

The origins, meaning, purpose and function of the Megalithic structures in Europe

What was the meaning and the purpose of the Megalithic structures in Europe (standing stones, mounds, circles)? Can people of contemporary modern society still relate to these structures built thousands of years ago and feel what their builders might have felt? They continue to fascinate people, but why? Is it the myth and magic of the long forgotten past or is it the actual structure? Is there a quality to the objects and the way they are assembled and where they are placed in the countryside that somehow continue to captivate people all those years? These are the question I am going to explore and try to answer in this essay. There have been many theories and explanations written about the meaning and purpose of the Megalithic structures. The megaliths have captivated the imagination of people throughout the recorded modern history. The theories and explanations have been changing over the period of years depending on new research methods, technology but also religious beliefs and cultural aesthetics.

There are many megalithic structures across Europe (Spain, Portugal, France, Malta, Germany, and Denmark). In this essay I am going to take a closer look and investigate a couple of areas with the high concentration of megalithic monuments which I have visited and have got a first hand experience of the sites. The first area is situated on the Orkney Islands – Mainland where the Ring of Stennes, Ring of Brodgar, Maes Howe, and Skara Brae can be found. The second location is the Stonehenge area in Wiltshire, England which includes Avebury, Stonehenge, Silbury Hill and number of burial mounds. I am going to analyse these sites through looking at various different scientific disciplines (archaeology, anthropology, history, technology, astronomy) as well as looking at the myths and religious beliefs.

The word megalith comes from Greek word which means a great stone and it is used for any structure built from large stones dating between 5000bc to 500bc found in Europe. These structures include dolmens (a structure with two upright standing stones with 3rd stone on the top of it – can be extended into a chamber), menhirs (singular upright standing stones – possible a astronomical function as a marker), circles and alignments (formed from menhirs), earth works (chambers with mounds of earth on the top of them) and Sacred hills (manmade hills made out of earth or chalk). Building of these structures began several centuries after the introduction of farming. According to archaeological finds and evidence and thanks to the modern method of carbon dating¹ we can say that most megalithic structures were built in between 3000bc and 1500bc. The climate at the time of building of the megaliths was very different to the climate as we know it now. The scientists have traced the prehistoric weather patterns from study of plants, insect, snails and animals found in many sites of different periods.

¹ Radiocarbon dating – all organic matter contains carbon14 (radiocarbon) which decays gradually from the moment life ceases and after more then 60000 years it disappears. The stage of decay can be detested by chemical analysis of the proportion of the radiocarbon in the material and so the age is discovered

The prehistoric climate (period between 4000bc till 1400bc) in Northern and Western Europe was warm and dry, the seas smooth and calm and the skies clear. The fine weather allowed the Neolithic people to travel far greater distances, exchanging of ideas and trading. During the early period of this time the first stage of megalithic building began. The first megalithic structures that were built were the chambered mounds (Newgrange, Ireland), chambered and circled cairns (Scotland), long barrows (West Kennet long barrow in Wiltshire).



1) Illustration – Newgrange Passage Tomb, Co.Meath, Southern Ireland

In between the years 2900bc – 2800bc which marked a temporary wet period and when the weather cleared again new ideas of megalithic building emerged. It was around this time when the giant stones circles in Avebury, Stennes, the second phase of Stonehenge circle and the earth chamber Maes Howe were built. The building of giant megalithic structures then continued until 2000bc when the third phase of Stonehenge was completed (the great sarsen ring and the large trilithons) which was the large giant circle built. After 2000bc the building of megalithic structures has changed under the influence of the Beaker people² and was aimed at quantity rather than quality (size and monumentality). This may have also happened in order to provide for the spiritual needs of the increasing population. Around 900 small stone circles is dated form this period. Then around 1500bc the weather changed again and it became colder. This cool and wet weather had a profound effect on the building of megalithic structures. Thousand of years of celestial observations could not be continued as the skies became cloudy more often then not. Also the high and open country of the North (Scotland, Orkneys, and Shetlands, Ireland etc.) became very cold and miserable place to live in. The farmers moved to the lower southern counties and the circles and alignments became abandoned. No more stone circles have been built after 1500bc in Northern Europe. However the building in warmer southern Europe continued (Corsica, Sardinia, Shardana, and Balearics) continued until the Roman Conquest in 23bc. In order to understand the meaning and function of the megaliths, firstly we need to have some kind of understanding of the people who built them. So who were the people in prehistory who built these structures that continue to awe us? In order to understand that we need to have a look beyond their time into to the time of Upper Paleolithic = the Ice Age (38000bc – 8000bc).

² Beaker people – named after the characteristic pottery they produced. They arrived to Britain after 2500bc from central Europe or Spain and had a major influence on the native people

The archaeological evidence would lead us believe that these people were primitives roaming around the land aimlessly. To understand it better we need to have a look at their lifestyle from anthropologic point of view. The people of the Ice Age lived in very harsh conditions in which most of us so called modern civilised people would not survive. So how did they do it? Our ancestors were intelligent and intuitive people. Around 35000bc they discovered how to control fire and how to make it anywhere they wanted. They hunted animals for their food and clothes and gathered vegetables, nuts and fruit and herbs. They had a profound intuitive knowledge of nature and its rhythms without which they would not survive. They had healthy diets which lead to longer lives. They were highly organised (when hunting), they travelled and exchange ideas and they were creative (beads, Venuses, cave painting). Their beliefs and religion were based around the animal world as this was one of the main sources of their survival. The sun, moon, stars, rainbow and lightening and other natural elements were also important deities³. The people of the Ice Age were not only surviving the harsh conditions they lived in, they were thriving and prospering in them⁴! If they wanted to built the megaliths they were intelligent and knowledgeable enough to do so but due to the cold weather which forced them to roam for food(the weather was too cold to sustain and rely on the crops) and the beliefs that reflected their lifestyle(the animal deities) they had no need to built them.



2) Illustration – *Natural elements such as rainbow and sun were important deities for both the Ice Age as well as the Neolithic people*

Around 8000bc however when the weather got warmer people started to settle down and gradually abandon the old way of hunting and gathering, in favour of farming and working on the land. This has not only brought changes in their diet and the way of life but also in spiritual beliefs. They were bound to the land and their lives depended on the crops produced from the land. This has led to their dependency on the seasons and the growing cycle. It could have been the trigger for the onset of megalithic building. As people were living in the houses now, they perhaps had a need to have a special place for worship as well. The shamans who cared for the spiritual needs people and created the magical cave animal paintings in the Ice Age had transformed to the sages or priests who tended to sacred places and organised the rituals for the people in the Stone Age.

³ According to the myths of the surviving aboriginal people of the 20th century in Africa, America and Australia whose lifestyle mirrors the hunter- gatherer tradition of the ice age man

⁴ More information and evidence in The secrets of the Ice Age, Richard Rudgley(video)



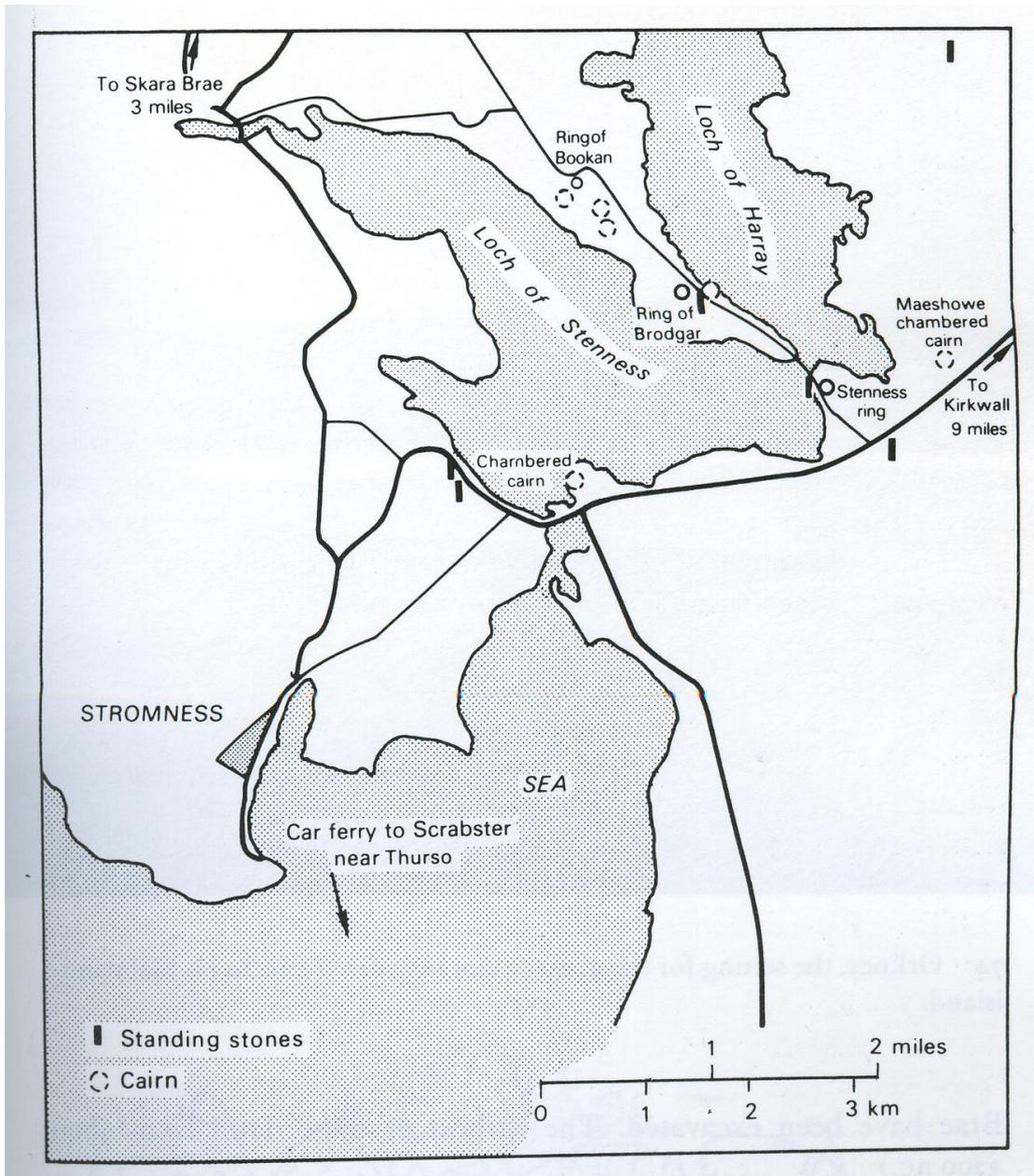
3) Illustration – Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae, Orkney Islands (Mainland), Scotland

Skara Brae, Bay of Skail, Orkney – Mainland, a Neolithic settlement inhabited in between 3100bc – 2450bc, is thought to be a place where a group of the ‘special people’ once lived. The archaeological excavation revealed that the diet of the people who lived there was extremely good and luxurious for that time. The meat they ate was slaughtered at a young age and there was no evidence of farming around the area. The remains of the skeletons revealed that the inhabitants were light muscled people who did no manual labour. Also there were found number of no purposeful objects which are thought to be of some kind of ritual or magical importance.



4) Illustration – magical objects found in Skara Brae, Orkney Islands(Mainland), Scotland

Skara Brae also lies in an area with the highest concentration of Neolithic monuments in Europe, which once must have been a sacred countryside for the people who lived there. This could explain the ‘special’ settlement in Skara Brae as a home for the wise men and women who tended to the nearby sacred sites and where they performed their rituals and celebrated the seasonal fertility festivals.



5) Illustration – outline map of part of Orkney Mainland Island, showing the megalithic centre around Stennes

The area of Stennes Loch in Orkney is not only an area of the high concentration of the megalithic structures but also an area of an outstanding natural beauty. When one visits there it is hard to leave without the feeling of being blessed and purified. There arises a question how and why did the megaliths builders chose the sites for their sacred temples? Alistair Service and Jean Bradbery who visited many megalithic sites all over Europe noted⁵ that the countryside around the sites usually falls into a certain pattern: 'The classic megalithic site is on a level platform part-way down a spur which runs from higher ground behind. From the site itself, a bowl or valley in the land will be noticeable below, while horizon will be surrounded by ridges of hills which wrap around the spur. These hills will be seen to run along about three quarters of the skyline, but the rest of it will be more open.' Also very often some kind of water source will be nearby whether it is the sea, lake, loch, river or a stream. Sites such as Stonehenge (England), Callanish (Scotland – Isle of Lewis), Rings of Stennes and Brodgar (Scotland –Orkney mainland) and many other site of great importance across UK and Europe are built on this principle.



6) Illustration – Ring of Stennes, Orkney Islands – Mainland, Scotland

This systematic placement of the site suggests that their builders had special reasons why they built them and where they did it. For explanation we could refer to the Ancient Chinese geomantic science which the Chinese called the Wind and Water (Feng Shui in Chinese). The Chinese used the geomancy to find the best sites for their tombs, temples and houses. According to this science, which is based on a subtle conception of the order of nature, there are currents (perhaps magnetic) within the earth surface.

⁵ Alistair service and Jean Bradbery are authors of the book *The Standing Stones of Europe – A Guide to the Great Megalithic Monuments*, J M Dent Ltd, London, UK, 1993, page 23

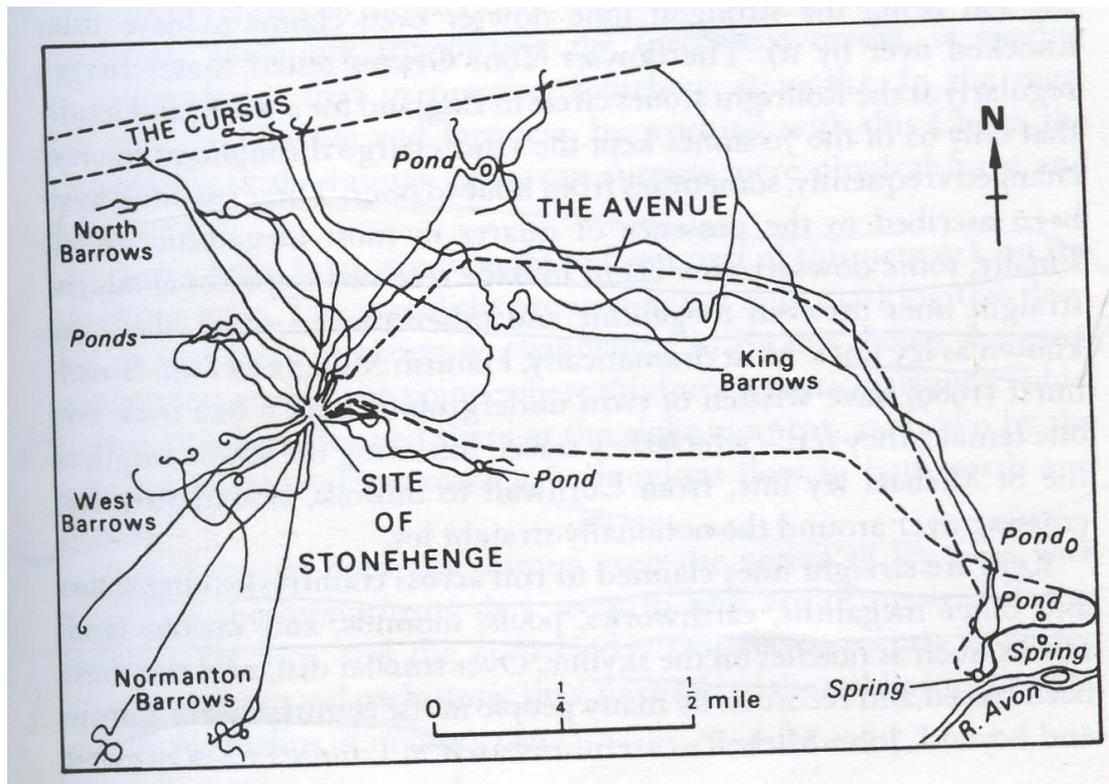
Like electricity these currents have positive and negative, male and female elements, which flow through the landscape and in the angle close to where they cross there may be the luck bringing site and a tranquil harmony of all the heavenly and terrestrial elements, including the direction of all the water courses⁶. According to Feng Shui the happy site is almost always sheltered by the hills, slightly elevated within them, and connected to them by land through which the geodic currents flow. In the angle formed by the junction of such hills, the geomancer looked for a little hollow or little mound, from which the chains of the hills around can be seen to form a complete horseshoe with one side open, and with streams that run away gently rather than steeply. This description very much resembles the description of the 'usual placement' of the megalithic sites. It is therefore possible that the Neolithic people who had an intimate relationship with the land they lived in, and who were intuitive and knowledgeable about the nature's rhythms knew how to find these special sites.

The ancient technique of 'dowsing' which survived till this day could have also been used by the Neolithic people to identify the sites. This practise is often dismissed as it hasn't got any scientific backing, it has nevertheless persisted all these years as it's been proven that it works. Dowsing is a technique which uses a couple of rods formed into an L shape. These rods are made out of copper although traditionally it was wood usually forked Hazel branches (Alder, Apple and Beech were also used). Dowsing is reported to date back approximately 7000 years but the origins are unknown. It is used to identify underground springs, minerals and energy fields. Many dowsers have picked up a powerful reaction from the ground around the megaliths. Some of these were like the movements of the instrument felt over an underground spring, yet no spring was there when the excavation was done. Similarly, path across the fields which reacted like the subterranean streams could be traced. A dowser called Guy Underwood⁷ noted three sorts of invisible tracks which dowsers are able to detect: water –lines (track following an actual underground stream), track – lines (which were weaker and often followed path) and aquastats (they run in pairs and override track – lines). He discovered that megalithic sites, especially stone circles are the meeting place of all these types of lines.

Many other dowsers, following the research of Underwood recorded an electro magnetic charge in standing stones. Some dowsers also claim they received impulses along the straight lines between megalithic and other ancient site which are known as Ley lines. Ley lines are straight lines running across country, linking stones and other megaliths, earthworks, pools, mounds, lakes sacred springs and hills. They are not seen as much as physical path (although some are the ancient tracks marked by prehistoric hill and valleys) but as paths of some sort of current of energy – an earth energy. This brings us back to the Chinese (and Japanese) science and philosophy of geomancy where this energy is called Chi. This energy is seen to flow not only through the planet, but also through all the living organisms.

⁶ E. J. Eitel, Feng Shui, Cambridge, 1973 - E. J. Eitel was an English missionary living in china in mid 19th century. He noted down all he could discover about the jus surviving ancient Chinese science Feng Shui. He researched books about the subject dated back to the 13th century but also noted that its origins were much older

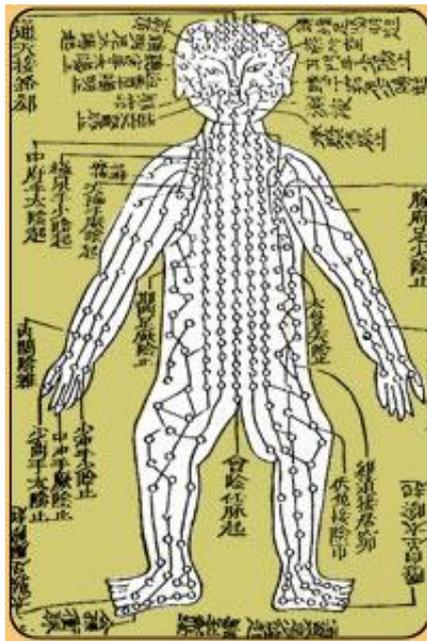
⁷ Guy Underwood, Patterns of the Past, London , 1969 – a dowser who worked the fields for many years his findings were published posthumously



7) Illustration – Patterns formed by primary dowsing lines under the ground at Stonehenge and its surroundings with typically spiralling formations at their ends, as recorded by Guy Underwood

Acupuncture a traditional Chinese medicine is based on the Chi in the human body. The energy – Chi runs through paths in the body along which are points called meridians. Needles are inserted into these points as ways of correcting the imbalances (energy blockages) in the flow to restore smooth running. The Ley lines are thought to be the equivalent of the body energy paths but on the planetary scales. The megaliths are seen not only as markers of this flow but also as an instrument to channel and directed. According to this theory the megaliths were built on these particular points so when the rituals were performed at the right by moment (sun and moon movements) it will promote harmonious flow in both earth and people.

With this theory arises a question. Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese medicine but did the Neolithic European people know about it? In the mid 1990's a body in the melting Alpine Iceberg has been found in the Italian Alps near the town called Bolzano. This amazingly preserved body has been proven to be of a man who died about 6000 ago (3000bc) which was around the time when the megalithic building started to sprung up all over Europe. When the body was analysed, amongst other facts about his lifestyle, they also found out that he was a middle-aged man suffering from rheumatism and arthritis. They also found a tattoo on his lower back and his foot. There have been many arguments what this tattoo might have meant. However when it was shown to an acupuncturist, he could immediately identify that in fact they seem to have been in the exactly the same place used by acupuncture for treating rheumatism and arthritis. This could be the proof that the Neolithic people were very much aware of acupuncture and its benefits and they could have applied the same principles in building their sacred places by using the powers of the Earth energy.



8) Illustration – Ancient Chinese Drawing of an acupuncture points (meridians) used for inserting needles to cure a variety of ailments by restoring balance in the energy flow



9) illustration – acupuncture needles inserted into an ear

Having explored the reasons and meaning behind the choice of location for the megalithic structures we can move on to try to identify the purpose these sites may have been used for. For a long time most megalithic structures were, due to the many human burials found in them, considered to be burial chambers, passage graves ect.

However in the late 1960's professor Alexander Thom⁸ has carried out an extensive study and research on the possibly use of the megalithic sites (mainly standing stones – menhirs, circles and alignments) as lunar and solar observatories. Through the extensive research he carried out using the modern principles of astronomy he came to a conclusion that the builders of the megaliths must have had profound knowledge of astronomy. By using the stones as markers for the movements of the sun and moon used in conjunction with the notches dug in distant hillside on the skyline (see the usual setting of the megaliths mentioned earlier) they could not only identify the exact movements of the sun and the moon but also predict the occurrence of the most dramatic regular natural phenomena - eclipses. The evidence of Professor Thom's general theory about the possible astronomical of the megalithic sites is so strong that is now considered and recognised as correct.

To accompany Thom's theory about the astronomical use of the megaliths there are other disciplines which can shed a light on better understanding of the megaliths such as mythology, comparative religion, art history and others. In the myths of many civilisations the moon (goddess, female, night) and the sun (god, male, day) are considered to be sacred deities.

⁸ Alexander Thom – Former Professor of Engineering at Oxford University, researched and investigated in great depth the possible use of megalithic structures as lunar and solar observatories.

If they were considered to be religious deities it would be of vital importance for the Neolithic people to know whether they are going to appear at the ritual or not. The observation of the sun would provide people with an exact calendar for the year's events: planting, annual wild crops, religious festivals. Also for people who moved on the sea lot (as the Neolithic people did) the knowledge of the moon movements would be important for the navigation on the sea as the moon affects the high and low tides.

There are different types of megalithic structures with different functions. Many have more than one purpose or function. Maes Howe(Orkney, Mainland) which was built 2800bc is thought to be used as a burial chamber but it could also serve as a some kind temple celebrating and remembering the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

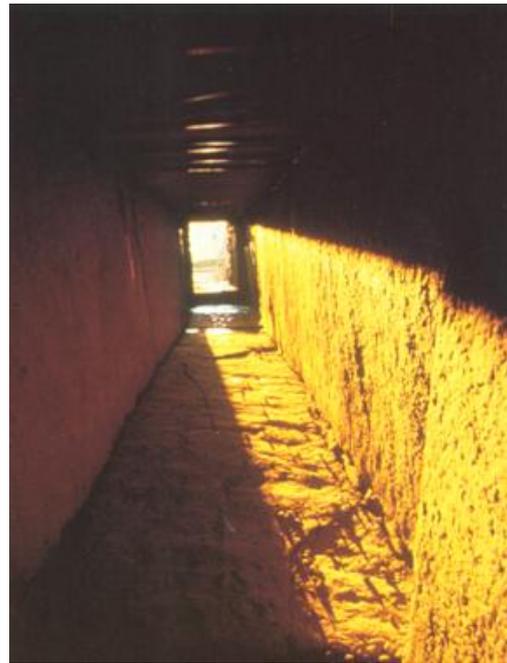


10) Illustration - Maes Howe mounded chamber (7.3 metre height inside), Orkney Islands(Mainland), Scotland

The entrance to the mounded chamber is pointed towards lone standing menhir (Barnhouse Stone) in south-west direction. Every year at winter solstice (21.December) the ray of sunshine pierces through the entrance to the mound and momentarily illuminates the chamber inside. The winter solstice is the point when the sun after the long winter starts to get stronger again. This could represent the belief at the rebirth of the dead and the celebration of the nature's never-ending cycle. Also the very set up of the mound with a long passage coming into an large open chamber which is covered by Earth and looks like hill from the outside could represent a womb as if to reinforce the notion : from the earth you come to the earth you return.



11) Illustration – Barnhouse stone towards whom the entrance of Maes Howe is pointed



12) Illustration – the ray of light coming through the entrance towards the inside of Maes Howe chamber at the winter solstice

Large monumental circles such as the Ring of Brodgar, Stonehenge and Avebury are also thought to have a dual function. This time it was probably for the astronomical use to predict and mark the movements of the sun and moon in order to identify important dates of the year. for the celebration, rites and rituals dedicated to the mother earth goddess. As the cultivation and fertility of the land was of vital importance for the Neolithic people.

The other purpose of the circles might have been for the purpose of private rituals performed by the wise men in order to invoke the earth spirit. Stonehenge was probably a place for such a ritual as its inner ring is quite secluded). The sites in Avebury and Ring of Brodgar were probably used for more public rites and celebrations as it is much more open.

The stones are up to 3m high. The ring is surrounded by a deep ditch (3m). Interestingly the size of the circle is exactly the same size as the two inner circles in Avebury. Prof. Thom's research shoed common unit of measurements – the megalithic yard (2.72ft in length) according to which most megalithic structures are built.



13) Illustration – Stonehenge – Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England
Monumental site which was built in 3 stages over 1500 years. At summer solstice sunrise the sun penetrates through the narrow space in between the largest trilithons and touches one of the stones in the middle of the circles



14) Illustration – an aerial view of the remains of the Avebury circle, Wiltshire, England, which is the largest and most complex megalithic structure in Europe.

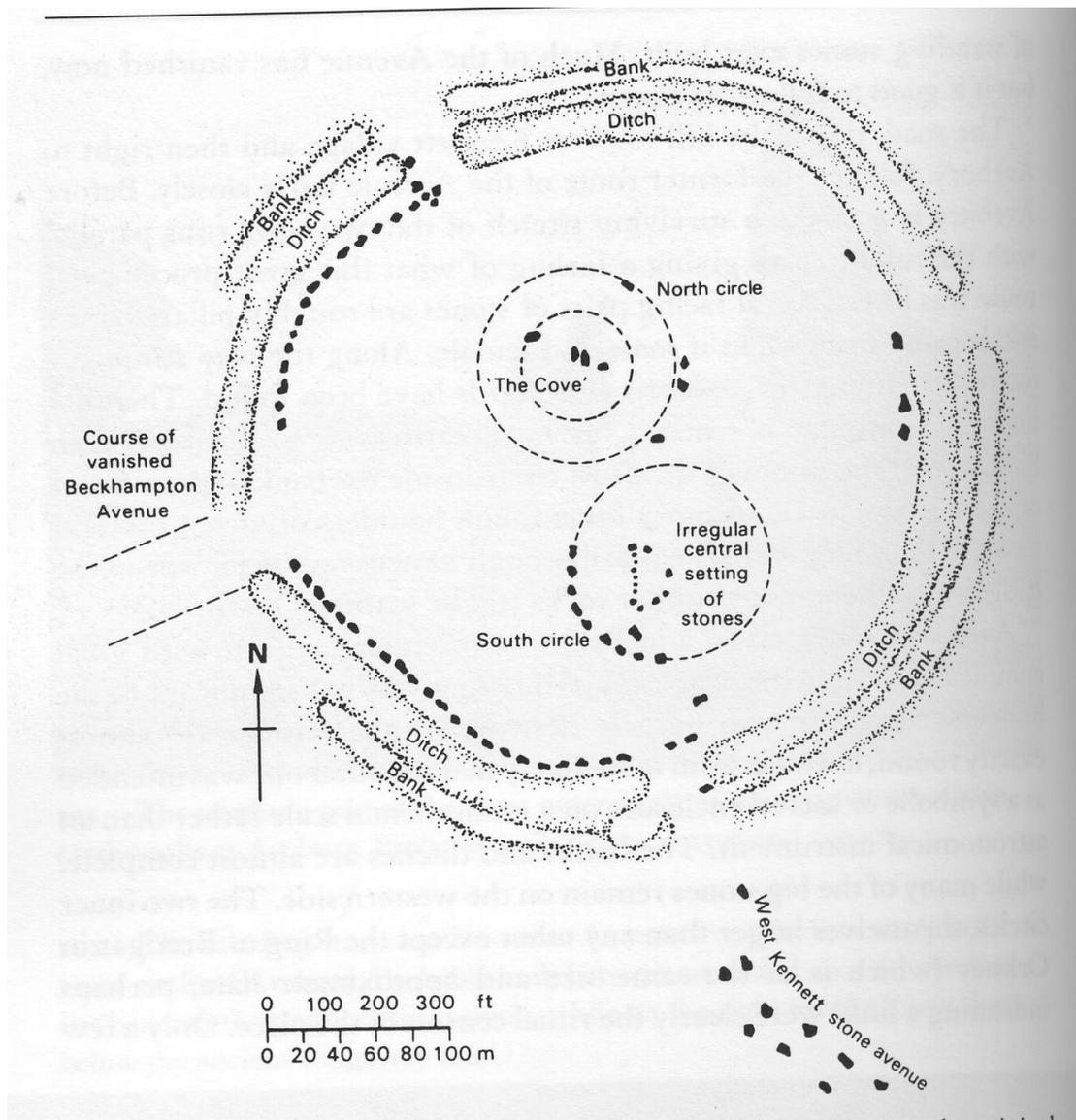


15) Illustration - West Kenneth Avenue – an avenue of standing stones leading to the entrance of the Avebury ring. The processions of people coming to celebrate their festivals are thought to once have walked along this way



16) Illustration – Ring of Brodgar, Orkney Islands(Mainland), Scotland – built around 200bc, originally consisted of 60 stones (30 stones remains standing).

These patterns are recognized by the students of sacred geometry, an ancient science concerned with mathematical relationships and harmonies which underlie the whole universe, and which express the laws of functioning, from the largest scale, the macrocosm, to the smallest the microcosm. The principles of this science have been detected to be used at the building of the Great pyramids, in great medieval cathedrals, renaissances architecture and the master works of Islamic Architecture. It also coincides with Pythagorean teachings on divine harmony.



17) Illustration – Plan of Avebury henge and stone circles indicating the original design and the positions of known stones, whether known or destroyed

At the beginning of this essay I have raised a few questions concerning not only the meaning, purpose and function of the megalithic structures in the past but also their meaning and significance to the people of the present time. I have undergone a research of this subject in which I tried to look at the megalithic structures from different points of view. In my research I have looked at evidence of different scientific disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, biology, meteorology, astronomy and history. I have also explored various alternative sciences and philosophies such Chinese geomancy, sacred geometry and acupuncture. And to make my research complete I have also looked into mythology and religious studies. Through exploring all these different disciplines and applying their principles in connection with megalithic structures I have arrived to a number of conclusions and answers to my questions.

Yes, I believe that the megalithic structures although thousand years old can still speak to us and visiting these sites can have a profound effect on us. And it is not just for the fact that they are very old and surrounded by the mystery of the long forgotten past, because we can never be sure 100% about their origins, as we cannot go back in time. However, based on the evidence we have, we can say that the structures were built by people who had an amazing knowledge of nature and its rhythms based on careful observation of their surroundings and well developed natural intuition. The megalithic structures represent deserted monuments of the lives and beliefs of our ancestors who lived in harmony with nature and within themselves (no archaeological evidence has been found which would indicate warfare). I believe it is the harmony and connection with our environment and the universe that megalithic structures represent to modern age people. In the rushed modern world in which ruthlessness and greed are the running forces and violence and wars are everyday issues, the craving for peace and harmony is why people are drawn to the megalithic sites. And I also believe it is not only the peace and harmony with nature megaliths represent to us, that makes them feel so special, but also the way they were built (sacred geometry), where they were built (geomancy) and the thousands years of positive spiritual energy put into these sites by the people who used them.

Finally, I have come to a conclusion that modern age people can relate to the megalithic structures. It doesn't matter how far our lifestyles and beliefs are removed from the lives of those who built these magnificent structures as what the megalithic structures represent is the physical manifesto of the notion of life itself which we all understand deep down in our hearts.

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To get a firsthand experience and a ‘feel’ for them I have also visited all the sites mentioned in this essay and the museums which are located nearby some of the sites (museums in Avebury, Maes Howe and Skara Brae)