Extracting more than rock? Insights into the acquisition of stone and flint in the Neolithic.

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Abstract: “What does sarsen stone quarrying look like?”

So, what does sarsen stone quarrying look like? Sarsen was immensely significant in neolithic and early bronze age life, exemplified in some of Europe’s greatest prehistoric monuments as at Stonehenge and Avebury. Yet the bulk of World Heritage Site-centred research and publication treats sarsen tangentially. Research into flint-mining, axe-head production, even bluestone sourcing and quarrying, has shown how valuable it is to locate and describe quarrying activity, in order to interpret past social practices, behaviours, and relationships. The detail of neolithic sarsen quarrying, however, has only very recently begun to be addressed (Gillings and Pollard 2016).

Sarsen extraction has, however, continued since prehistory. Identifying early quarrying sites is problematic. Later activity has almost certainly damaged and erased signs of previous extraction. Can we even distinguish prehistoric from modern sarsen extraction?

This paper presents new research into what we do know about sarsen quarrying. This includes the archaeological signatures of the varied ways that sarsen has been quarried across its geological distribution in southern Britain at different times. It asks which of these, if any, might be useful analogies for neolithic sarsen extraction. And it suggests how neolithic sarsen quarrying might appear, if we go looking for it. This enquiry is the essential precursor to finding sarsen quarries, fundamental to gain insights into the lives of the sarsen-builders, informed by landscape context and the significance of place, similar to the progress made over the past 30 years for other stone acquisition.

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