Abstract

What if…none of the building stones at Stonehenge came from Wiltshire?

Over the past 20 years archaeologists have been exploring the idea that Neolithic monument construction provided conditions in which social differentiation could develop. This is in contrast to earlier interpretations of cursus, barrow, enclosure, mound, henge, and stone circle building in which perceived growing complexity of construction through time, and thus of inferred complexity of resource-management, were seen to indicate an increasing centralisation of prehistoric political authority. The henge earthworks, stone settings, and avenue at Stonehenge (Wiltshire, UK) play a prominent role in these contrasting interpretations.

This paper presents a discussion, by means of a thought experiment, of the role of Stonehenge’s stones in some 60 years of debate about Neolithic and early Bronze Age social structure. The paper starts with the revolutionary proposition that not only the Welsh bluestones, but all of Stonehenge’s building stones are ‘foreign’ to the monument’s locality. It goes on to explore the implications of this proposition by examining those of Stonehenge’s rocks that have in general been taken for granted, geologically-speaking, in the archaeological literature – sarsen stones: and others that have been almost completely ignored – packing stones to the sarsen settings.

Drawing in particular on work by Colin Richards, and Mark Gillings and Josh Pollard, to interpret these unsung components of the internationally-important monument, the paper suggests that an alternative to the dominant twentieth century discourse in which Stonehenge represents the culmination of Neolithic social evolution, is possible.

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