
Opening Extract from...

Foundation

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THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND

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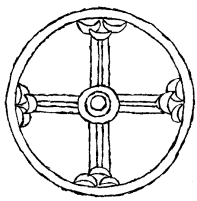
Hymns of stone



When the first sarsen stone was raised in the circle of Stonehenge, the land we call England was already very ancient. Close to the village of Happisburgh, in Norfolk, seventy-eight flint artefacts have recently been found; they were scattered approximately 900,000 years ago. So the long story begins.

At least nine distinct and separate waves of peoples arrived from southern Europe, taking advantage of warm interglacial periods that endured for many thousands of years; they are races without a history, leaving only stones or bones as the evidence of their advance and retreat. Against the wall of a cave of the Gower Peninsula has been found the body of a man laid down 29,000 years ago. His bones were stained with a light patina of red, suggesting either that they were sprinkled with red ochre or that his burial garments were deeply dyed. He also wore shoes. Around him were various items of funereal tribute, including bracelets of ivory and perforated shells. His head had been removed, but his body had been placed in alignment with the skull of a mammoth.

He was young, perhaps no more than twenty-one, but in that far-off time all men and women were young. He was clearly some kind of clan leader or tribal chieftain. At the beginning of the human world, a social hierarchy already existed with marks of rank and status. The cave in which he was interred was visited by

many generations, but we do not know what secrets it contained. The people whom he represented passed from the face of the earth.

Only the last of the arrivals to England survived. These people came some 15,000 years ago and settled in places as diverse as the areas now known as Nottinghamshire, Norfolk and Devon. In a Nottinghamshire cave the figures of animals and birds were carved 13,000 years ago into the soft limestone ceiling; the stag and the bear, the deer and the bison, are among them.

Generations passed away, with little or no evidence of change. They persisted. They endured. We do not know what language they spoke. Of how or what they worshipped, we have no idea. But they were not mute; their intellectual capacity was as great, or as small, as our own. They laughed, and wept, and prayed. Who were they? They were the forebears of the English, the direct ancestors of many of those still living in this nation. There is an authentic and powerful genetic pattern linking the living with the long dead. In 1995 two palaeontologists discovered that the material from a male body, found in the caves of Cheddar Gorge and interred 9,000 years ago, was a close match with that of residents still living in the immediate area. They all shared a common ancestor in the maternal line. So there is a continuity. These ancient people survive. The English were not originally 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Celtic'; they were a prehistoric island people.

The study of prehistory must also be the study of geography. When the settlers arrived in England, 15,000 years ago, the North Sea was a great plain of lakes and woodland. It now lies submerged, rich in the unseen evidence of the past. Yet we can in part rescue that which has been lost. Oak woods, marshes covered by reeds, and open grasslands covered the land. It was a warm and humid world. Red deer and voles inhabited the landscape; but they shared it with elephants and macaque monkeys. Among them wandered groups of humans, twenty-five or more in each group, pursuing their prey. They fired upon the animals with flint arrowheads, and used carved reindeer antlers as axes; they carried wooden spears. We do not know how they were organized but the discovery of 'butchery sites', where tools were manufactured and food prepared away from the main settlements, suggests a measure of social control.

We can still see the people walking towards us. On the sand at Formby Point, on the north-west coast of England, there are human footprints continuing for 32 feet (9.75 metres). The prints of many children are among them. The men were approximately 5 feet and 5 inches in height (1.55 metres), the women some 8 inches shorter (20 centimetres). They were looking for shrimps and razor shells. Footprints are found in other parts of England. Some appear on the foreshore of the Severn estuary; they fade away at the point where, 7,000 years before, the dry land became swamp. Now, on the flooding of the tide, they are gone.

These are the prints of what have been called Mesolithic people. The term, like its counterparts Palaeolithic and Neolithic, is loose but convenient. These people cleared the woods and forests by burning, in order to make way for settlements or to render the hunt for game more effective. Pine was also burned to make way for hazel, whose autumnal nuts were a popular source of food; they knew how to manage their resources. The early English have been called 'hunter-gatherers', with dogs employed for hunting, but their life was not that of undisciplined nomadic wandering; their activities took place within well-defined boundaries. They ranged through group territories that adjoined one another. They liked the areas where land and water meet.

Some 11,000 years ago a great lake covered what is now the Vale of Pickering in Yorkshire. On the bank of this lake was built a platform of birch wood. It might have been used to expedite fishing, but it is more likely to have been a site of ritual ceremonial; the people wore amber beads, and left behind the bones of pig and red deer, crane and duck. A round house has also been discovered, 11.5 feet in diameter (3.5 metres), that has been dated to approximately 9000 BC; it was constructed of eighteen upright wooden posts, with a thick layer of moss and reeds to furnish a sleeping area.

Its inhabitants used barbed antler points, flint knives and scrapers; they started fires by means of iron pyrite. The house itself seems to have possessed a hearth. They used canoes to travel over the lake; one paddle has been found, but no craft is now visible. It has disintegrated through time. But there are survivals. At this site, known as Star Carr, were discovered twenty-one fragments of deer

skull, some of them still with antlers. Were they a form of disguise for hunting? More likely, they were part of a shamanistic covering to enter the spirit of the deer. It might have been an early form of morris dancing, except that the numinous has now become simply quaint.

The Mesolithic English lived in settlements such as that found at Thatcham in Berkshire; the modern town itself is in fact the latest version of human community on the same site. Some atavistic impulse keeps habitations in the same place. 10,000 years ago the people lived on the shore of a lake. Burnt bones, burnt hazelnuts and patches of charcoal used for fires, were found; here, in other words, was all the panoply of daily domestic life. Cleared spaces represented the floors of small huts. The first English house was made of flexible saplings, bent over and covered with hides. It measured approximately 20 feet by 16 feet (6 metres by 4.8 metres).

Hundreds of other such settlements existed, many of them in coastal regions that now lie upon the seabed. The coasts were once between 70 and 100 feet (between 21 and 30 metres) higher than their present level and, as the seas rose, so the settlements were lost in the deluge. We may never know very much more about the Mesolithic English because their remains are beneath the waves. One submerged village came to light when some divers peered into a burrow made by a wandering lobster off the Isle of Wight; the crustacean was flinging out pieces of worked flint. A settlement of craftsmen and manufacturers, as well as hunters and fishermen, was then revealed. A wooden pole, with a flint knife embedded in it, was rescued from the waters. A canoe was found, carved from a log. The remains of structures like houses could clearly be seen. They were workers in wood as well as in stone. This is part of the lost English world under water.

The water rose so much that, after the melting of the ice sheets of the glacial era, it encircled what had become the archipelago of England, Scotland and Wales. 8,000 years ago, the marshes and forests of the plain lying between England and continental Europe were obliterated by the southern North Sea. It may not have come as a tidal wave, although earthquakes can precipitate great masses of water. It is more likely to have happened gradually, over 2,000 years, as the land slowly became swamp and then lake. In earlier

ages of the earth, two catastrophic floods had already created the Channel between England and France. With the influx of new waters the archipelago (we may call it an island for the sake of lucidity) was formed; 60 per cent of the land surface became what is now the land of England.

The land then becomes the object of topographical enquiry. Where, for example, is the exact centre of England? It is marked by a stone cross at the village of Meriden in Warwickshire; the consonance of Meriden with meridian or middle of the day is striking, and that may indeed have been reason enough for a cross to be raised there. In fact the true centre of the country is to be found on Lindley Hall Farm in Leicestershire. The property was recently owned by a couple with the surname of Farmer.

The effects of this novel insularity eventually became evident in the tools which were fashioned in England. They became smaller than those shaped on the continent, and certain types of microlith were in fact unique to this country. Yet the island was no less inviting to the travellers who came across the waters in boats manufactured of wood or of osier covered with stitched skins. They came from north-western Europe, proving that the Anglo-Saxon and Viking 'invasions' were the continuations of an ancient process.

They also came from the Atlantic coasts of Spain and south-western France, but that migration was not a recent phenomenon. The Atlantic travellers had been colonizing the south-western parts of England throughout the Mesolithic period, so that by the time of the formation of the island a flourishing and distinctive civilization existed in the western parts of the country. The travellers from Spain also settled in Ireland; hence the relationship between 'Iberia' and 'Hibernia'. The Iron Age tribe of the Silures, established in South Wales, always believed that their ancestors had come from Spain in some distant past; Tacitus noted that these tribal people had dark complexions and curly hair. These are the people known later as 'Celts'.

So differences between the English regions already existed 8,000 years ago. The flint tools of England, for example, have been divided into five separate and distinct categories. The artefacts of the south-west had a different appearance to those of the south-east, encouraging trade between the two areas. Individual cultures

were being created that reinforced geographical and geological identities. There is bound to be a difference, in any case, between those cultures established upon chalk and limestone and those built upon granite.

A division is to be observed within England, established upon two broad zones. The Lowland Zone – comprising the midlands, the Home Counties, East Anglia, Humberside and the south central plain – is built upon soft limestone, chalk and sandstone. This is a place of low hills, plains and river valleys. It is a place of centralized power and settlement. It is soft, and various, and pliable. The Highland Zone in the north and west – comprising the Pennines, Cumbria, North Yorkshire, the Peak district of Derbyshire, Devon and Cornwall – largely consists of granite, slate and ancient hard limestone. This is a place of mountains, high hills and moors. It is a region of scattered groups or families, independent one from another. It is hard, and gritty, and crystalline. These two regions do not face each other; they face outwards, towards the seas from where their inhabitants came. We can see the changes upon the ground itself. In Wessex the border of the 'finds' from one settlement stops at the point where the chalk meets the Kimmeridge clays. These people would move no further west. So regional differences began to spread.

Differences, in accent and in dialect, may already have existed. There was an original language in the south-east of which traces still survive in contemporary speech – the words 'London', 'Thames' and 'Kent' have no known Germanic or Celtic root. It is possible that the people of East Anglia and the south-east began to speak a language that developed into Germanic, and that the people of the south-west spoke a language that would become Celtic. The Germanic tongue became Middle English before flourishing as standard English; Celtic speech diverged into Welsh, Cornish and Gaelic. It is pertinent that in Wales and Cornwall Celtic inscriptions can be found in stone, carved during the Roman age, while in southern England there are none. Tacitus reports that, at the time of the Roman colonization, the south-eastern English spoke a language not unlike that of the Baltic tribes. But there can be no certainties in the matter. All lies in mist and twilight.

When the mist rises, we see extraordinary things. Beneath a

burial mound in Wiltshire, near Avebury, was discovered what had once been a surface layer of soil dating from 3500 BC; it had been preserved by the construction of the barrow. The significance of this ancient ground was confirmed by the discovery of tiny grooves running at right angles, one to another, so that they form a criss-cross pattern. These grooves were cut by a plough. It was a forked tree branch, strengthened by a stone tip, pulled by an ox. It is the first evidence of a field in England. It represents the beginning of farming. We have entered what has become known as Neolithic England. This small patch of land was cleared by the destruction of dense woodland; it was cultivated with the plough; it then became pasture for sheep and cattle; a boundary fence or hedge was erected; the barrow was then built some 1,500 years later. In this sequence of events we see the slow changes of prehistory.

The transition from hunting to farming was itself a very gradual one; there was no agricultural revolution in any meaningful sense, just the increments of days and years and centuries of habitual practice. Custom was the keystone of life. In this long period flint tools were replaced by sickles and polished axes; pottery was introduced to England; new forms of communal ritual emerged. But in the space of an individual generation, which we may estimate between twenty and thirty years, it must have seemed that nothing had changed. When we use terms like 'Mesolithic' and 'Neolithic', we should remember the underlying deep continuity that represents the nature of England itself.

The slow expansion of farming can be dated from 4000 BC. The woods and forests of the country were cleared, at first sporadically but then extensively; the moors of northern and south-western England, and the heaths of East Anglia, were in part created by human activity. On this newly open ground wheat and barley crops were harvested. Domesticated pigs and cattle were kept, as well as sheep and goats. But sheep were not originally English. All of these animals were brought over in ships, not being native to the island, emphasizing the extent to which seafaring visitors contributed to the now familiar landscape.

This was a time of rising temperature, and in the glowing sun the people expanded; during the entire Neolithic period, from approximately 4700 BC to 2000 BC, the population trebled and has

been estimated at 300,000. The pressure of ever-increasing numbers helped to accelerate the intensity of cultivation, and by 3000 BC the available countryside was marked out in small rectangular fields. Where there are fields there will be fences and ditches; there will be stone walls. Fences have been found beneath prehistoric burial mounds, testifying to their ancientness.

The presence of the barrows, where the dead reside upon the landscape, is a further sign of a settled society with its own forms of ritual and worship. Evidence can be found for the construction of houses and of scattered farmsteads with settlement pits, for enclosures where cattle might be herded or fairs and meetings held. One such enclosure, built in Cornwall before 3000 BC, was guarded by a great stone wall; the remains of houses were found here, sufficient accommodation for approximately 200 people. So the beginning of the English village, or of the English town, is to be found in the Neolithic period.

Roads and trackways were built from settlement to settlement. The Icknield Way took the prehistoric traveller from Buckinghamshire to Norfolk. Lanes led from farmstead to farmstead. The Pilgrims Way linked the great religious centres of Canterbury and Winchester. Ermine Street is now known, in part, as the Old North Road. The Jurassic Way goes from Oxfordshire to Lincolnshire. Watling Street ran between Canterbury and St Albans, passing through what may have been prehistoric London. Long causeways were built across the soft fens of Somerset, from timber that was felled in approximately 3800 BC; the varieties of wood used in their construction, from ash and lime to hazel and holly, suggest that they were especially grown for the purpose. The specific properties of the wood, utilized by the Neolithic English, are not known to us. Their technology is lost.

Many of the roads loosely known as 'Roman roads' are much more ancient; the Romans simply made use of the prehistoric paths. Modern roads have been built along the routes of these ancient lines, so that we still move in the footsteps of our ancestors. They created a network of communication that extended throughout England. This was a populous and busy civilization, much more sophisticated than was once generally thought. Along these

routes were transported axe-blades for the use of farmers or house-builders, pottery of all kinds, and leather goods. Flint was mined in underground galleries entered by hundreds of shafts reaching a depth of 50 feet (15.2 metres); then it was sent over the country.

Yet the great division was steadily growing more pronounced. On the Atlantic side rose up megalithic portal tombs and passage tombs, unknown in East Anglia, the midlands and the south-east. These great stone hymns to the dead, erected for 600 years from 3800 BC, are the emanations of a distinctive culture that originally came from south-western Europe. The same tombs are found in Portugal and Brittany, Scotland and the Orkneys, suggesting that there was in essence a shared European religion inscribed in the siting of stone.

Causewayed enclosures of the same period are to be found predominantly in southern and eastern Britain; these are oval or circular spaces surrounded by a ditch cut into segments. They were used for the purposes of ritual, but the system of belief and practice was different from that of the south-west. Unlike the massive gateways of death revealed in the excavation of portal tombs, the open spaces suggest a more egalitarian or at least communal faith.

From the same epoch emerge the long parallel lines of ditches that have become known as cursus monuments; they cross what must have been cleared countryside, and can extend as far as 6 miles (9.6 kilometres). They are part of a ritual landscape of which the significance is now lost. Yet we know well enough that in this age of England the ground was holy; the stones, and the earth, were sacred. The English of the early Neolithic age had some direct communion with the terrain, and with the creatures that lived upon it, beyond the reach of the modern imagination.

All roads lead to Stonehenge, part of the greatest of all sacred sites. It began with a circle of fifty-six timbers, erected in approximately 2800 BC and placed in a ritual landscape that had already been in existence for 500 years. A cursus, 1½ miles long (2.4 kilometres), runs just to the north. Also found were pieces of rock crystal that must have been carried from Alpine regions. Salisbury Plain was then the spiritual centre of the island. From here radiate the chalk and limestone ranges of lowland Britain. A network of

ridgeways and trading routes converged upon it. It was the largest area of habitable land. It was accessible by rivers. It was a great cauldron of human energy and purpose.

At some point, around 2200 BC, the first stone circle was being formed. The change from wood to stone has been related to a profound cultural movement, resulting in the building of monumental enclosures elsewhere, in the decline of ancestor worship and in bouts of warfare between opposing groups. In Peterborough a male and a female, with two children, were found within the same grave; the male was killed by an arrow in the back. In Dorset several bodies were found lying in a ditch, with a rampart fallen upon them; one of them had been killed by an arrow.

The building of Stonehenge was the largest and most protracted programme of public works in the history of England. A series of bluestones was first erected in 2200 BC; these stones were largely igneous in origin and were considered to have magical healing properties. The bluestones were then dismantled after a life of approximately 100 years and replaced by thirty sarsen stones; they formed a circle around five pairs of trilithons arranged in horseshoe pattern. At approximately the same time a wooden henge, or circular monument, of twenty-four obelisks was erected less than half a mile (0.8 kilometres) from its stone companion; it may have been a burial centre or the site of some other ritual activity.

Another henge and stone circle, known as Bluestonehenge, was erected a mile (1.6 kilometres) to the south-east along the bank of the Avon. A large village was also constructed, less than 2 miles away (3.2 kilometres), variously interpreted as a lodging for pilgrims, a ritual centre, a place of healing, or a home for those who erected the sarsen stones. Whatever the explanation, Salisbury Plain was the site of communal and spiritual settlement on a very large scale. It was once conceived to be a largely empty field, but now we find it to have been a field full of folk.

From this period was found the body of a man variously called 'the Amesbury archer' and 'the king of Stonehenge'; his grave contained over 100 artefacts, including gold hair ornaments, copper knives, pots and boars' tusks. Over his body, crouched in a foetal position, were scattered flint arrowheads. This was the last resting

place of a tribal chieftain. Oxygen isotope analysis revealed that he had been brought up in the colder regions of northern Europe. What was a foreign king doing on Salisbury Plain? Was he on pilgrimage? There is evidence of an abscess and a painful bone infection. Had he crossed the sea to be healed? Or did he reign here as one of the tribal chieftains who, in an era without countries or nations, were not necessarily confined to one region?

In the final phase of building, approximately 1600 BC, the pits or holes for two circles of standing stones were hollowed out; but they were never filled. So the shape, and therefore possibly the nature, of Stonehenge has changed over a period of 1,200 years. It would be strange if it were not so. The same distance of time separates us from the Saxon age. It has been argued that the stones were a burial ground, a centre of pilgrimage and of ritual healing, a great observatory and a celestial clock, a place of public ceremonial and ritual. There is no reason why they could not have fulfilled all of these, as well as other, functions in the various eras of their existence. At the time of their erection these great stones seemed magnificent and immoveable in the earth; now, from a distance of 4,000 years, they dance in a pattern before us.

In all these eras, however, the stones are evidence of a controlling power that could organize vast numbers of people in a shared project. This was a hierarchical society with an elite, tribal or priestly, that could coerce or persuade many thousands of people into fulfilling its ritual will. The inhabitants of Salisbury Plain, to put it no broader, were under the guidance and protection of leaders who were rich in land and in cattle; the more we understand the material remains of this Neolithic culture, the more impressed we become by its range and authority. The construction of Silbury Hill, in the same region as Stonehenge, would have taken the labour of 1,000 men working every day for five years. The construction of Stonehenge itself would have entailed millions of hours of labour. Its bluestones were transported from the Preseli Hills in south-west Wales, some 200 miles distant. So great parts of England were already under organized administration long before the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons came; land, labour and material resources were governed by some form of central control.

It is suggestive that, in the course of the formation of Stonehenge,

communal burials were being replaced by individual burials. The 'king of Stonehenge' is just one example. In some graves the body of the chieftain is accompanied by weapons, and in others the corpse is surrounded by goods. These are the graves of leaders and high priests, often with their immediate families. England had become an aristocratic, rather than a tribal, society.

The contours of the Bronze Age, succeeding the Neolithic in the standard time-lines of prehistory, are still to be found everywhere. They have endured for almost 4,000 years, and can be seen in a certain light. In the hour before sunset, when the rays of the sun lie across the English fields, the old patterns of the earth rise up and the land seems to return to its origins. The banks and ditches of hundreds and hundreds of small rectangular fields can be discerned. The sweep and extent of these fields are truly extraordinary; they can only really be comprehended from the air and, seeing aerial photographs for the first time in 1929, the historian G. M. Trevelyan was moved to declare that 'the discovery of these old Celtic fields, from under the palimpsest of later agricultural systems, is the most romantic thing that has come to stir our historical imaginations since the first Cretan finds'.

A lost world was revealed. The uplands and downlands of southern Britain were laid out in fields, with hedges and stone walls stretching for mile after mile; drove-ways and waterholes can be seen among these rectangular ditched fields. It is a feat of organization to rival that of the building of Stonehenge, and bears all the marks of powerful central planning. It seems likely that many thousands of square miles of land were laid out in one significant single act or set of acts, an example of land planning that has never since been rivalled in English history. In the process the English landscape was created.