

HISTORY NOW

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New finds could reveal 'the origins of Stonehenge'

A wealth of objects unearthed near the Wiltshire monument has led experts to develop a new theory about why it came to be a vital religious site.

Matt Elton reports

Monumental discovery?
Experts working near Stonehenge may have found evidence pointing to the ways in which the area was used at the dawn of the Neolithic era

It's one of the most famous prehistoric landmarks in the world, but much about Stonehenge remains a mystery. Yet experts believe that a major collection of artefacts may provide fresh clues about how the landscape was used in the years before the monument's construction – and, as a result, why it was regarded as so important.

The finds, made at two sites over the past five years, date from the Mesolithic period, usually considered to have spanned from 8000 to 4500 BC. Experts have uncovered 35,000 flint artefacts and 2,500 pieces of animal bone in one area of just 23 square metres. The work is important because there has previously been scant evidence of Mesolithic occupation near Stonehenge, the famous Neolithic monument that may date in parts to as early as 3000 BC.

"Finding Mesolithic material anywhere is as rare as hen's teeth; finding so much so close to Stonehenge is even more special," says University of Buckingham archaeologist and project leader David Jacques. "Mesolithic use of this area continued longer than anywhere else in Europe, which raises all kinds of questions – not least whether it could represent the genesis of the area's later, Neolithic ritual landscape. Could it be, in other words, that these finds tell the 'back story' for why Stonehenge is where it is?"

The artefacts discovered at the first site, in Blick Mead, include a slate arrowhead. It's a particularly interesting find because slate is known to not be naturally present in the area. And that's not all: although experts believe that the arrowhead comes from the west, probably Wales, its style is particular to





Cattle country A fragment of bone from an auroch, a large ox-like animal that inhabited the Stonehenge landscape in the Mesolithic era. Its presence may account for the area's extensive deforestation

what is now Hampshire and Sussex. This may seem confusing, but Jacques thinks that it indicates one of the site's possible uses. "The artefact is almost a 'snapshot' of the exchange of ideas between people from different places: a moment when east met west," he says. "Along with other evidence, we think it points to people coming to the site from far away to meet for hunting, feasting and rituals between the ninth and late fifth millennium BC."

Examination of bones by experts from Durham University may offer clues to another of the site's uses, meanwhile. More than half are from a species of giant wild cow known as aurochs. Their huge size meant both that whole communities would have needed to work together to hunt them, and that the resulting meat would have fed hundreds of people.

"The evidence that aurochs were local to the Stonehenge area is interesting, because many people have wondered why it was so deforested in the Mesolithic and later periods," says Jacques. "Aurochs are nature's vacuum cleaners, so we now have a good clue why! We're therefore wondering if the area had been associ-

"This will be a paradigm shift for our understanding of the establishment of the Stonehenge landscape"

ated with aurochs and a sacred hunting ground for a very long time before the Neolithic monuments went up around it."

As well as being a sacred site, the dig also indicates the presence of stakeholes, postholes and the remains of a hearth in an area dated to between 4336 and 4246 BC. If these are the surviving features of a house, as is thought, it would be the oldest yet found near Stonehenge. "This structure is a sign that people did not just come to the area from elsewhere, but that they also stayed for at least part of the year," says Jacques. "It is just these sort of conditions that gave rise to the 'Neolithic revolution' that saw people moving from a hunter-gatherer culture to a domestic one. We may have found a site that dates right to the point that these periods overlap – it doesn't get more exciting!"

In a separate development, a posthole found in 2003 in nearby Amesbury Down has been newly dated as Mesolithic by a team from Wessex Archaeology. "Our posthole tends to get forgotten as it sits a long way outside the World Heritage Site," says the project's Alistair Barclay. "However, it's possible it may even be slightly earlier than those at Stonehenge."

Both projects are ongoing, and Jacques is optimistic about their future. "We think we are only at the tip of the iceberg, and that this will be a paradigm shift for our understanding of the establishment of the Stonehenge landscape," he says.

Both sites will feature in BBC Two's *Horizon*, set to air later this summer

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED THIS MONTH

Ancient teeth may show signs of air pollution

Plaque found on 400,000-year-old teeth discovered in a cave in Israel may feature evidence of air pollutants, experts believe. The human teeth, unearthed in Qesem Cave, bear traces of charcoal that archaeologists from Tel Aviv University think may have originated from smoke inhaled from cooking fires. Fibres present on the remains, meanwhile, may be scraps of material used for cleaning.

Iron Age diners may have been fussy eaters

Being picky about food isn't a trait that we would normally associate with prehistoric people – yet pig remains found in the Vale of Glamorgan in Wales may show evidence of selective eating. Most of the bones, which date across several centuries, are from the pigs' right forequarters. Experts suggest that the find points to a feasting custom in which people came together to express solidarity with their forebears.

Experts have recreated a Roman death device

A machine that would have been used to winch wild animals into the Colosseum in Rome has been recreated at the site. The 23-foot-high lift features a cage that would have carried the creatures, including lions, bears and leopards, into the arena from a network of passage-ways underneath. The animals would then have emerged through trap doors to fight to the death against gladiators and other hunters.

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The Colosseum's lift, which would have hauled animals to a gory fate