Stone is the Storyteller - The materiality of stone through time (and mind)?

Stone is the media of much of archaeology. It persists and survives where much of the other apparatus of life - cloth, food, bodies, stories and songs - decay and become lost. For this reason, it forms not only a large part of the archaeological record, but also forms the props and settings of many of the stories archaeologists tell about the past. But should the stone tell other stories - how do archaeologists interpret and present the agency of the stones themselves?

We intend to broaden our enquiry, reaching beyond the confines of prehistory’s preoccupation with stone into historical periods and the present day. Our interests extend to the material agency of stone in contexts that could be characterised as the small, personal, and intimate, such as jewellery; and those that could be characterised as communal, public, and topographic, such as architecture. Your stone might be raw and not modified by processes such as carving, knapping, cutting - we are interested in the material agency of stone in all its forms.

This session will hear stories from stones, not just of prehistory but at all stages of their entanglement in human history. We invite contributions from archaeologists, geologists and geographers, architectural and art historians, artists, curators, and anyone working with, interpreting, and presenting stony materials. We are especially interested in trans-disciplinary, innovative, and creative approaches.

Paper abstract, Katy Whitaker

“Once upon a time, sarsen stones spoke. Hush! Do you want to hear them?”

Once upon a time, sarsen stones had a voice. A long time ago, sarsen stones were alive. But they have become silent stones, dead stones. Sarsens used to be able to change things, to change people, to make things happen. They have become a mere cypher; a stand-in for labour, a stand-in for ancestors: or a prop; holding up things like roofs, lichens, and gates. It is time to give sarsens back their voice, to re-animate them.

In the earliest enquiries into southern Britain’s sarsens, the stones are full of vigour and life. They have names, identities, character: they breed, they grow, they move, they do things. But sarsens have been threatened, and damaged. Between the 1850s and 1930s in north Wiltshire there was a sarsen genocide. This prompted an intervention. Sarsens needed protection, so they were cared for because of their character, their presence.

This led to them becoming boulders of sand frozen in time by silica cement. They became mineral resources to be exploited, a nuisance to be dealt with. They were merely a convenient rock; as building components in archaeological monuments they were nothing more than scaffolding for rites and rituals. A local stone of no
special merit, not worthy of the love, the fear, the respect they once garnered. They were silenced. Worse, they became dead stones.

But sarsens live and breathe. They sweat. They are fought over. They still attract visitors. They are ecosystems that are part of a living, growing, changing world. They should get their voices back. They should be heard. Listen!