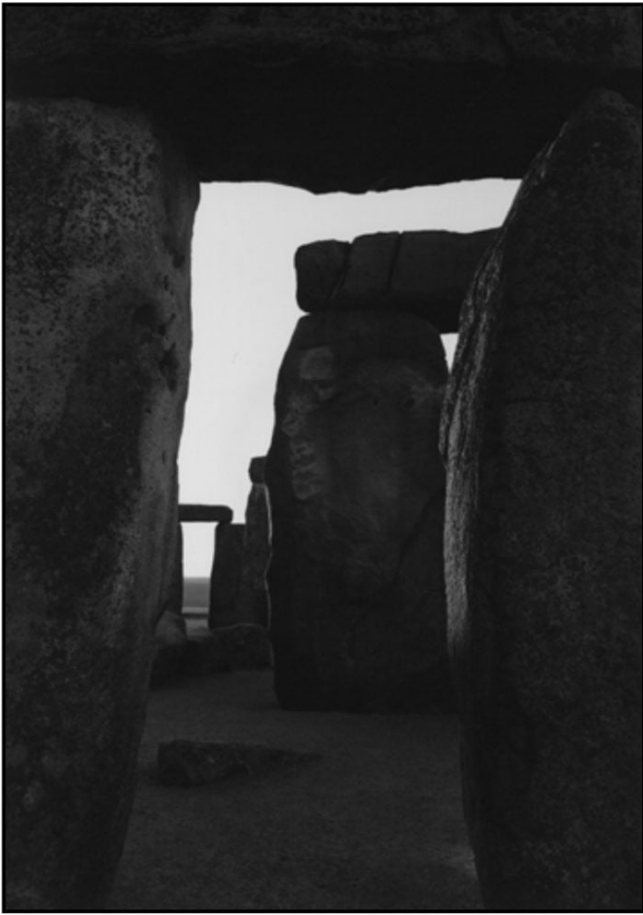


Photographs also provide a record of the reconstruction. The following photograph by John Piper shows the upright resurrected. This photograph was taken before the 1958 reconstruction of the southwestern trilithon (which can be seen in the 2014 photograph at the beginning of this posting).





John Piper in another undated photograph in the Tate Britain collection focuses on the surface of one of the stones. In so doing he captures their very tactile impression. Unlike other megaliths, the stones at Stonehenge were dressed using stone axes so that their inner surfaces were smooth. Over the years lichen have painted upon them in an abstract expressionist style.



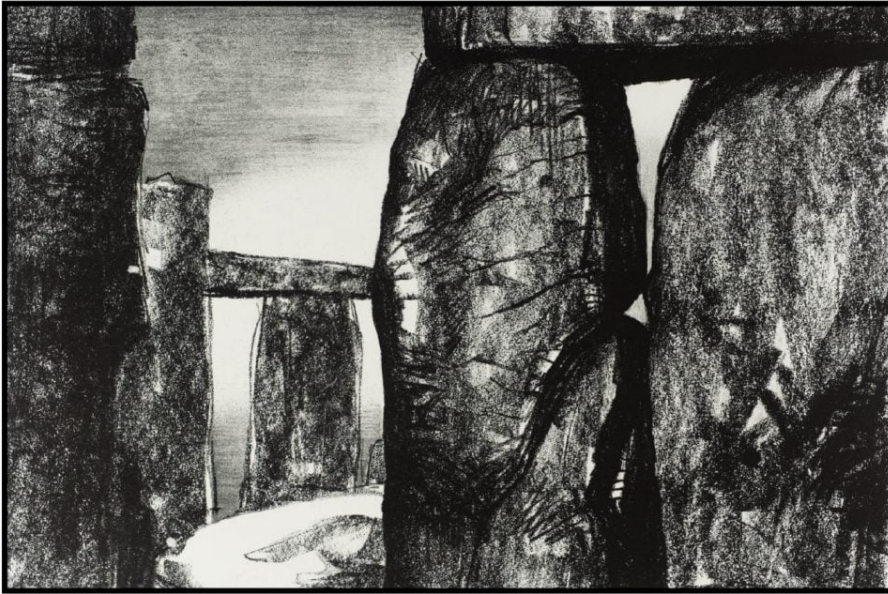
Photographs can give a sense of the place as well as providing a simple record. The photograph to the left by Paul Caponigro is entitled *Inner Trilithon through Circle Stones, Stonehenge* (1970). Caponigro published a large book of photographs of the Neolithic monuments in Britain, Ireland and France in 1986. The outer reaches of Europe contain numerous stone structures dating back to several thousand years BCE (Mohen, 1999)

Prints of the Stones



Print-makers have been very successful in capturing the form and feeling of Stonehenge. Perhaps they are more comfortable with stones, since they work closely with them in lithography. Their prints concentrate on how the light plays on the monument. They tend to consider the monument in part rather than in whole. On the right is a 1961 aquatint print by Julian Trevelyan.

Henry Moore made a series of lithographs of Stonehenge in 1973. All are available at the Tate Britain website. Below is *Stonehenge IV*:



On the right is a 1974 intaglio by Norman Stevens. Stonehenge at night has a brooding majesty.

Nature of Stonehenge

What purpose did Stonehenge serve? Many fanciful explanations have been proposed with little support other than the imagination (Hutton, 2013). Any ideas that the site served as a place for living are completely dispelled by the lack of any archeological evidence for everyday life. The people who built Stonehenge lived nearby but not at the site of the monument. They stayed close to the River Avon in a place called Durrington Walls, where archeologists have found signs of ancient wooden buildings, and the refuse of everyday life (Parker Pearson, 2012). Some of the wooden buildings, such as Woodhenge, were circular. The people then used the techniques of the wooden buildings when constructing Stonehenge.

Why then did they build their great megalithic monument? Was it a place for meetings or a site for religious observances? One would have thought that the objects used in such meetings or rites might have remained, but the site is largely empty of anything unrelated to the stones or to the burials. Was Stonehenge a shrine where the sick went for healing under the benign influence of the stones? The human remains do not show evidence of obvious illness. Was Stonehenge a celestial observatory to help predict the seasons and eclipses (Hawkins & White, 1965)? When one stands at the base of the great trilithon at the summer solstice, one can see the sun rise over the Heel Stone. Although the monument is laid out along the line of the solstices, most archeologists now feel that this was more of gesture to the heavens rather than a way to measure them (Brown, 1976; Ruggles & Hoskin, 1999; Hutton, 2013)

Because of the cremated human remains found in the Aubrey Holes, Parker Pearson (2012) has suggested that the site was built as a monument to the dead, perhaps as a place to honor noble ancestors. He tells an intriguing story of how he was told by Ramilisonina, an archeologist from Madagascar, that people in his country spent their lives in wood structures, but gave their dead stone houses to last them for eternity. Other great stone monuments such as the Egyptian pyramids were certainly built as places for the dead, as were the British barrows and dolmens that predated Stonehenge.

Words

Thomas Hardy set the penultimate scene of his 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* at Stonehenge. Tess has killed Alec, her seducer and tormentor. Tess and Angel Clare are now fleeing at night across the Salisbury Plain. When they reach Stonehenge, Tess is too tired to go on, and she lies down on one of the recumbent stones. She asks Angel if he believes that they might meet again after they are dead.

Like a greater than himself, to the critical question at the critical time he did not answer; and they were again silent. In a minute or two her breathing became more regular, her clasp of his hand relaxed, and she fell asleep. The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway. Presently the night wind died out, and the quivering little pools in the cup-like hollows of the stones lay still.

The great stones are silent about what happens after death. They persist through the centuries. They evoke memories of those who built them so that they might, themselves, remember

and honor their ancestors. Yet the world has moved on and all those ancient people are no more.

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Winter Light

The coming of the winter twilight clarifies the mind. With the snow the light becomes more intense, the dark more evident, and the remaining colors more obvious. The heightened contrast forces us to think.



The 1871 painting *Winter Twilight from Olana* is by Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900). He was a successful member of the Hudson River School, and at the time of the painting lived on the Olana estate overlooking the river. This small painting (10 by 13 inches) is a vivid representation of winter.

This posting considers the light of winter through four different poems.

Emily Dickinson

An 1861 poem by Emily Dickinson describes the “heavenly hurt” experienced in the winter light. She lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, not that far from the location of Church’s painting.

There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
‘Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

Like the “heft” of hymns, the winter light forces us to think of “meanings,” even those most painful. “Heft” is an old English word for “weight,” that has also come to mean “importance.” The word is etymologically related (cf. “heave”) to “haft,” the handle of a tool or weapon such as a knife. Winter light can cut right through us.

Dickinson’s approach to life and religion was significantly affected by American Transcendentalism (Barnstone, 2006; Farr, 1992). One of the tenets of this movement (Goodman, 2011; also American Transcendentalism webpage) was that the contemplation of nature provides us with all we need to know and teaches us

how to live our lives. In his 1836 essay *Nature*, Emerson states

the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the great organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it. (p. 77).

Dickinson followed this precept but sometimes found despair rather than enlightenment. As winter brings the year to end, it inevitably elicits thoughts about death. Dickinson describes this in terms of silence. The landscape “listens” and the shadows “hold their breath” but nothing can be heard. The ending of the poem focuses on death. The “distance on the look of Death” is cold and abstract. Death is so far from life that it cannot be understood.

The mystery of death dominated the mind of Dickinson. About half of her poems are related in some way to the death of loved ones, to the nature of death, or to what may happen after death (Nesturuk, 1997).

However, to get only one level of meaning from a Dickinson poem is simply to miss the other levels. The very word “slant” immediately brings to mind another poem *Tell all the truth but tell it slant*. The final stanza of the poem on winter light gives a sense of reconciliation more than despair. Death will not be understood, but that just makes it distant. What it will mean we will only come to know when it comes (and when it goes).

The technique of this poem is striking (Vendler, 2010, pp 128-129). The rhythm is never regular, and the reader should not lapse into simple periodicity. The opening line is best read as beginning with an anapest: “There’s a *certain Slant of Light*.” This type of beginning recurs intermittently during the rest of the poem, especially in the last stanza: “When it *comes...*” and “When it *goes ...*” The anapests provide a feeling of

expectancy or involvement. The rhymes are just as intriguing as the rhythm. Vendler remarks on how the inevitable paired rhyme of “breath” and “death” at the end of the poem is balanced by the gentle slant-rhyme of “listens” and “distance.” Inevitable is not necessarily harsh.

Thomas Hardy

In face of despair we bolster ourselves with beliefs. The Christian religion centers on the idea of salvation. Death then becomes as much the beginning of a new life as the ending of the old. The celebration of Christmas occurs in the middle of winter. Winter will occur but we should not mind since the savior has been born. Spring is coming and the festival of Easter will describe the actual process of our resurrection.

Such beliefs can keep us warm in winter when thoughts of death are near. Thomas Hardy’s poem *The Oxen* published on Christmas Eve, 1915, considered the state of belief when the world found itself in a devastating war.

The word “oxen” nowadays often refers to castrated bulls used as draught animals. However, it can also simply mean “cattle,” and this fits more easily with Hardy’s description of them as “meek” and “mild.” Two other words in the poem come from old English. “Barton” is a farm outbuilding, and “coomb” a small valley.

A Dorset folk belief was that the animals that had been present at the manger when Christ was born kneel in remembrance of his birth on Christmas Eve. The presence of these animals at the original birth is not documented in the scripture, but soon became part of the accumulated legends of the nativity (Cartlidge and Elliott, 2001, pp 18-19; Wager, 1939). A possible justification of the belief (for the animals at the original birth though not for the reverential kneeling on Christmas Eve) might be found in prophetic lines like

Isaiah 1:3 “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib.” Yet this would require an additional belief in the possibility of prophecy.



The above illustration shows the nativity with ox, ass and manger on a 4th-Century sarcophagus in the Sant’Ambrogio Basilica in Milan (Source: Wikipedia Commons). Very soon after Rome turned to Christianity, the animals came for Christmas. One English version of the hymn *In dulci jubilo* by John Mason Neale (*Good Christian Men Rejoice*) contains the lines

Jesus Christ was born to-day:
Ox and ass before Him bow,
And He is in the manger now.

The fair “fancy” that the oxen kneel at midnight every Christmas Eve does not follow any logic. How would one know if the oxen were kneeling in reverence or simply resting? Yet the story is magical. We are entranced by the idea that the natural universe attends to human history and marks the birth of a child in a manger many years ago. Shakespeare mentions in *Hamlet* (I:1:160) a similar folk belief that during the Christmas period “the bird of dawning singeth all night long.”

In his poem, Hardy remembers back to his childhood:

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
‘Now they are all on their knees,’
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen;
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
'Come; see the oxen kneel

'In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,'
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Hardy no longer believes the story. Yet he regrets the comfort that came with the idea that God was in his heaven and peace was on the earth. When he wrote the poem the world was at war. In the trenches the idea of peace on earth was being torn to shreds by shrapnel.

Hardy was uneasy in his lack of faith (Perkins. 1959). Though he had written a poem on *God's Funeral* (1910), he always felt that perhaps he was missing something. This is most poignantly rendered in his poem celebrating the century's turning *The Darkling Thrush* (1900). Hardy's description of the bleak winter scene is interrupted by the joyful song of a thrush:

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

The Oxen continues his uneasy isolation. Hardy both wishes for the comfort of the old beliefs and realizes only too clearly

that they are in part responsible for the present. Beliefs in God and Country now support a war that reason says should not have been entered into.

Hardy's poem was published in *The Times* on December 24, 1915. Allingham (retrieved 2014) points out the irony that the poem occurred on the same page as a smug editorial claiming that the English and their allies were the true Christians, and that the Germans had shamelessly departed from the true faith.

Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens' 1921 poem *The Snow Man* draws other thoughts from winter. The poem begins with a bravura description of the winter landscape: the "juniper branches shagged with ice," the "distant glitter of the January sun."

The poem then contrasts the reality that we perceive to the meaning that we attribute to it. The syntax is as torturous as the understanding is difficult. It is so easy to think of misery when we see the frost and hear the wind. Yet if we develop a "mind of winter" like that of the snow man, we can experience what really exists.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind

That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The last two lines describe the true experience that lies beyond our preconceived notions. If we become empty of ourselves, we no longer see things that are not there. We come face-to-face with the truth, realizing that it is as empty as the perceiving self. There are three nothings: the nothing of the emptied self, the “nothing that is not there,” and “the nothing that is.”

This has some similarity to Dickinson’s experience after the heavenly hurt passes and she is left with the “distance on the look of death.” However, Stevens found in winter not despair but understanding.

The poem has been interpreted in different ways, depending mainly on how the critic considers the “nothing that is.” For some, such as Bloom (1977) and Pack (2003), the nothing that concludes the poem is but the first stage on the path to imagination. One must remove the old ways of looking and then create a better way. Contemplation can lead to detachment but must then proceed to imagination.

However, other critics, such as Bevis (1988, 2003), Qian (2001) and Hahm (2003) propose that the nothing that concludes the poem may be an end in itself. Stevens’ conclusion hearkens back to Buddhist and other Eastern philosophies, wherein the goal is to lose oneself in the universal self and thereby reach enlightenment. The wording of the poem’s last two lines brings to mind the koan riddles of Zen, verbal tricks to help the meditator reach true understanding.

The poem’s vision is austere. Not one that the western mind can easily grasp. The goal is to lose one’s self. Not to gain comfort, not to make oneself better, not to determine how

things work. Yet by losing ourselves we might be released from suffering, learn what is right, and gain true understanding.



The illustration shows some calligraphy of Sengai Gibon (1750-1837), a monk from the Zen monastery *Shofukuji* in Fukuoka, Japan. The characters represent *bu* and *ji* in Japanese or *wú* and *shì* in Chinese (Mandarin). Sengai presents the traditional characters 無為 quite freely. On the left is his signature and seal. The meaning of *buji* is difficult to pin down. The first character negates and can be translated as “no, not, nothing” depending on the context. The second character means “matter, affair, activity.” Combined the two characters mean “nothing doing.” *Buji* is the goal of meditation, equivalent to *samadhi* in Sanskrit. As such it also means “serenity.” The state attained when one has the mind of winter.

Though he had only slight exposure to Eastern religions, Emerson (1936) described a similar state:

Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I

see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (p. 13).

Myra Schneider

The final poem in this winter sequence is actually the beginning of a longer poem *Caedmon* by Myra Schneider (1988).

Caedmon lived in northern England in the 7th century. He is known for one surviving poem, *Caedmon's Hymn*, in praise of the Creator of heaven and earth. This lovely example of alliterative verse is the oldest recorded English poem. The webpage of A. Z. Foreman presents the hymn in Old English together with a recitation and a modern English translation.

Schneider's poem also uses alliteration though not in as formalized a fashion as in Old English. The beginning of her poem about Caedmon describes the middle of winter:

That night frost stretched
the fields into stiff white sheets;
from post, strut and roof glinting
ice-fingers pointed to the ground.
But within walls, reed-woven,
mud-baked, we warded off
the wind-beast's bellow and bite.
Herded in the wool of our own warmth,
near red-gold flames that licked
logs, then leapt to find the hole
to heaven, we defeated winter's pikes.
That festive night we filled
our bodies' troughs with roasted meats,
with mead that honeys the senses, muzzes
the mind. As ever I kept quiet,
stoked myself with the comfort rising
from the rush-strewn floor, the goodwill
steaming through talk and laughter.

This poem vividly depicts the human response to winter's cold. We come together round the fire. We drink the mead that "honeys the senses" and "muzzes the mind." The word "muzz" meaning "confuse" derives from an old English word for bog (cf. "moss"). Too much thinking should cede occasionally to simple conviviality. In winter, human beings gain comfort from human company, whatever their beliefs. Goodwill is the best response to adversity.

The rest of Schneider's poem describes the story of Caedmon's vision, as originally told in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England* (731) which was written about fifty years after the death of the poet. Caedmon was a simple cowherd unable to put words together with any meaning or music. He therefore leaves the winter feast when the harp is passed around and everyone asked to sing.



That night, while Caedmon is sleeping with the cows, an angel wakes him and asks him to sing. Caedmon is told to "delve for

the hoard of words in himself” and sing in praise of the creator. And so he does. Caedmon’s song becomes famous, and he joins the monastery in Whitby as a lay brother. He writes many other hymns though only the first one survives. The illustration shows the depiction of Caedmon’s story on a commemorative cross outside St. Mary’s Church in Whitby (derives from a photograph in Wikimedia Commons).

Caedmon’s was a different vision from Dickinson’s experience of death. It had something akin to the beliefs that Hardy held when he was young and longed for when he was old. In some ways it is the opposite of Steven’s experience of the nothing that is everything. It shows a commitment to poetry rather than a detachment from the world.

Frederic Edwin Church

The posting concludes as it began with a small painting by Frederic Church from 1871. Like the first it represents the winter landscape viewed from his home in Olana. The light is brighter, the land is simpler. It is an invitation to behold.



I wish you all a Happy New Year! May your winter bring enlightenment.

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