

## Book Reviews

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### Stonehenge decoded?

Mike Parker Pearson, *Stonehenge: Exploring The Greatest Stone Age Mystery*. London, New York: Simon & Schuster Press, 2012. £25 (cloth).

This book provides a popular account of the ‘Stonehenge Riverside Project’—a seven year series of excavations between 2003 and 2009 in and around Stonehenge by a large team of archaeologists led by Mike Parker Pearson, and a summary of some of the discipline’s recent relevant discoveries into our prehistory. The project was prompted by Parker Pearson’s association with Ramilisonina, a southern Madagascan archaeologist of the Tandroy people who continue to build stone monuments. On being taken by Parker Pearson to Avebury stone circle, Ramilisonina saw no mystery as to their meaning, since a monument of stone must be a cenotaph to the ancestors, compared to monuments of wood which are for the living. Out of Parker Pearson’s adoption of this interpretation has come the ‘materiality model’—those monuments of wood and stone were the ‘stations’ for festivals of life and death. This model has been hailed by some of his colleagues as finally achieving the ‘decoding’ of Stonehenge.

It used to be thought that wooden monuments close to Stonehenge, Durrington Walls and Woodhenge, were earlier wooden dummy runs for the later upgrade to stone at sarsen Stonehenge. But once the Riverside team in 2008 dated Durrington Walls and the close-by Woodhenge to be contemporaneous with Stonehenge this ‘lithification’ thesis was dropped and favoured the materiality thesis. The model predicted that funereal feasting rituals conducted at Durrington Walls would have been a precursor to taking the processed remains of the illustrious dead to be interred at Stonehenge. The key to decoding Stonehenge was therefore its relationship to the wooden Durrington Walls. Parker Pearson predicted that if this model is correct then it predicted that Stonehenge was linked to the River Avon, that the wooden Durrington Walls had to have its own avenue linking it to the river upstream of Stonehenge, that the river route would be a funeral highway, and that evidence of burials should exist at Stonehenge. The many specialists in the research team included the archaeoastronomer

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Clive Ruggles, who suggested that Durrington Walls and Stonehenge had horizon alignments on the sun's solstices and the moon's standstills, and that these would have served calendrical ancestor ritual purposes, rather than those of a high precision observatory. This model therefore sees Stonehenge as one component of an integrated complex of monuments of a prehistoric sepulchral cosmology. Parker Pearson claims that exactly the same cosmology can be found at Avebury, since here just as at Stonehenge the Avebury stone circle is linked by the River Kennet to the wooden West Kennet Palisades and the Sanctuary. If correct it raises archaeological models beyond the limitations of site-exclusive excavation reports, and integrates its interpretations with anthropological analogy and archaeoastronomical findings. And by a return to a hypothetico-deductive methodology without excluding post-processual insights, Parker Pearson set up a number of tests to his model.

In a series of excavations in and around Durrington Walls and the Avon riverside, the project team have discovered that that a large temporary village of huts and other buildings were sited early on to house thousands of people for monument building work and pig feasts, that an avenue of rammed flint does in fact connect that monument with the river, that along much of the River Avon's high banks a number of wooden towers were located alongside large cremation fires, that the Stonehenge Avenue did in fact connect with the River Avon and was marked by an early 'Bluestonehenge' later replaced with a henge when the bluestones were moved to add to Stonehenge, and that at Stonehenge for much of its over one thousand years of use it was a cremation cemetery. These are a remarkable series of discoveries that seem to confirm the materiality model, and the book is an accessible source for the latest archaeological knowledge of Stonehenge and our local prehistory. The book is written in the now familiar style of a publicity-savvy British archaeology, introducing by personal disclosure the characters who variously made up the changing team of the Riverside Project. And with the archaeological engagement with anthropology and archaeoastronomy this seems to finally signal an end to the destructive and acrimonious debates of the sixties and seventies that can allow a decoding of Stonehenge. However there are many reasons to be cautious while still welcoming this publication.

At the very beginning of his book Parker Pearson claims the scientific high ground—that a theory must withstand the tests of evidence and discoveries of new evidence. If a hypothesis cannot explain evidence then that theory must be rejected. There is another model of the scientific process, in which disciplinary and paradigm boundaries immunise scholars

against evidence that is counter to their preferred interpretations. Rather than a scholarly landscape littered with defunct rejected theories this second model predicts that mutually incompatible theories survive by research groups ignoring the evidence and publications of others to the detriment of a broad front forward movement in knowledge. Parker Pearson claims to follow the first 'Popperian' model of scholarship yet displays classic symptoms of the second 'Kuhnian' practice. In spite of an impressive energy to get out and do the fieldwork, Parker Pearson has not considered all extant theories or evidence and that work has still to be done.

This is particularly clear with his adoption of archaeoastronomy. While it is refreshing to read a senior archaeologist at last engaging with archaeoastronomy, his justification for his adoption of it is worrying. He argues that archaeology has been under 'seige' from the earlier archaeoastronomers like Hawkins, Thom, and North, but can now be adopted because Ruggles is an archaeologist and therefore any astronomical properties of a monument can be grounded in 'archaeological knowledge'. This is an unjustified comment, since for example the work of John North is one of the most archaeologically detailed and painstaking examples of archaeoastronomy research ever made. Scholarship does not move forward through disciplinary amity relationships, but requires the sober and non-partisan assessment of evidence. With regard to Stonehenge and its 'astronomy' it would have paid Parker Pearson to pay more regard to John North's work. Parker Pearson claims, apparently on Ruggles' authority, that Stonehenge had axial horizon astronomy alignments on summer solstice sunrise and winter solstice sunset, the four station stones have alignments on the southern major moonrise, the northern major moonset and the summer solstice sunrise, and the entrance post holes on the northern major moonrise. None of these claims were first made by Ruggles and some are so problematical that they display a slipshod attitude to the architecture of the monument. The summer solstice sunrise claim was first made by Stukeley in the early eighteenth century, the station stones' alignments by Hawkins in 1963, and the entrance post holes northern major moonrise alignment by Newham in 1972. Why is Parker Pearson accepting the claims of Hawkins and Newham while simultaneously viewing them as enemies of archaeology? And why does he amalgamate them with John North? North showed in painstaking detail that these three claims in particular are not true to the archaeology of the monument or the field method requirements of archaeoastronomy. The close argumentation for this view has been in the public domain from North and others for at

least two decades now, and one wonders why Parker Pearson is practising Khunian paradigm defence by bibliographic exclusion. The convincing picture made by North is a closely specified double alignment from the Heel Stone on winter solstice sunset and the southern minor standstill moonset, both through the Grand Trilithon, which together generate a dark moon at winter solstice every nineteen or so years. Since his own materiality model requires Stonehenge to be a cremation cemetery, then a ritual that coincides with the start of the longest darkest night makes far more sense than the start of the longest brightest day through his claimed summer solstice sunrise alignment.

While the archaeoastronomy is poorly advised, the archaeology is under-interpreted. While both Durrington Walls and Woodhenge are within his 'domain of the living', a male burial is found along the Durrington Walls avenue and a three year old girl child with her skull split in two was at the centre of Woodhenge. Similarly at the Sanctuary, the Avebury equivalent of Woodhenge, an adolescent child was buried and Aubrey Burl's review of the antiquarian evidence suggests that many more human remains were once there. Some dead are therefore found in the proposed 'the land of the living'. And at Stonehenge Mike Pitts has suggested that an oak lintel spanned the gap beneath the half-height stone 11 in the outer circle of sarsens. Together with the woodworking mortise and tenon joints that Parker Pearson acknowledges were used by the builders at Stonehenge, this suggests that the monument is not reducible to stone alone, just as 'the land of the living' has to include the dead. The reverse holds true, since Parker Pearson's excavation has revealed that the Durrington Walls avenue was lined with sarsen pillars. Similarly rather than the multi-phase roofed buildings favoured by most archaeologists in the past, we now know that both the Sanctuary and Woodhenge were open monuments of wood *and* stone. And while only 6% of the Avebury Circle has been excavated, nobody has suggested that its main function was as a cremation cemetery. Yet in spite of a pointedly different architecture, John North has shown it shares with Stonehenge the same axial alignments on the setting winter solstice suns and the southern standstill moonsets. The materiality model is insensitive to both the detailed astronomy and archaeology, and this anomalous evidence challenges scholars, including Parker Pearson, to be true to science and either amend or reject the theory.

The materiality model is the latest version of the sepulchral model which has been around since Petrie first suggested it in the 1880s. Archaeologists of the Neolithic have generally viewed monuments housing the elite dead as signifying the decisive break with forager primitiveness

and the beginning of civilisation. Instead of seeing monument building and ancestor worship as foundational of culture, anthropology suggests that it is a revision and reversal to the forager cosmology that preceded it. Parker Pearson's use of one megalith building culture separated by thousands of miles and years as an analogy for Stonehenge is unsafe. It could be countered by others that would reverse the meaning of materiality, since wood that rots can be seen as the domain of the dead and resistant stone as the permanence of society. Since we now know that the Neolithic monument building cultures of NW Europe were cattle herders who continued to hunt and forage, then a more appropriate analogy would be to the global ethnographies of pastoral cultures. All suggest that young men only gain marital rights through gifts of cattle to wife givers, and that they receive these cattle from senior agnates. Ancestor worship is therefore a public demonstration of respect to them, since the elite dead are those senior agnates that are the source of cattle. But as the descendants of native hunter and gatherers, these nouveaux-riche cattle owners had to contend with the tensions of traditional forager bride-service obligations which were gradually eclipsed by bride-price negotiations. Seen as a simultaneous continuation and reversal of an earlier cosmology, the regionally competitive dynamic of monumental architecture can arguably be interpreted as addressing the builders' immediate concerns to overcome fraying clan loyalties and to signal externally their ability to mobilise labour in large handicap displays. This alternative anthropological model, not considered by Parker Pearson, predicts that our ancestors used a complex swan-song of allusions, their horizon alignments displacing earlier lunar phased rituals with an elite male solarising religion.

This is a book that must be read by all interested in the period and the issues. As one attempt to use a multi-disciplinary method to decode Stonehenge, it has failed, but linking archaeology with archaeoastronomy and anthropology clearly has much to offer.

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