

The Origins of Avebury: lecture by Professor Josh Pollard, President of SAS, given on 10th October 2023

Avebury is a pre-historic site in Wiltshire, said to be the world's largest stone circle, although obviously not as well-known as Stonehenge. Neither of the monuments has had any major excavations but at Stonehenge there have been many investigations to date the monument and the stones. Avebury was excavated between 1908 and 1923 by Harold St George Gray who was connected to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. On investigating the ditch, he discovered over 40 antler picks and concluded that the 11m solid chalk ditch had been dug in the Bronze Age using red deer antlers. In the later 1930s Alexander Keiller excavated part of the stone circle guided by earlier records, and reinstated some stones which had toppled.



View of Avebury bank and ditch with part of N inner stone circle.

Image: University of Southampton

Focusing on the monument's origins, the outer earthworks are referred to as a henge which is roughly circular, comprising >100 upright stones within a bank and ditch. There are two inner circles (Northern and Southern), each about 100m diameter, enclosing smaller stone settings. The monument could have had ceremonial or ritual uses for great gatherings similar to a cathedral, but other uses are possible.

Avebury is not isolated in this landscape, being connected by stone avenues with Neolithic monuments such as Overton Hill, and west to Long Stones Cove. In the early 20th century it was thought to have been constructed in one go, but it is now known that there was a sequence of phases probably over centuries rather than decades. During excavation it has been found that activities happened within the landscape before the henge was dug: the earliest phase was built around 3000BC, followed by the main earthworks and outer stone circle ~2500BC. Beaker communities from the continent and within the country were starting to visit, and Bronze Age human bones were found in the ditch. Other later burials were excavated against the standing stones of the Avenues. It is estimated the monument was probably built over 1500 years but was phased, not continuous. Over time there will be more accurate dating as scientific techniques improve in future years.

The Neolithic sequence

From 4000BC farmers from continental Europe started to move into these islands, although around 3500BC there were short periods when evidence for crop growing disappears, indicating a pastoral landscape with livestock grazing, and people living in the area may have moved around. At this time there appears to have been a sharp population decline possibly due to a period of climatic downturn, while after 2500BC there is again an upturn of occupancy. 3000BC shows the start of different types of monuments, including circular ones like Avebury, becoming a 'blueprint' for later circles.

The mid Neolithic period 3200-3000BC showed an upscale in monument building, for example in Denmark, 40,000 passage graves were constructed. Similar works appear in England, but not to that extent, and mainly around key monuments. Large ceremonial complexes appeared in Orkney at this time, including the Ness of Brodgar and the well-known passage grave of Maes Howe, suggesting wide contacts with Ireland and other areas giving better resources. The large passage grave of New Grange in Ireland has been fully excavated, and one skeleton examined there shows features suggesting incestuous parentage (this may have been the result of so-called divine kingship, similar to the ancient Egyptian hierarchy). Closer to home key monument complexes have not been so fully excavated: as we now know, later re-construction of Stonehenge incorporated 80 blocks of Welsh bluestone from a previous monument, possibly linked to the movement of people, as the original site in Wales seemed to have lost their community. Flagstones in Dorchester has a similar circle to Stonehenge, but not as extensive and it is associated with human burials (mostly inhumations).

Back at Avebury, the outer earthworks stand 5/6 m high, but a recent small excavation uncovered traces of an earlier bank with a capping of calcified grass: this primary bank was 2.5m high and 5/6m wide and dates from the middle Neolithic around 3000BC. Parts of the earthwork are more rounded, but overall they were laid out with symmetry and care. Some features found within the inner circles are also early, and evidenced by crop marks. The entrances visible today belong to Phase 2 of the monument but it is not known whether they originate from the mid- Neolithic or from a reworking around 2500BC, and other causeways may be buried within the bank – as found at Durrington Walls where two original entrances had been blocked off, so it is not unusual. The present entrances to the circle do not line up with significant sun movements such as the midsummer solstice. Other monuments of this

age show a more elongated circle or ovoid shape, for instance the plan of New Grange monument drops well into that of Avebury so has similar geometry. The early Neolithic enclosure at Windmill Hill nearby was constructed around 3600BC and is inter-visible with Avebury. Middle Neolithic activity there included reworking and enlargement of the outer enclosure between 3000 to 2000BC, on a similar axis to Avebury. Few radio-carbon dates have been obtained, as they left hardly anything on site to date! Stone circles such as Long Meg and Her Daughters at Penrith, Cumbria; Stonehenge, Wiltshire; and Waun Mawn in the Preseli Hills, West Wales were of very similar dates.

At Avebury, in the centre of one of the smaller circles, a 7ft high stone was erected. A recent excavation was carried out next to this stone due to it and other stones leaning, perhaps aiming to straighten them. One stone was buried 3m into the ground and the angle appears to be original, either by design or mishap. The inner circles were dated at mid-Neolithic, and within these circles are stone settings from an earlier building: in one circle a square setting of stones was found, known as the 'Z features'. Mid-Neolithic pottery was excavated in some of the stone holes, suggesting it was constructed during the primary phase of building, and possibly before the earthworks. It is thought this structure may have been semi-domestic but became derelict and was later enclosed as a sacred or taboo site. The original dwelling is similar to Neolithic buildings/longhouses found elsewhere and were very distinct in 3700BC which pre-dates the circle. It could perhaps have been the house of a prominent ancestor which became the start of the Avebury henge. These dwellings were often found in groups of two or three, so it is possible remains of more may be in the area.

Some stone circles were later enclosed within earthworks such as ditches or mounds. For example, Silbury Hill built in 3400 BC started as a small, very low mound surrounded by boulders, then was gradually enlarged. The earthworks were about covering, enclosing or wrapping these sacred sites.

Avebury was built on a low ridge against the Winterbourne stream and there could have been a causeway or crossing of the stream at that point. There was a settlement in this area near the stream, but very little evidence of Neolithic occupation on the western side of the ridge. As mentioned, Avebury was not built all at once, it emerged through two or three phases, probably in response to increasing population and to encourage the bringing together of people for social, spiritual or ancestral reasons. Within the larger landscape around 3000BC, other significant locations which may be connected are

Windmill Hill, West Kennet Long barrow (starting with deposits of flints, human and animal bones) and Mill Barrow to the north (an unusual mid-Neolithic tomb). To the south of Avebury was an area of mid-Neolithic settlement, possibly where the people who created the first earth and stonework were living. Lots of the flint artefacts excavated in the area had originally come from other places such as the Thames Valley, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. Work at Avebury will continue, and it is hoped to uncover more stories from the past.

Questions:

Investigation of the environmental evidence in the 1960s and 1990s concluded that in the early Neolithic period the area was not covered by blanket woodland, but a more mosaic-like and open landscape. By the mid-Neolithic there was more woodland regeneration especially near the headwaters of the Kennet. By late Neolithic/early Bronze Age, the landscape was generally open and grazed grassland.

Soil surveys show that there was not much alluvium in the area which would have been apparent if there was extensive wash-off of soil into the river, thereby depleting the use for farming. There is a rise and fall of population in the area however, which could be due to climate changes.

Being in a chalk landscape, the earthworks would have been very visible when first constructed, but thereafter they would not have been touched or maintained unless they were being re-engineered.

Report from Mandy Kesby