



Debate

Beyond the bluestones: links between distant monuments in Late Neolithic Britain and Ireland

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Recent research has considered the relationship between Stonehenge and sites in south-west Wales, raising questions about whether the first monument at Stonehenge copied the form of an earlier stone circle at Waun Mawn and how the relationship between these sites was connected with the transport of bluestones between the different regions. But Stonehenge and Waun Mawn are not the only prehistoric sites in Britain and Ireland that share architectural elements and hint at social connections across vast distances of land and sea. This debate article explains how the questions raised about these Late Neolithic monuments can and should be applied to other monumental complexes to explore this insular phenomenon.

Keywords: Britain and Ireland, Neolithic, Stonehenge, Waun Mawn, megaliths, travel, alliance, pilgrimage

Introduction

The various periods of construction and alteration at Stonehenge took place over more than a thousand years and the site assumed its special significance at a time when connections between different parts of Britain and Ireland were taking a new form. During the earlier fourth millennium BC the distributions of artefacts and monuments conformed to a familiar pattern: distinctive styles of pottery were favoured in different regions and the same applied to traditions of stone and earthwork monuments. There were certain contrasts between northern and southern Britain, and others between an Atlantic axis and structures along the North Sea and Channel coasts. Only stone axes were distributed far outside local groups and the forms of mounds, cairns and enclosures resembled examples in continental Europe.

The situation changed towards 3000 BC and new monuments were constructed after that time. These were widely distributed and included passage graves, henges and stone circles that conformed to a common architectural repertoire. Some are associated with a distinctive style of pottery decorated with linear designs similar to those seen on houses in Orkney and megalithic tombs in Ireland. The movement of artefacts significantly reduces at this time, yet travel by sea seems to assume an increasing importance (Bradley 2019).

Some of the new kinds of monument are strikingly similar to one another, even over great distances, but such resemblances are restricted to Britain and Ireland and no longer extend to continental Europe. These connections first formed in the Middle Neolithic period and ended during the Early Bronze Age (4000–1500 BC). They were strongest during the Late Neolithic between 3000 and 2400 BC; a period corresponding with the construction

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of the principal structure at Stonehenge (Darvill *et al.* 2012). By this point, the movement of portable objects had become less important and there may have been more emphasis on the sharing of practices, beliefs and ideas.

Stonehenge and Waun Mawn

These issues regarding changing patterns of movement and regional connections are particularly relevant to a discussion in this journal of the relationship between Stonehenge in Wessex and a recently investigated monument at Waun Mawn in south-west Wales (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2021, 2022; Darvill 2022). The discussion raises some important questions.

The first concerns whether or not Waun Mawn was in fact a stone circle and if it shared the same plan, dimensions and orientation as the first setting of monoliths at Stonehenge. Darvill (2022) is not convinced by the argument that the Welsh structure was dismantled and removed to a distant location: if that did happen, where was it taken? No bluestones have been identified at Waun Mawn itself (Bevins *et al.* 2022), so, if the site took the form favoured by the excavators, it must have been the *idea* that was transported to Wessex rather than its physical structure.

At the same time, Stonehenge does incorporate bluestones brought from south-west Wales. Their shaping suggests that they had already been used in at least one other monument and, when they reached Stonehenge, they were rearranged several times before they assumed their final configuration. If they were introduced from another structure, where was it originally located—in Wales, beside the River Avon or at both places in turn (Darvill 2022; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2022)?

There are quarries in south-west Wales where excavation shows that monoliths of similar lithology to the Stonehenge bluestones were extracted during the Neolithic and later periods, but radiocarbon dating suggests that not all of the stone was taken to Wessex. Some must have been used elsewhere, yet so far these raw materials have not been identified in monuments outside the immediate source area (Darvill & Wainwright 2003; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2019). This presents another challenge.

The bluestones employed at Stonehenge were enclosed by settings of sarsens, obtained from 25km away near Avebury. The contrast between more local and exotic materials must have been important (Darvill 2006; Nash *et al.* 2020), but its significance is open for debate. At least five of the sarsens were also embellished with depictions of metal artefacts—115 Early Bronze Age axe heads and three daggers—making yet another reference to the wider world. The physical objects that are represented in these images were made from non-local metal and belong to a later phase than the settings of sarsens and bluestones (Abbott & Anderson-Whymark 2012; Darvill *et al.* 2012).

None of these references are peculiar to Stonehenge, or even to connections between Wales and southern England, and may be considered and discussed separately. They are apparent in other specialised contexts—usually megaliths where the stone structure survives intact and can be studied in three dimensions.

Relocating monuments or other stones

Early examples of relocated monuments/stones in continental Europe include the incorporation of statue menhirs in chambered tombs (vertical pillars with carved stylised human

figures, Laporte & Bueno Ramírez 2022), but the insular evidence takes a distinctive form (see Figure 1 for the locations of sites discussed in this article). The largest passage grave at Knowth in County Meath, Ireland, was built of material taken from at least one decorated monument whose original position remains unknown (Eogan & Cleary 2017); the same



Figure 1. Map showing sites referred to in the text (drawing by Courtney Nimura).

may apply to Newgrange, just over 1km to the south-east. Similarly, Colin Richards (2005) suggests that the Stones of Stenness on Orkney incorporated monoliths that had stood outside Maes Howe (2005: 242–4). Polissoirs—stone blocks upon which stone tools were rubbed to produce a polished surface—taken from the Marlborough Downs were reused in Neolithic monuments like Avebury (Drise 2017), and, during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age periods, cists in northern Britain incorporated fragments taken from already-decorated outcrops; occasionally their selection favoured motifs shared with megalithic art (Bradley 1997: 138–46). Stone transport must have been important and the sources of the rock may have assumed a special significance.

Combining materials from separate sources

Older tombs in Britain, Ireland and continental Europe brought together materials from several sources. The same practice can be observed in the passage graves of the Boyne Valley which incorporated stones from along the east coast of Ireland—the entire monument provided a microcosm of this wider region (Hensey 2015: fig. 5.1). This phenomenon also occurred at both stone circles in Orkney, which combine monoliths introduced from different parts of the main island (Richards 2013: fig. 5.1), and at several structures on Machrie Moor in western Scotland (Richards 2013: 57). Another example is in south-west England where the largest circle at Stanton Drew incorporates several different kinds of rocks. At this site, the different rocks were kept apart and those that had travelled farthest were used in the entrance (Lewis 2005: 88–97). A similar argument may be applied to the distribution of bluestones in the overall layout of Stonehenge. Not all of them originated from the same quarry and their organisation within the new monument reflects their natural distributions in the geology of south-west Wales. The setting of Welsh materials can therefore be characterised as a transported landscape (Bradley 2000: 92–6; Darvill 2006: 136–7).

Copying distinctive monuments outside their usual distributions

Individual instances of monuments appearing outside of their usual distribution have long been recognised, but their frequency is seldom appreciated, not least because many structures have been destroyed. Again, such monuments are concentrated in the Middle and Late Neolithic periods. Embanked henges of a kind best known in the Boyne Valley (Stout 1991) may also be found a long distance away at Mayburgh in Cumbria (Topping 1992: 249–53) and, on a smaller scale, in south-west Wales (Darvill & Wainwright 2003). Another is seen at Catterick in north-east England, where it is located close to a timber enclosure with close parallels in Ireland (Moloney *et al.* 2003; Hale *et al.* 2009). In the same way, there were links between a distinctive group of henge monuments in North Yorkshire and an earthwork in the Upper Thames Valley. At Thornborough, an unusual enclosure with two spaced ditches overlies a cursus (Harding 2013: 85–95). Almost the same sequence was followed 280km away at Dorchester on Thames where Big Rings had the same ground plan (Whittle *et al.* 1992: 184–93). Stone circles provide similar evidence, and the similarities between Ballynoe (in Northern Ireland), Swinside (in Cumbria) and Rollright (on the Cotswolds) are striking, extending to their layout, size and, in the latter two cases, orientation (Burl 2000). A detailed review

of these sites concluded that they conformed to “a common architectural (or perhaps ceremonial) tradition” (Lambrick 1988: 121–4). In the same way, Alison Sheridan (2012) has argued that the unusually tall monoliths in two monument complexes on the west coast of Scotland—Machrie Moor and Calanais—were meant to resemble the Stones of Stenness in Orkney. In turn, two stone circles on Machrie Moor are similar in layout to a pair of adjacent monuments in Kilmartin Glen, 65km further to the north. The Machrie Moor circles also share the same architectural sequence as one of the Kilmartin Glen structures, which replaced an earlier timber circle (Scott 1989).

Other monument complexes shared common features despite the long distances between them, yet, at the same time, some of their components contrasted with the other structures. Aubrey Burl describes the group of stone circles on Machrie Moor as featuring a “combination of architectural styles from other regions” and the obvious differences between them “are best explained by traditions from outside” (Burl 2000: 90). Elsewhere in Scotland, the Early Bronze Age linear cemetery in Kilmartin Glen resembles that of the monument complex at Balnuaran of Clava, 200km to its north-east (Watson & Bradley 2021). Sheridan (2012) recognises other links between the features in both groups. Sometimes the earlier stages of development link Scottish monuments, while later sequences diverge. At Calanais in the Outer Hebrides, the site of a small circular earthwork was marked by an unusually tall monolith. It was approached along an avenue of standing stones leading from the north and enclosed by a ring of upright stones, but the sequence of construction is not clear (Ashmore 2016). At Broomend of Crichtie, 250km away on the mainland, another exceptionally high monolith indicates the site of a shaft grave. In this case it was flanked by a semicircle of standing stones. The monument was approached along a similar avenue with the same orientation as the one at Calanais (Bradley 2011: 73–89). Yet a small chambered cairn was erected inside the ring at Calanais and, by contrast, the earlier structures at Broomend were enclosed by a henge.

Visual images with non-local references

Some stone monuments were decorated with non-figurative designs (Robin 2009; Eogan & Shee Twohig 2022). These motifs could have been created in parallel with those in passage graves and stand out from other panels of rock art because their distinctive composition resembles megalithic art. Examples include a stone circle at Temple Wood by the west coast of Scotland. Motifs also link Irish chambered tombs with sites in Cumbria (Sharpe 2022), and the same monuments in the Boyne Valley with Neolithic structures in Orkney (Thomas 2016); in turn a few specialised motifs are shared between Orkney and western Britain (Nash 2022). Similar motifs are also found on a decorated cliff at Morwick and an unusual stone structure on Fylingdales Moor in north-east England (Vyner 2011; Bradley 2022: 93–4). During later phases, in the Early Bronze Age, illustrations of axes and other metalwork become shared features between sites in Wessex and Kilmartin Glen, although these depictions were probably made at different times (Watson & Bradley 2021).

Shared elements

The forms of a few monument complexes made reference to distant places, some of them connected by sea. For instance, the archaeology of Kilmartin echoes developments in

Table 1. Possible connections between Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age regions in Britain and Ireland, represented by monumental architecture, the layout of ceremonial centres and the presence of specialised imagery.

Paired locations	Site types	Distance (km)	Access by sea and/or land
Preseli/Stonehenge	Quarries and stone setting	200	Land
Ballynoe/Swinside	Stone settings	150	Sea
Kilmartin/Clava	Cairn cemeteries	250	Land
Calanais/Broomend of Crichtie	Stone settings	250	Sea and land
Boyne Valley/Cumbria	Rock art	250	Sea and land
Boyne Valley/Mayburgh	Embanked henges	250	Sea and land
Thornborough/Dorchester on Thames	Double-ditched henges	350	Land
Boyne Valley/Catterick	Palisaded enclosures and embanked henges	400	Sea and land
Orkney/Morwick	Rock art	400	Sea

The distances between paired locations have been rounded to the nearest 50km and do not take account of the practicalities of travel overland or by water.

Ireland and north-east Scotland, yet it also shares features with passage tombs in Orkney. The distances between several of these places—about 250km—are like those between Stonehenge and megalith quarries in Wales. Other connections extended even further (Table 1). There is no doubt that some artefacts passed between different areas, but the clearest evidence for the long-distance movement of people comes from the isotopes preserved in faunal remains. Perhaps people travelled to distant places on special occasions (Viner *et al.* 2010; Madgwick *et al.* 2019; Evans *et al.* 2022). There is disagreement around the extent of these contacts (Barclay & Brophy 2021; Madgwick *et al.* 2021). Nearly 40 years ago Colin Renfrew drew on similar observations to infer the practice of pilgrimage (Renfrew 1985: 255–6). The idea has since been discussed by Chris Scarre (2001) and Jan Harding (2013) and deserves more attention. Another possibility is that architectural connections between different regions celebrated alliances formed between distant communities. Mike Parker Pearson and his colleagues raise a similar possibility (2021: 100).

Conclusions

Almost all these processes apply to Stonehenge and its surroundings, but none is unique to this complex and that is why the debate is important. The long-distance movement of building material might have been peculiar to that site, but the issues raised by the bluestones may be only one part of the story. Problems of preservation and survival make it difficult to compare Stonehenge directly with Waun Mawn and there will always be legitimate differences of interpretation. But the problematical character of both monuments does not prevent them from raising wider issues.

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