

Stonehenge exhibition - texts - EN

custom version for ASMünchen edition

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(texts written by ASM - Heiner Schwarzberg - are marked as such) - status 13 July 2026

1. INTRO

[section panel text - this text by ASM - Heiner Schwarzberg]

Stonehenge

Ancient Mysteries, new Discoveries

Welcome!

Around 5,000 years ago, people in the south of what is now England began building Stonehenge. This mysterious Stone Age construction has become one of the world's most famous monuments, visited by millions of people.

Who built it, how and why – these are questions that have intrigued for at least 900 years. Finding answers is anything but easy: there are no written records, and the famous megaliths remain silent.

And yet, research over the last two decades has produced bold new hypotheses and unravelled many of Stonehenge's secrets. Join the renowned archaeologist Prof. Dr. Mike Parker Pearson. Discover how recent archaeological excavations and the use of modern scientific analytical methods have led to a completely new understanding of the legendary stone circle.

[scale model text]

Stonehenge Today

Uprights and lintels are missing from the circle, probably removed in the last 1500 years to build churches at Amesbury and Durrington. Many surviving stones have been damaged by souvenir hunters in the last 400 years. Other stones have fallen and broken. Yet, despite being incomplete, the monument lives on.

The most prominent feature today is the outer circle, where standing sarsens support a few surviving lintels. Inside are five large trilithons, only three of which still stand today. The smaller bluestones are found on either side of the trilithon horseshoe. Outside it they form a circle, and inside it they form their own bluestone horseshoe. Outside the stone circle itself is the henge with its bank and ditch. The Slaughter Stone and two surviving Station Stones lie inside the henge. Beyond the bank and ditch, outside the henge's north-east entrance, is the Heel Stone.

[panel text]

The Altar Stone came from Scotland

New analysis has shown that the Altar Stone—a stone in the centre of the monument—came from Scotland. The findings suggest Neolithic Britain was a far more connected and advanced society than earlier evidence indicated.

The Altar Stone got its name in 1620, as it was assumed to have been flat on the ground. It was thought to be a Welsh sandstone. New analysis has shown that it must have come from the far North of Scotland, which is no less than 700 km away from Stonehenge.

2. THE FIRST STONEHENGE

[section panel text]

THE FIRST STONEHENGE

A circle built to honour the Dead

5000 years ago

Neolithic farmers built the first Stonehenge on the southern end of the solstice-aligned natural landmark. Bluestones were transported by land or sea from west Wales, 240 kilometres away, and placed upright inside a circular ditch and bank, called a henge. A few locally quarried sarsen stones stood within the circle of bluestones and outside its northeast entrance. Inside, a passageway of timber posts connected its southern entrance to the centre.

As well as marking the solstice sunrise and sunset along the natural landmark, people also put up posts to mark the northernmost direction of moonrise which occurs every 18.6 years. Heaven and Earth must have seemed in perfect harmony here.

[scale model text]

Stage One united

east and west,

heaven and earth

The original Stonehenge was a henge - a circular ditch and bank - enclosing what we now call the Aubrey Holes. Standing bluestones brought from west Wales were placed in these pits. Cremated remains were buried in the Aubrey Holes and throughout the henge, indicating its use as a cemetery.

A few sarsen stones - a type of sandstone found throughout south-east England - stood within the circle and outside, at its northeast entrance. Inside the henge, a passageway of timber posts connected the southern entrance to the centre. A row of posts at the northeast entrance also lined up with the northernmost direction of moonrise.

These discoveries suggest that the circle united east and west, life and death, earth and sky.

[module panel text]

Shortly after 3000 BC

Stonehenge

A sacred circle

The henge was made almost 5000 years ago. About 350 metres in circumference, it would have taken 100 people more than two weeks to dig.

They probably first marked a circle of about 54 metres radius, using a long rope and central peg. Uniform spaces between its key features suggest that measurements were based on a 'long foot' -slightly longer than a modern foot. The builders calculated in multiples of ten.

People throughout Britain buried their dead in such circular enclosures, some of which also had standing stones: Stonehenge is one of more than ten such sites.

[panel text]

3000-2900 BC – Stonehenge

Antlers made effective tools

Flexible and strong, antlers made useful picks once unnecessary points and branches had been removed. People used more than 70 antler picks to dig Stonehenge's huge ditch. It would have been hard work, even though the bedrock is relatively soft chalk. Traces in chalk blocks show that the picks were used in two different ways. They were swung, like modern pickaxes, to remove fractured chalk near the surface. Digging deeper into harder rock, people used them more like crowbars, levering the chalk out in blocks. The antler tip wore down quickly, sometimes making a pick unusable after only one day.

[module panel text]

c. 3000 BC – Stonehenge

Stones with a meaning

In Stonehenge's first phase, it consisted of an enormous circle of 56 upright stones enclosed by a ditch and a bank. The stones, about two metres tall on average, came from the Preseli Mountains in western Wales, 240 kilometres west of Stonehenge. They are known as 'bluestones'.

The bluestones from Wales may not have been an arbitrary choice. West Wales is thought to be one of the regions where the first farmers set foot on land when they migrated to the British Isles around 4000 BC. They spread from there across western Britain, as far east as the area around Stonehenge.

The site they chose for this may have been considered by them as the navel of the world and the birthplace of the gods, as this is where the sun's movements are incised in the landscape.

[panel text]

c. 3000 BC – Carn Goedog

Stone wedges for quarrying bluestones

About 5,000 years ago, these angular stones were used as wedges to extract pillars of bluestone from the Carn Goedog quarry in Wales. The edges show traces of use where they were driven into crevices between the pillars to pry them away. The mudstone wedges are much softer than the hard dolerite of the bluestones. Perhaps the stonemasons hoped this would reduce the risk of damage and fractures to the bluestones. They probably also used wooden wedges and hammers, as well as ropes. Those objects, made of organic, perishable material, have not survived.

[panel text]

The Bluestones first stood in Wales

At a site called Waun Mawn in West Wales, Mike Parker Pearson and his team found the remains of a dismantled stone circle. Nearby, even closer to the bluestone quarries in the Preseli Hills, they have found four henges, one of them with a dismantled stone circle enclosing a house from 3400 BC.

Was this the organisational centre for quarrying and movement of the bluestones? Where they erected here first? Were the bluestones brought to Stonehenge as part of a migration out of west Wales?

These hypotheses are now further explored in archaeological excavations and scientific research.

[module panel text]

From 3000 BC onwards – Stonehenge Consumed by Fire, Buried in Earth

For over 500 years, from its beginning, Stonehenge was a place of burial. At the time, people cremated their dead and buried the remains within the henge and bluestone circle. Stonehenge is the largest of the circular cremation enclosures in Britain. Only half the site has ever been excavated. It is likely that well over 100 people were buried here. It seems that most of them were women. Perhaps their status was higher than that of men at this time.

The analysis of one of the burials, a woman aged between 35 and 50, reveals that she lived far from Stonehenge, possibly in Wales, where the Stonehenge bluestones come from. Her cremated remains were brought to Stonehenge and buried beside a recently erected bluestone.

[panel text]

c. 3000 BC – Stonehenge Grave of a woman

These are the cremated bones of a woman buried in Stonehenge around 5000 years ago

The woman was between 35 and 50 — a good age for anyone to reach at that time. She had lost a lot of teeth, probably due to poor diet, and may have suffered pain from an abscess in her jaw. She also had arthritis in her neck; she must have had to carry heavy loads in her daily life.

An analysis of strontium isotopes in her bones tells us that she lived far from Stonehenge, possibly in Wales, where the Stonehenge bluestones come from. Her remains were buried in Stonehenge, beside a recently erected bluestone, with an animal tooth and a sarsen stone flake as grave goods. The display replicates the spatial arrangement of the finds.

3. THE SECOND STONEHENGE

[section panel text]

THE SECOND STONEHENGE

A sacred circle

4500 years ago

Stonehenge was dramatically remodelled some 500 years after the first stone circle. It acquired more or less its current form, with massive sarsen stones. The builders stayed in a village near Durrington Walls, less than three kilometres away. At the heart of this settlement were more circles, made of timber instead of stone. Huge quantities of animal bones found at Durrington Walls tell us that the wooden circles were indeed places for living it up. People feasted on great quantities of pork and beef. What were they celebrating? What was the link?

New research suggests that Stonehenge was primarily a sacred place for the dead. Stone symbolised the permanence of death and the eternal world of their ancestors, whereas wood, a perishable material, represented this transient life. Stonehenge was the world of the dead, and Durrington Walls the world of the living. The River Avon connected those two worlds, via ceremonial avenues that aligned with solstice sunsets and sunrises.

[scale model text]

Stage Two

The Monumental Project

Stonehenge was dramatically remodelled some 500 years after it was first built. Larger sarsen stones were raised to create the iconic structures that frame the setting midwinter sun.

These massive stones, between 4 and 28 tons each, were brought from 24 kilometres away. They were then shaped and erected, creating a new circle of tall uprights crowned by horizontal lintels, with the ring of bluestones inside. In the centre, five trilithons – these are pairs of upright stones with lintels on top – formed a horseshoe-shaped setting of grand portals.

Archaeologists have found the builders' village less than 3 kilometres away at Durrington Walls.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Stonehenge

Hammerstones

Found just outside Stonehenge, these sarsen hammerstones were used to shape the large sarsens. Most are quartzite sarsen, harder than the 'sugar' sarsens that stand at Stonehenge. Archaeologists estimate that more than ten thousand hammerstones were used.

Most were of the sizes shown here, but some were larger than beach balls. Too large to be held in the hands, they must have been suspended in slings and swung at the sarsens to detach large flakes. Hammerstones became worn or broken, so each person probably went through several. The small size would have been ideal for children to use, so perhaps people of all ages shaped the stones.

[module panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Stonehenge

The world of the dead

Stonehenge continued to be used as a cemetery, but for declining numbers of people. The monument constructed in stone represented the world of the ancestors.

In its first phase the monument heralded unity and unification in cosmic as well as human terms. With the dramatic transformation into the Stonehenge we still can perceive today, the builders made an even more grandiose gesture to mark this the centre of the earth and heavens.

It would have taken at least 200 people several months to drag just one sarsen stone 25km to Stonehenge, probably using sledges on wooden rails. The largest stones weigh 28 tons or more. Once on site, the sarsens were pounded into shape using hammerstones, producing quantities of waste material. Raising the lintels would have been a great feat of engineering. Copying carpentry techniques, the builders joined the sarsens together to symbolize unification.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Stonehenge

Sarsen construction waste

These sarsen flakes, found inside Stonehenge and immediately north of the site, are waste products created when the stones were hammered into shape. Archaeologists suspect that the sarsens were first roughly shaped at the quarries 24 kilometres from Stonehenge. They were later dressed with greater care at the site itself. The hours of continual hammering left the stones' surface pitted with indentations. Once hammered into shape, each stone was dragged into position and pulled upright. Dense concentrations of waste in the form of sarsen flakes and chippings remained at the dressing site.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Stonehenge

Bluestone flakes: waste produced over thousands of years

These flakes are from bluestones transported to Stonehenge from Wales about 5,000 years ago. Some are debris from stone-dressing by builders of the second Stonehenge 4,500 years ago. Others are more recent. When Stonehenge lost its significance about 3,500 years ago, people used the site as a quarry. They broke pieces off the bluestones and used them to make stone tools.

[module panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Durrington Walls

The world of the living

Theories about Stonehenge have dramatically changed with the discovery of the homes at Durrington Walls, some 3 km away. The many houses may have once been home to 4,000 people, the builders and their families.

The building of Stonehenge would indeed have occupied large crews for months, while others worked to provide their food and shelter. This degree of organization suggests a complex social structure.

Studies reveal that the builders brought their livestock from many regions of Britain, some coming from hundreds of kilometres away. The peak of building activity, as well as feasting seems to have been in wintertime. The settlement was largely occupied seasonally though a few people lived there all year round. Visiting builders would have stayed for months at a time.

At the winter solstice, they would observe the sunset at Stonehenge, where the Great Trilithon frames the setting sun perfectly on the shortest day of the year.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Durrington Walls

The feast: pork and beef on the menu

The people who gathered at Durrington Walls killed and cooked thousands of animals. Pigs accounted for around 90 per cent, cattle for the rest. Many bones were discarded with meat still attached, suggesting an abundance of food during these feasts. Some bones show signs of cutting with flint tools. We can tell from the burnt leg bones that some pigs were roasted whole over an open fire. Others were chopped into pieces and boiled in pots.

Some of the pigs' teeth show signs of bad decay. They must have been fattened up with sweet or starchy feed, possibly even honey. Surprisingly, very few sheep bones were found here. Were mutton and lamb not considered delicacies?

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Durrington Walls

Entertainment after work

A striking aspect of the finds at Durrington Walls is the many items of personal adornment, especially in comparison with the few tools in bone or stone.

Bone beads are the remnants of necklaces. People used to wear bone pins in their clothes or hair. A few tools in bone and stone have also been found amongst the waste.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Durrington Walls

What's there to eat?

These are the remains of cooking pots that were found at Durrington Walls. The pottery style, called Grooved Ware, dates to the time of Stonehenge's construction. It supports the latest theory that Durrington Walls was the temporary home of builders of the stone circle. This was a place for the living. No signs of cooking or feasting have been discovered at Stonehenge, a place for the dead.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Durrington Walls

Picks made of deer antlers

Hundreds of picks made of deer antlers have been excavated at Durrington Walls. They were used for constructing a number of large, circular monuments made of wood and for digging a huge ditch.

A lot of picks were found in pits that were dug around 2500 BC to hold enormous timber posts. Pick fragments have also been found in the chalk rubble of a huge ditch. It was created after the builders' village at Durrington Walls was abandoned in around 2450 BC. By then, the large-scale reconstruction of Stonehenge must have been completed.

[panel text]

Stonehenge as an observatory?

Astronomer Gerald Hawkins believed Stonehenge was an observatory, a sort of 'Neolithic computer'. His 1965 book *Stonehenge Decoded* was a bestseller. Among his claims was that the 56 Aubrey Holes were used to predict solar and lunar eclipses—by moving marker stones between them, people could track the passage of the moon.

Hawkins' ideas were enthusiastically embraced by the general public but since then astronomers with more knowledge of Stonehenge's complex sequence have cast doubt on his more extraordinary claims. Professor of archaeoastronomy Clive Ruggles considers that the only astronomical alignments we can be certain of are those at the extremes of the sun's range during the solstices, and at the extremes of the moon's rising and setting.

[panel text]

World of the living

World of the Dead

Durrington Walls, home to at least four thousand people, was less than 4 km from Stonehenge. At the heart of this settlement of wooden houses were more circles, made of timber instead of stone.

Stone's permanence has long been a symbol of death. In contrast, wood is temporary, like life. The River Avon connected the circles of wood and stone, via ceremonial avenues that aligned with solstice sunsets and sunrises.

Recent research has revealed a 2km-diameter ring of huge pits around Durrington Walls. This discovery gives us a better idea of where the border was drawn between the land of the living and that of the dead. Excavations at Durrington Walls have uncovered many artefacts of daily life. Stonehenge, on the other hand, has yielded no few such artefacts, only principally human remains.

[panel text]

c. 2500 BC – Woodhenge

Pottery, sea urchins and more

A monumental timber circle, similar to the ones at Durrington Walls, was also built at Woodhenge around 4,500 years ago. Part of the same complex, Woodhenge produced similar finds—Grooved Ware pottery, the bones of cattle and pigs, and objects made of bone, antlers, flint and decorated chalk. A number of fossilized sea urchins were found at the bottom of one post-hole, possibly deposited deliberately during the construction of the circle. The flint items include tools for making fires, drills, a knife, arrowheads, scrapers and instruments with serrated edges.

[panel text - short film]

Imagine life

at Durrington Walls

Building Stonehenge was a massive project. People travelled great distances, bringing huge stones for the circle and livestock for the feasts. Someone must have drawn up and communicated the overall plan. Someone must have decided on the logical steps.

With this film we show what the builders of Stonehenge might have thought as they completed this monumental task.

[module panel text]

c. 2500 BC

The River Avon

Life and death connected

The River Avon connected the area around the village of the builders at Durrington Walls to the area around the Stonehenge burial site. Archaeologists found processional avenues that connected Stonehenge and Durrington Walls to the Avon in around 2500 BC. It seems that the river played a role in rituals that marked the transition from life to death.

The Avon's path is particularly meandering: one can easily become disoriented by its bends of as much as 180 degrees. Deliberately making people disoriented is a feature of transitional rites such as burial rituals the world over. In this way, people make sure that the dead end their journey to the next world unable to return. The River Avon would seem to have formed the perfect setting for that twisting and disorienting transition from life to death.

4. AFTER STONEHENGE

[section panel text]

AFTER STONEHENGE

The end of the Stone Age

4500 to 3500 years ago

From the beginning, Stonehenge's stones have been symbols of human achievement. But over time, they lost their significance as stone-working technologies became redundant. New materials and tools changed people's lives. About 4,500 years ago, new arrivals from Europe brought innovations that must have seemed magical. They coaxed metal out of rocks, casting it into sharp-edged copper axes and knives. They made shiny gold ornaments that flashed yellow like the sun.

Britain was now re-connected to continental Europe and new ideas. The metal trade brought wealth. Metalworkers learned to add tin to copper to make bronze. By 4,200 years ago the Bronze Age had replaced the Stone Age and people stopped building massive monuments. About 3,500 years ago, Stonehenge began to lose its significance. Some of its stones were robbed and it became a ruin.

Stonehenge is a story of science, culture and change.

[scale model text]

The renovations

and final abandonment

of Stonehenge

Cultural change brought the beginning of the end. Stone monuments were no longer being built in Britain. Yet Stonehenge underwent minor modifications in another three stages that unfolded over hundreds of years.

About 4,300 years ago, Stonehenge's bluestones were rearranged into an inner and outer circle. Around 200 years later, they were rearranged again, to form an outer circle and inner horseshoe. The bluestone horseshoe was at the centre of Stonehenge. The outer circle was outside the horseshoe of sarsen trilithons, but inside the outermost sarsen circle.

In its final stages, some 3,600 years ago, two concentric rings of pits — the Z holes and the Y holes — were dug around the outside of Stonehenge but then abandoned. Was this a final, failed attempt to put up more stones at Stonehenge?

[module panel text]

c. 2450-2000 BC – Salisbury Plain

The Beaker People

Almost 4,500 years ago, new people began to change the culture of Neolithic Britain. Arriving in small groups over centuries, they gradually replaced the indigenous farmers.

Archaeologists call them the Beaker People for the bell-shaped pots that they made and buried with their dead. However, they brought more than new pottery and burial practices. They had the wheel. They knew how to cast copper and gold. Their technology ended the Stone Age.

Stonehenge's Great Trilithon seems to have been deliberately destabilized at this time. Did Beaker People try to damage the monument? Yet later, they seem to have embraced it, altering the monument by rearranging its bluestones and continuing many of the old traditions.

[panel text - this text by ASM - Heiner Schwarzberg]

2500-2200 BC – Central Europe

Elite graves of the Bell Beaker Culture

In the first half of the 3rd millennium BC, a cultural complex characterised by shared norms and values emerged in Central and Western Europe from local groups and under the influence of the earlier Corded Ware culture – the Bell Beaker culture.

Through very close interaction – which may have been linked to the exchange of status objects and raw materials, as well as through marital relations – the artefacts of the Bell Beaker people came to share a similar appearance across vast areas.

[panel text]

c. 2400-2200 BC – Roundway Down

A man of the world

In Bell Beaker culture the deceased were not cremated, but simply buried in graves, often under earthen mounds called round barrows. The bones in this showcase belong to a man buried on Roundway Down, 15 kilometres north of Stonehenge. His grave goods indicate ties to continental Europe.

In addition to the usual bell-shaped beaker, this man was buried with a copper pin and large dagger, possibly made in Central Europe, and a flint arrowhead. A polished jade wristguard, once attached to a leather strap, protected the inside of his arm against the bowstring's recoil. The bow and quiver have rotted away.

[panel text]

c. 2300-2000 BC – Amesbury

Buried with the Stonehenge dagger

A man and a woman were buried under a large barrow within sight of Stonehenge. The woman wore a necklace of amber and faience beads, a silica-based ceramic. At the man's feet were a Beaker decorated with fingernail marks and punched lines, and an oval hammer of polished chert, a fine-grained rock composed of tiny quartz crystals. Perhaps most impressive was what has become known as the 'Stonehenge dagger'. This masterpiece of flint-working has a broad blade and a sharp edge. Crafting it would have required just as much skill as making a similar dagger of bronze. The wooden handle has rotted away.

[module panel text]

c. 2000-1500 BC – Salisbury Plain

A landscape with burial mounds

From around 4000 years ago, the Beaker People and their descendants buried their dead in circular mounds known as round barrows. These earthen monuments were signs of status. A few people were interred in barrows with precious grave goods of gold, amber and jet.

Archaeologists call these rich burials the Wessex Culture because many have been found in the round barrows near Stonehenge, which is in Wessex. It seems that trade in metals had made the region wealthy.

This part of Salisbury Plain became a great cemetery of burial mounds built by successive dynasties. Yet none of these mounds was anything like the grand monuments of previous centuries that had required thousands to work together. It was the end of an era.

[panel text]

c. 1900 BC – Near Stonehenge

A wealth of gold

Bush Barrow, Britain's most famous Bronze Age burial mound, was excavated in 1808. Within sight of Stonehenge, its exceptional grave goods include a lozenge-shaped gold breastplate, a smaller ornament, a gold belt-hook, a bronze flanged axehead, several daggers, and a stone mace-head. Excavators found bronze rivets and fragments intermixed with wood, believed to be the remains of a helmet or shield.

One remarkable bronze dagger had a wood handle once covered in almost 138,000 tiny decorative gold studs. Specialists estimate that such precision work must have taken around 2,500 hours of work, or about 300 eight-hour working days. Similar daggers have been found in graves in Brittany in western France.

[\[panel text\]](#)

c. 1900 BC – The Area around Stonehenge

A woman of status

These unusual grave goods were found with cremated bones within a round barrow less than a kilometre south of Stonehenge. The pendants of amber and gold and an earthenware incense burner might have been made near Stonehenge but created of materials from far away. Amber came from the Baltic region. The style of incense burner is like those from northern France.

The ornaments suggest that the bones belong to a woman. This is thought to be the earliest example in Britain of a woman with such exceptional grave goods. In the previous five centuries, wealth was concentrated in men's graves.

[\[panel text\]](#)

1750-1500 BC – Great Durnford

Bronze axe that inspired graffiti?

Between 3,500 and 3,750 years ago, people etched over a hundred carvings of bronze axeheads and three daggers into some of the sarsens of Stonehenge. The shapes, clarified by laser scans, represent axe types that correspond to a specific production period, revealing when the carvings were made.

The type of axehead shown here has been found throughout southern England. Perhaps the carvings were just graffiti, but carvings of axeheads have also been found in burial chambers. The people who carved them at Stonehenge were probably commemorating the dead who lay buried beneath the barrows on Salisbury Plain.

5. EXTRO

[section panel text]

ROCK SOLID PROOF?

Stonehenge will always remain a mystery, but some of its riddles have recently been solved through a major research effort.

Stonehenge and Durrington Walls: stone and wood, the world of the dead and the world of the living. The two sites are inextricably linked as two parts of the same complex.

At first it was no more than a bold and fascinating theory. A multidisciplinary team of scientists set to work on it: what started as a radical idea became more firmly rooted in evidence.

New hypotheses like this one can offer an entirely different lens through which to interpret the past. They create new lines of research and new narratives, which can then be tested and move the conversation forward. This is archaeology in action.