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Bell Beakers, Celts and Stonehenge

A few centuries after the Corded Ware people had dispersed throughout eastern Europe, a similar but slightly different culture spread across the western part of the continent. Known as the Bell Beaker culture, it paved the way for the Bronze Age.

The British Isles were a particular stronghold of this culture. The Bell Beaker people are believed to have played an important role in the legendary monument of Stonehenge. A few kilometres from the stone circle, archaeologists have found graves containing the remains of a number of Bell Beaker individuals.

One of these is known as the Amesbury Archer. He was about 40 years old at the time of his death about 4,300 years ago. His grave is regarded as the most valuable find ever from the British Bronze Age. The gifts that accompanied him in death were very costly, comprising four ceramic vessels, three copper knives of different sizes and two hair ornaments made of gold (the oldest gold artefacts ever to be found in Britain). A slate wristguard associated with archery was found next to his arm, along with 16 arrowheads. A similar one lay at his feet. His hide cloak was held together by a large bone needle. A number of small bone and flint tools had been placed in a pouch, although this has rotted away.

However, the most interesting tool of all is a small stone anvil. British researchers interpret the anvil, the copper knives and the gold ornaments as showing that the man was a craftsman who specialised in metalwork. They believe the Archer's expertise in this field would have given him an elevated social status.

A nearby grave contained a man in his twenties who appeared to have been the Archer's son or younger brother.

Both of them had a rare hereditary anomaly of the heel bone. The younger man had similar hair ornaments made of gold. He was clearly born locally; that can be seen from the composition of the isotopes in his teeth. However, the older man, the Archer, turned out to have been born somewhere quite different and distant from Stonehenge. To the researchers' amazement, he appears to have spent his childhood in the Alps or Germany.

Clearly, some Bell Beaker people were very mobile, travelling not just along the western seaboard of Europe, but also along watercourses and other routes that extended well into central Europe.

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Just as Y chromosomes belonging to haplogroup R1a are very common in eastern Europe, where the Corded Ware culture was at its strongest, the twin haplogroup R1b is best represented in the areas where archaeologists have found most traces of the Bell Beaker culture.

The US genetics professor Peter Underhill has examined thousands of samples from men living today and constructed genealogical trees for R1a, as I mentioned on page 257. He has also constructed similar genealogies for haplogroup R1b. In Underhill's view, it is quite conceivable that a major subgroup of R1b, known as M412, was dispersed in association with the Bell Beaker culture. At any rate, the time of its dispersal fits perfectly.

The latest analyses of DNA from archaeological remains and family history researchers now confirm this hypothesis. Just as with R1a, lineages that include R1b appear to originate with the Yamnaya culture from the Russian steppes. It was thus from the steppes that men with the R1b haplogroup spread out over western Europe. The most reasonable explanation is that they travelled by boat.

Today, R1b (with its subgroup M412) is the most common group of Y chromosomes in the whole of Europe, followed by R1a. More than half the men in Europe belong to one of

these two groups. In Sweden, more than one in three men belongs to either R1a or R1b.

Many researchers believe that the Bell Beaker people brought with them an early variant of the Celtic languages. Today, this group of languages survives only in the far west of Europe, being confined essentially to Brittany (France), Wales, Scotland and Ireland. However, before the time of the Roman Empire, the Celtic tongues were far more widespread and were spoken through much of western Europe.

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The British press came up with their own name for the man in the lavish grave. They dubbed him 'King of Stonehenge'. Of course, we cannot know exactly what links he had with Stonehenge. But it is clear that his son or younger brother was born nearby, and that his own lifetime coincides with the period when some of the great stones were raised.

This huge megalithic construction is now Europe's best-known prehistoric monument. I visit it one icy January morning. This time I am a good deal luckier than on the cloudy day when I visited the Goseck solar observatory in Germany. At Stonehenge, the dawn sky is limpid. I am with a small group of tourists on one of the few special tours that enable you to enter the stone circle. Like all visitors, we come by bus from the entrance to the visitors' centre. A few minutes before sunrise we leave the bus and walk a few hundred metres towards the great stones. By the time the first rays of the sun glint on the horizon, I am inside the circle. The light is framed by two huge stones – a stirring sight.

Annoyingly, I am absolutely freezing. The cold January winds sweep over the open landscape. Wrapping my woollen scarf around my head a few times, I console myself with the thought that this wintry weather is part of the experience. These days, Stonehenge's high season is midsummer, when entry is free and thousands of tourists – including neo-pagans and self-appointed druids – flock around the stones to mark the summer solstice. But sunrise at the summer solstice lies on

the same line as sunset at the winter solstice. Today, leading British archaeologists think the megaliths were raised primarily to celebrate the winter solstice – just as with the Goseck solar observatory, built 1,500 years earlier. Within these structures, the people of the time celebrated their version of Christmas or Yule.

The ambitious guided tour continues throughout the morning. We walk around the site and are given a detailed account of the ways in which Stonehenge was used over the millennia.

In recent years, archaeologists have mapped a large area around the monument. Vincent Gaffney, the lively professor I tried to interview in a hotel bar in Bradford, has led an extensive research project using a range of remote analysis tools. The collected findings show the area was first used by Stone Age hunters about 10,000 years ago. At the site now occupied by the car park, researchers have found traces of three pits that once contained long pinewood poles. These were lined up with a tall tree. According to one interpretation, they may have been totem poles of some kind, with ritual significance.

About 5,500 years ago, when agriculture had just reached England, people began to build structures including several long, narrow burial mounds, a massive elliptical ridge and several round formations comprising ditches, earthworks and wooden posts. The circular formations are similar to those at Goseck and other solar observatories in Hungary and Germany built by early farmers. A similar wooden structure, called Woodhenge, has been reconstructed a few kilometres north of Stonehenge. As the new posts are made of concrete and are only about a metre ($3\frac{1}{4}$ feet) high, the reconstruction lacks the imposing atmosphere of the Goseck observatory, with its tall oaken posts.

Near Woodhenge, archaeologists have found traces of a whole village, known as Durrington Walls. The small houses there were first used about 4,500 years ago, but only for a short period of the year – just before, during and after the winter solstice. The people who occupied the houses seem to

have come on foot from all directions, bringing cows with them. They also had access to herds of pigs, which were shot with bows and arrows. Huge numbers of arrowheads have been found from the pig hunt – though wholesale slaughter would be a more accurate description – that seems to have been part of the winter solstice rituals.

British archaeologists believe these people celebrated sunrise at the winter solstice in a structure that lay near the little village and next to the river. Then they walked up in a procession towards the place where Stonehenge now lies. They may have covered part of the distance by boat along the River Avon. The route they took varied somewhat at different periods. Once the people reached Stonehenge, they would have watched the sun sink between the mighty stones. This, at any rate, is the archaeologists' latest interpretation, our guide explains.

Originally, Stonehenge would have looked more or less like Goseck, with a circular ridge on the outside, a circular ditch and an inner circle of wooden posts. It was one of several similar round timber structures in the area, according to the latest findings from remote analysis. But about 4,500 years ago people began to enhance this particular structure by raising megaliths.

One of the stones – the Heel Stone, standing about 70 metres (230 feet) outside the circle – was there from the beginning. The others were hauled there in different stages. The very largest megaliths, the sarsens, which are made of sandstone and weigh up to 40 tonnes (88,000 pounds), come from a site a few dozen kilometres away. But the smaller stones, weighing up to four tonnes (8,800 pounds), were brought all the way from Wales, a distance of about 250 kilometres (155 miles). They are made of various types of dark rock whose collective name is bluestone. These dark stones glisten in a very particular way, especially if polished and moistened.

At the time when the Bell Beaker people arrived in England and the Amesbury Archer was alive, the people at Stonehenge were thus engaged in enhancing their ancient solar

observatories by adding megaliths. They shot pigs at the winter solstice, and they had begun to use metal.

This was an age of decisive importance for Europe's development. It witnessed the diffusion of the Bell Beaker culture, and metals were becoming ever more important. Some men became powerful and had large numbers of offspring; that is why the traces of these changes can still be seen in Europeans' genetic material. The Y chromosomes belonging to haplogroup R1b are one such marker.

The summer and winter solstice had been important reference points ever since farming first came to Europe. Everything suggests that early Bronze Age society attached at least as much importance to the course of the sun.

Established archaeologists in Sweden tend to be wary of engaging in astronomical interpretation of this nature. My impression is that they are afraid of being lumped together with self-proclaimed experts who have wild and highly unscientific theories about astronomy and archaeology. But perhaps they are a little too fearful. They risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater and missing important factors that researchers in other countries take very seriously.

It is not only British archaeologists who see a link between heavenly bodies and prehistoric monuments. In Germany, the most important find of the whole Bronze Age is also associated with astronomy.