

## 5 Authenticity, Artifice and the Druidical Temple of Avebury

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### **Abstract**

This paper engages with the legacy of a prehistoric monument – the Avebury henge, in southern England – and the influential work of an early antiquarian – William Stukeley. We highlight how the reception of Stukeley's 1743 work, *Abury: a temple of the British druids*, has structured images of Avebury and shaped the authenticity claims of later scholars, artists and religious groups. In biographical terms, Stukeley's carefully crafted *Abury* has possessed a very active afterlife, its status shifting from that of primary record (of Avebury), to a form of constructional-blueprint (for Avebury), to a partial and flawed primary record (of an Avebury), only to end up for some as an unassailable and definitive record (of *the* Avebury). At the centre of this narrative is the status of *Abury* as a material agent around which various authenticity claims have been constructed.

**Keywords:** landscape biography, Avebury, William Stukeley, Alexander Keiller, authenticity, Druids

### **Writing a Biography**

The prehistoric stone circle complex at Avebury on the Wiltshire chalkland of southern England is the largest of its kind in Europe (figure 5.1). A 420-metre-diameter earthwork encloses a ring of huge standing stones, which in turn encloses two other roughly circular configurations of megaliths with further stone settings at their centres. Radiating out to the south and west are linear avenues of megaliths that snake out across 3.5 kilometres of the surrounding chalk landscape to link the Avebury structures to other prehistoric earth and stone monuments. The henge earthwork and the stone settings all belong to the third millennium BC, or later Neolithic (Gillings & Pollard, 2004; Harding, 2003). In terms of its scale and structural complexity, Avebury is unusual among henge monuments. It is also unusual in having a living village in and around it, the surviving prehistoric remains now

Figure 5.1 Avebury today



interwoven into a complex web of boundaries, roads, shops and houses (Gillings & Pollard, 2004). This is no 'dead' monument, but a component of a living community. The significance of the site is today reflected in its inscription (along with Stonehenge) as a World Heritage Site, Avebury comprising "a unique surviving example of outstanding human endeavour in Neolithic times and later" (Pomeroy-Kellinger, 2005, p. 20). Reflecting its current heritage status, it has a museum and has been partially restored and renovated.

In archaeological terms, to think of Avebury as 'done'. Detailed plans and descriptions exist dating back to the 17th century, and many limited excavations have taken place, culminating in the major campaigns undertaken in the first half of the 20th century by Harold St. George Gray and Alexander Keiller (Gray, 1935; Smith, 1965). However, the real paucity of detailed archaeological knowledge can be illustrated by Aubrey Burl's estimate (1979, p. 75) that only 6% of the interior has been excavated and most of that focused on the area of the ditch. Even within this notional 6% studied through formal excavation, the results are far from conclusive and often frustratingly unclear. Ambiguity is ever present. Likewise, although a number of plans and records of the monument drawn-up prior to episodes of stone destruction from the 17th through the 19th centuries exist, they are replete with contradictions, errors and speculations and as a result the apparent detail such records offer is invariably illusory (Ucko et al., 1991).

Given the sometimes equivocal nature of archaeological knowledge about the site, and inherent slipperiness and contingency of many of the interpretations tendered, a traditional narrative which seeks to chart a single path through the tensions, contradictions and uncertainties will remain at best a partial account and at worst a misleading one (e.g. Malone, 1989). As a result, when attempting to write about monumental landscapes such as Avebury ~~as~~ a traditional historical structure – origin and construction; use and elaboration; desertion and forgetting; archaeological discovery and interpretation (often post scripted with a short section entitled ‘the monument today’) – that treats the structure as essentially a fossil seems somehow lacking; more an obituary than an active history. This is not only because of the seemingly authoritative knowledge claims such histories embody, with the inherent assumption that there is a single story to tease out, but through the implicit assumption that the ‘history’ has, in effect, reached a conclusion. As we hope to show, in the case of Avebury nothing could be further from the truth.

In an attempt to overcome this problem, rather than chart a single authoritative course through the varied and highly nuanced life of Avebury, in our various writings on the site we have sought to take an explicitly *biographical* approach to the life history of the monument; a biography we hope captures better the complexity, dynamism and tension of its long and active social life (e.g. Gillings & Pollard, 1999 & 2004; Pollard & Reynolds, 2002). At the heart of this work has been the assumption that monumental landscapes such as those at Avebury were less ‘structures’ or ‘containers’ laid out according to pre-determined plans in order to serve a finite set of specific purposes, but instead projects whose episodes of construction, elaboration, use and encounter were the very acts from which social and ritual behaviour gained its meaning. In this sense what we see at Avebury today is less a fossil designed and constructed to serve a mysterious past function, but instead the residue of a set of meaningful social practices, spanning the period from its first conception to the present, a residue that is still being actively and vigorously reworked and refashioned today.

Avebury is still very much in a state of becoming, with the episodes of construction, elaboration, destruction, discovery, recording, excavation, even vandalism, continuing to add layer upon layer of meaning. This is where the benefits of an explicitly biographical approach become manifest – there ~~is (and never has)~~ been a single ‘correct’ Avebury to tease out, and rather than resolve ambiguities and inconsistencies these need to be actively embraced and brought to the fore – they are, after all, what makes Avebury the monument it is today. For us one of the strengths of

approaching Avebury through the metaphor of biography has been the way that it directs academic attention to the least expected places. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the later history of the site, in the centuries up to the present following its classification as a pre-eminent archaeological site. This is a period when one would expect our understandings to be at their most detailed and refined, yet, as will become evident, this is a period when questions of authenticity and authorship, both active and quiet (see Ronnes, this volume), are brought into stark relief and the social life of the site begins to reach out to other times, places and currents of thought. Here we view Avebury's more recent, historical, biography through the lens of contrasting narratives and practices that sought to project particular visions of its authentic status during prehistory. Foregrounded is not just the physical fabric of the monument complex, but also the agential role of an early antiquarian text and associated series of records where issues of both biography and authenticity come together in surprising and productive ways.

### A Search for the Authentic Avebury

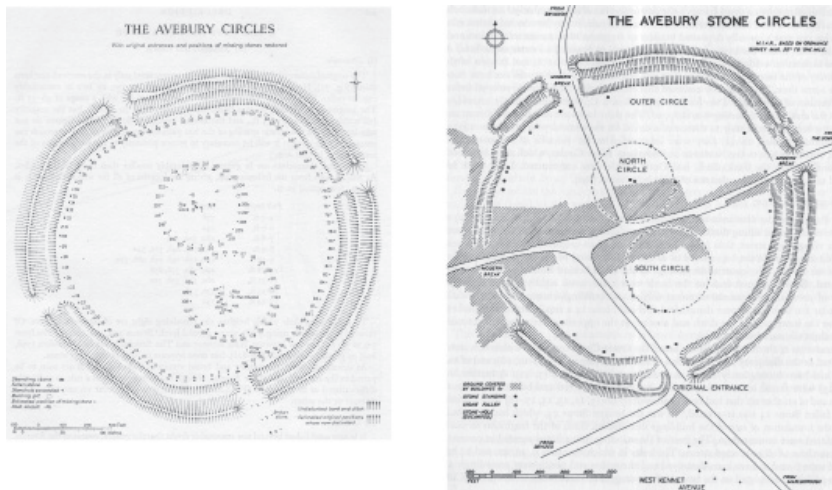
Between the summers of 1719 and 1724 the antiquary and polymath William Stukeley spent periods of a fortnight or more surveying and recording the surviving fabric of the prehistoric earthworks and standing stone settings at Avebury. Both the site and Stukeley's record of it are notable objects of human endeavour and imagination. Despite its scale, the survival of Avebury was not a given facet of its being. William Stukeley's relatively short, punctuated periods of record and survey took place at a time of particular change and physical transformation. Practices of stone-breaking, developed a century or so earlier in order to turn the large slabs of sarsen (a resilient sandstone) that peppered the surrounding downland into manageable building stone, began to be applied to the megaliths of the henge and its avenues (Gillings *et al.*, 2008). This process was well under way when Stukeley first visited the site and continued apace during his period of recording. He noted the positions of remaining megaliths, along with those recently toppled and broken, often relying on local testimony to furnish a record of *what had been* (Piggott, 1985, p. 165-6; Ucko *et al.*, 1991). On-going stone-breaking meant that the process of recording during the period of his visits was never stable, but highly dynamic, subject to revisions and alterations, addenda and corrections. Every summer he would return and resume his recording, but it was of a changed monument. Sometimes

the changes would have been subtle – a stone gone here or there – at other times more dramatic, as entire elements of the Avebury landscape were dismantled and broken up, such as the stone circles of the Sanctuary on Overton Hill connected to the Avebury circles by the 2.5-kilometre-long West Kennet Avenue of paired standing stones (Cunnington, 1931).

Stukeley was never merely recording Avebury; he was also actively trying to make sense of the patterns of earthworks and megaliths that he saw. This was a complex record, of a complex site; and a unique one, insofar as much of the physical fabric he recorded in his published and unpublished work has been lost. Despite his protestations, the process of piecemeal disassembly of the monument complex that was taking place around him continued well into the 19th century, with explosives replacing sledgehammers and bonfires (Gillings et al., 2008). By the time prehistoric archaeology had become a defined academic discipline in the 1850s, the Avebury Stukeley recorded was no longer there (figure 5.2) and as a result his efforts comprise a remarkable record of a unique site, produced at a particularly critical juncture in its life history. And it is a truly remarkable record, both in the levels of technical virtuosity and apparent detail, as well as vision and scope (figure 5.3).

The lack of a comparable surviving Avebury to stand alongside the engravings and descriptions that Stukeley published in *Abury, a temple of the British druids* in 1743 lent his record a considerable (and for many years

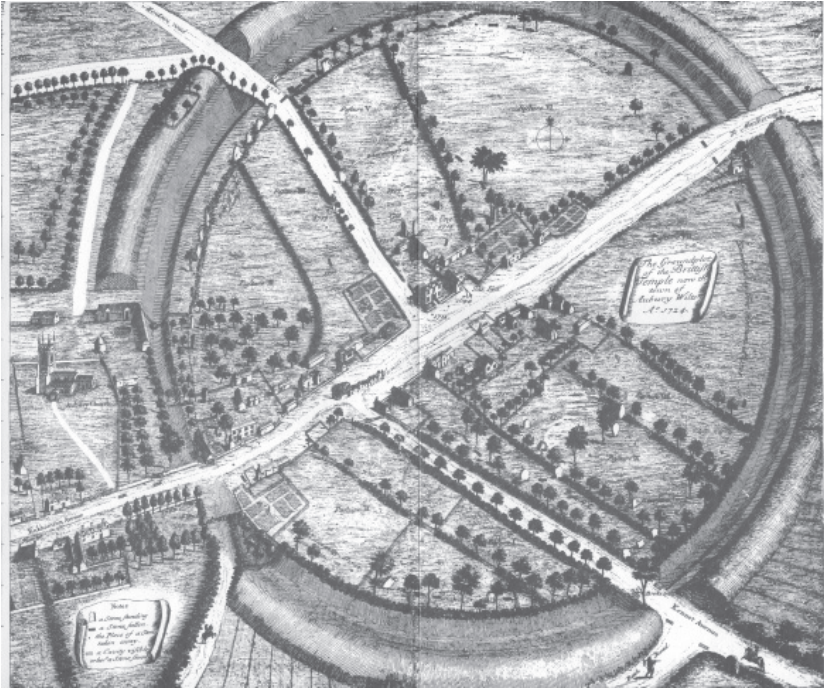
**Figure 5.2 The impact of stone removals on the main circles of the monument excluding the avenues**



After Smith, 1965



Figure 5.3 Stukeley's frontispiece to *Abury* (1743)



unassailable) aura of authority. The dramatic frontispiece alone stood as a definitive record of the monument, while in the background remained a substantial body of field-notes, sketches and drafts generated by the original fieldwork. In short, Stukeley's *Abury* became a canonical text for students of the site – the definitive record from which interpretations emerged, and against which claims were, and as we will see, still are, evaluated.

Stukeley's quest was to establish the original and authentic form of the Avebury complex, one that had been despoiled by the later encroachment of the village. At one level, this can be seen as an archetypal process of academic enquiry, driven by a sense that it was eminently possible to reconstruct the past *as was*. However, while fascinated by antiquity in itself (Piggott, 1985), Stukeley's interest in the Avebury monuments was driven by a belief that study of this and similar pre-Roman temples provided direct insight into the form of an authentic 'true religion', one shared by all ancient peoples and which provided the foundations of Christianity before it was tainted by idolatry and Rome. Distracted by the archaeological detail, it is easy for modern scholars to forget that *Abury* was a work of contemporary religion and politics (the two domains, of course, being synonymous). In

the preface to *Abury*, Stukeley states his aim to go to “the fountain-head” of proper divine wisdom through the medium of historical study (Stukeley, 1743, p. i), delineating the first, simple, patriarchal religion which he equated with Druidry (Hutton, 2009, p. 89-102). His own individual philosophy comprised a complex and shifting mix of deism, trinitarianism, Newtonian science and Platonist and Pythagorean ideas (Boyd Haycock, 2002; Hutton, 2009), and this permeates every aspect of his interpretation of Avebury. The latter centred upon the idea that Avebury was a planned construction, laid out according to an over-arching hermetic design, the very form and shape of the temple encoding esoteric knowledge. He provided a three-part classification of Druid temples, all variants on a depiction of the deity – a “most effectual prophylact” for drawing down blessings (Stukeley, 1743, p. 9). The scheme comprised simple circles, serpentine temples (or *Dracontia*), and winged (*ophio-cyclo-ptyerygo-morphus*) temples. Avebury belonged to the second category (Stukeley, 1743; Boyd Haycock, 2002).

What we would like to draw attention to here is not so much Stukeley’s *Abury* and his fieldwork archive, but instead the later reception of this work. As a religious text, it received both ridicule and rapturous acceptance, later influencing the radical Protestant poet and artist William Blake and modern Druidry, not to mention the work of such contemporary ‘seekers of truth’ as Michael Dames (Blain & Wallis, 2007; Hutton, 2009; Dames, 1996). In archaeological terms *Abury* has possessed a very active afterlife, its status shifting from that of primary record (to be put to the test), to a form of constructional-blueprint (to be generally followed), to a partial and flawed primary record (to be tested and evaluated with forensic zeal), to end up as an unassailable and definitive record (to be accepted unconditionally). At the centre of this narrative is the status not of Avebury, but instead *Abury* as a material agent around which various authenticity claims have been constructed.

### Stukeley Records a Temple

Through his work, Stukeley created a persistent image of Avebury as a unitary physical structure, and also cemented an erroneous association between this and other megalithic monuments and the pre-Roman priesthood of the Druids that is still with us today. From the mid-18th century until the first archaeological excavations there in the 1860s (Smith, 1867), knowledge and image of the prehistoric monument of Avebury existed almost solely within the confines of Stukeley’s archival records and

published work. However, with notable exceptions such as Colt Hoare's account in his influential *Ancient History of North Wiltshire* (1821), the integrity of Stukeley's Avebury was placed under increasing scrutiny, both in terms of his interpretative schema and the veracity of his supposedly empirical recording. Throughout the later 18th and 19th centuries lively debate regarding Stukeley's *Dracontia* and Druidical connections raged; to some it was nonsense, to others he simply had not gone far enough (see Gillings & Pollard, 2004, chapter 9). We can also detect the beginnings of a trend that was to find its clearest voice in the 20th century (e.g. Piggott, 1950), that by the time of publication in 1743 the survey records of the site had been massaged by Stukeley in order to better support the sinuous logic of his serpentine scheme (e.g. Long, 1858, p. 26). There was the suspicion that between the end of the period of his fieldwork in 1724 and the publication of *Abury* in 1743, Stukeley had gradually manipulated the record to better fit his *Dracontia* interpretation (Piggott, 1985, p. 107). Gaps in the survey record were creatively filled in, and, in the case of the Sanctuary, the shape of the stone circles deliberately flattened so as to better resemble a serpent's head. However, it is clear that even before the serpent temple took hold, and while fieldwork was on-going, the dialectic between observation and interpretative reconstruction was in operation (Ucko et al., 1991). Before the reptilian image of deity, came symmetry; and Stukeley as a good Newtonian natural philosopher appreciated that symmetry, order and harmony were at the heart of the 'system of the world', and that its divine laws had been keenly understood by the ancients who created Avebury (Boyd Haycock, 2002, p. 93-9). Thus it was that despite an absence of evidence, the western (Beckhampton) megalithic avenue was confidently extended from the Longstones to Fox Covert in order to create symmetry with the West Kennet Avenue, a stone cove (box-like arrangement of stones) was placed mid-way along both, and the henge earthwork made geometrically circular, presumably to correct its flawed implementation and more realistically represent the original intentions of its builders. What is of particular interest is that when questions were subsequently raised regarding Stukeley's work they tended to focus upon his interpretative scheme and representational sleights-of-hand it engendered, rather than the fundamental truths of the underlying survey record. Within the 19th-century work of William Long (1858), A.C. Smith (1885) and others, there existed a central idea that if one could only blow away the fog of patriarchal Druidry and the *Dracontia*, you would find as accurate and objective a record of the now lost site as could be made in the early 18th century.



### Keiller Builds One

The idea that Stukeley's *Abury* could function as an authentic blueprint for Avebury is illustrated by the greatest single campaign of excavation carried out at the site. This was undertaken between 1934 and 1939 under the direction of Alexander Keiller, the aim of this exercise being a combination of enhancing archaeological understanding of the monument complex and active reconstruction (Smith, 1965). Prehistoric Avebury was to be rapidly resurrected, although the process was halted half-way by the outbreak of the Second World War. Paralleling in many ways the campaigns of the Victorian church restorers, the process entailed not only the raising up of fallen or previously buried standing stones, but the 'freeing' of the monument from the living village that lay within and around it, something only dreamt of by Stukeley and John Aubrey before him (Smith, 1965; Lowenthal, 2011, p. 215-6). Writing three years after the last season of work, Grahame Clark talked of the site's 'rehabilitation' (1940, p. 107), while one published plate in his *Prehistoric England* shows 'the south-western sector after treatment' [our emphasis] with stones re-erected and later features removed (Clark, 1940, plate 100).

Stukeley's *Abury* directly guided the hand of Keiller in bringing Avebury back to life. Keiller had acquired many of Stukeley's drawings and surveys of Avebury at a sale of the family papers in 1924 (Piggott, 1965, p. xx), and these much influenced his desire to purchase and restore the monument. While his assessment of Stukeley's work was far from uncritical, strong echoes of Stukeley permeate Keiller's own excavation strategy and site records (Ucko et al., 1991, p. 244-7).

The work carried out by Keiller has been likened to a form of megalithic jigsaw puzzle, with Stukeley's records providing the picture on the box (Gillings & Pollard, 2004, p. 180). Even his employee and colleague Stuart Piggott referred dryly to the work as an act of 'megalithic landscape gardening' (Piggott, 1983, p. 32) (figure 5.4). As with the vigorous campaigns of 19th-century church restoration, and the 'Anti-Scrape' movement of William Morris and colleagues that emerged in response to it, not everyone was happy with the results of the work (Lowenthal, 2011, p. 215). The artist Paul Nash had first visited Avebury in the summer of 1933, just before Keiller's work began on the West Kennet Avenue, and photographed the stones of the avenue and the henge. He was much inspired by their form, composition and 'suggestion of a super-reality' (Bertram, 1955, p. 243), inspiration that led to the production of a series of remarkable surrealist paintings: *Landscape of the Megaliths* (1934 and 1937), *Equivalents for the Megaliths*

Figure 5.4 Keiller's engineering project



(1935) and *Circle of the Monoliths* (1938). As Sam Smiles notes, his was an artistic accommodation with the past that was set apart from contemporary archaeological understandings, being situated instead within a particularly

British neo-romantic and surrealist artistic movement to which painters and sculptors such as John Piper, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth belonged (Smiles, 2005, p. 147). Although relations between Nash and Keiller were cordial, Nash felt that the excavations and restoration had destroyed something of Avebury's quality, removing the 'primal magic' of the stones' appearance (Hawkes, 2002, p. 311) and turning them into a dead museum exhibit (Smiles, 2005, p. 148). It is interesting to note here Nash's interest in the romanticism and mysticism of William Blake, another indirect legacy from Stukeley (Boyd Haycock, 2010). Stukeley's *Abury* seeps through on both sides, but while Keiller felt he was recreating through the excavations a close approximation of the authentic Avebury, Nash considered the process to be one that robbed the place of its aura and *genius loci*.

Even if closely guided by it, Keiller was not slavish in his adherence to Stukeley's record; he was too good an archaeologist to fall into such a trap. If Keiller had merely followed the records of Stukeley then the resultant Avebury would constitute a curious and perhaps unique example of a 1930s reconstruction of what might best be termed a Newtonian-inspired Georgian late Neolithic monument complex. However, like Stukeley before him, Keiller's fieldwork was intimately bound up with interpretation and his reconstructed Avebury also carries with it evidence of the interpretative concerns of the time. Some of these centred upon sexual symbolism and the idea that the shapes of the standing stones embodied archetypal male (thin and tall) and female (triangular) properties: referred to as types A and B respectively (Keiller & Piggott, 1936). When stabilizing existing stones and re-erecting fallen or previously buried ones, the way in which they were set upright was strongly constrained by the assumption that all of the stones originally erected at the site conformed to one or other of these basic types.

Keiller's sexual template was also extended to stones that had already been re-erected. For example, he pointedly set out to rectify the setting of a fallen West Kennet Avenue stone that had been re-erected by the archaeologist Maud Cunnington in 1912, arguing that it was not only in the wrong position, but upside down (Keiller & Piggott, 1936, p. 418).

### Purity of Vision

As well as the fabric of the monument, Keiller also set about removing the clutter of the modern village from the interior of the henge in an attempt to return it to some notional pristine state. Reconstruction went hand-in-hand with deconstruction, and Keiller's vision went far beyond the removal of

unsightly tree-stumps, rubbish-dumps and field-walls. In 1937 he gained permission from its owner to demolish a cow-byre in the northwestern quadrant of the site 'in the interest of the monument'. A year later, two derelict cottages, their outbuildings and a modern stable in the southwestern sector were dismantled (Keiller, 1939, p. 225 and p. 230). Rawlins' Garage, lying close to the centre of the monument was also demolished, and at Keiller's expense new premises were constructed immediately outside the northern entrance (Rawlins, 1999, p. 44). Put simply, the village and the monument were forcibly disentangled. What is more, this active process of heritage-cleansing carried on long after Keiller's last excavation season in 1939, as a selective programme of demolition was continued by the National Trust (a non-government heritage body) well into the 1950s (Pitts, 1996; Edwards, 2000) (figure 5.5).

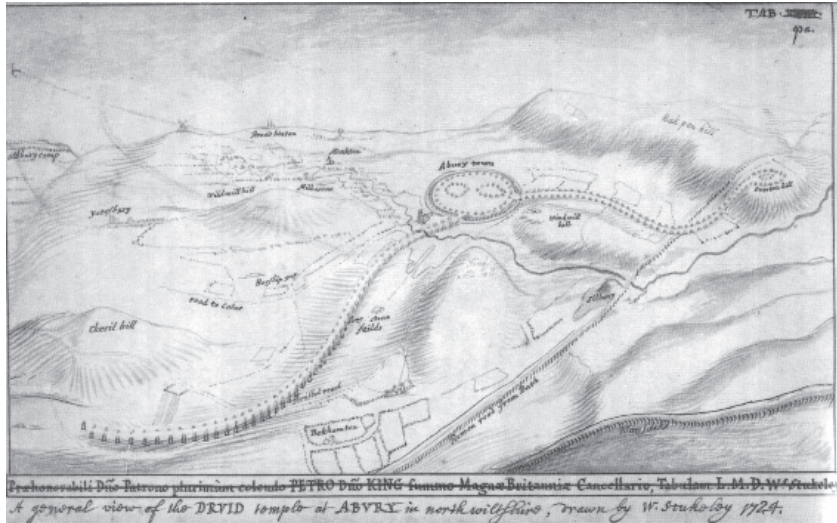
Since Keiller's work at Avebury, sustained research has revealed the fallacy of the assumption that empirical record preceded fanciful manipulation in Stukeley's research (Ucko et al., 1991). Interpretation shaped Stukeley's field records from the outset. Further, whilst Stukeley is often portrayed as one of the father figures of objective, scientific archaeological field-craft, and many of his field notes and sketches betray a concern for empirical measurement and exactitude, many do not, with depictions of Avebury

**Figure 5.5** The 20th-century social cleansing of Avebury





Figure 5.6 Stukeley's Dracontia in all its symmetry



firmly embedded in a stylistic trope of landscape depiction more commonly associated with the contemporary visualization of stately homes and their landscaped gardens. Indeed Boyd Haycock has recently argued that the approach adopted by Stukeley in *Abury* 'reflect[s] the express influence of contemporary, "polite" fashions in early 18th century landscape design' (Boyd Haycock, 2009, p. 46). Even Stukeley's terminology floats between realms religious (temples, sanctuaries) and those picturesque (formal avenues). To put it bluntly, Stukeley's *Abury* is of its time; a profoundly early 18th-century monument that is as much concerned with Palladian (and/or Newtonian) symmetry and the theatre of the landscaped garden and formal tour as it is the exigencies of druidical practice (figure 5.6).

Wherever one looks, a complex web of citation runs through the Aveburys of Stukeley and Keiller, and one that takes the monument *away from* rather than *towards* its proper late Neolithic context. The Egyptian art-deco style of the new Rawlins' Garage, while a manifestation of designerly influence that can be traced to the fascination with all things Egyptian following the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter in November 1922 (Elliott, 2008), unintentionally draws attention to Stukeley's fascination with ancient Egypt. Stukeley was convinced that the Druids had been brought to Britain by the Tyrian Hercules, a 'pastor king' of the Egyptians, introducing the original patriarchal religion that was materialized in the creation of Avebury (Stukeley, 1743, p. 70-8). He even named the largest



Figure 5.7 Keiller's carefully re-erected obelisks and stones



Figure 5.8 A clash of aesthetics – the north-west sector of Avebury



stone within the Southern Inner Circle at Avebury the 'Obilisk', in imitation of the tapering stones erected in front of ancient Egyptian temples, and evidently saw a direct genealogical connection between both. The appellation still holds, though the stone itself is now gone. In its place, and marking the positions of other stones that were broken up during the late 17th and 18th centuries, Keiller placed a series of concrete markers that he had carefully manufactured so as to be modern and clearly distinct from the original stones. Ironically, the form he chose was that of miniature obelisks (figure 5.7). The overall effect is a startling motley of citation, evocation and reference that is particularly striking in the north-west sector of the circles: here the deliberately smoothed and manicured bank (Deco) frames artfully re-erected sarsen stones; obelisks (Egyptian deco); and reassembled but still fragmentary stones that look as though they had been sculpted by Paul Nash or Henry Moore (figure 5.8).

### **What is Avebury?**

Whilst the assumption that a phase of meticulous empirical fieldwork on the part of Stukeley preceded a more creative reworking of such records held currency, the idea that the records could function as a blueprint for the original Avebury could be sustained. However, growing realization that this core assumption was flawed, makes Keiller's Avebury a true oddity. Most archaeological excavations result in the production of a substantial archive at the expense of a physical structure, rather than the other way around. Just what did Keiller put together and to what extent was it a process of construction rather than reconstruction? Whatever the opinion on the authenticity of his work, it left behind a very physical 'Avebury' that went on to have a direct and powerful impact upon the public and academic imaginations. Visitors to the excavations rose from an impressive 100-200 per week at the beginning to some 1000-1500 towards the end (Keiller, 1939, p. 229 and p. 233). When a museum was opened at Avebury in 1938 to display the finds from the excavations here and at the near-by site of Windmill Hill, it not only received 6000 visitors in its first five months but a positive write-up in *The Times* (Murray, 1999, p. 90). Keiller's Avebury also attained a prominence in the archaeological literature that persists today. For example, in contrast to the short paragraph given over to the site in Kendrick and Hawkes' influential survey of British archaeology published in 1932, there is an extended discussion in Grahame Clark's *Prehistoric England* of 1940. The latter even opened with an aerial photograph of the

henge actively under excavation and restoration (Kendrick & Hawkes, 1932; Clark, 1940).

Keiller's Avebury or, more accurately, *Keiller's-version-of-Stukeley's-Georgian-Avebury*, is visited and explored today by over half a million people a year, and in 1986 was granted the status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a designation that is itself underpinned by notions of authenticity (Larsen, 1995; Holtorf & Schadla-Hall, 1999, p. 234). This is an Avebury that has in turn generated its own records, interpretations, debates, discussions, protests and demands, yet as we have illustrated, it is one whose precise relationship to the Neolithic is not always certain. We therefore have phenomenological ruminations and archaeo-astronomical measurements of *Keiller's-version-of-Stukeley's-Georgian-Avebury* that purport to shed important light upon processes of prehistoric monumentality (e.g. Watson, 2001 & 2004; Sims, 2009a & 2009b). We also have researchers claiming to see forms (human and animal) in the stones carefully put into their current configurations not by Neolithic communities, but by Keiller, the wealthy heir to a marmalade fortune who possessed a passion for witchcraft, fast cars and archaeology, among other things (Meaden, 1999; Murray, 1999). As for the Stukeley records, the late 20th century witnessed a short-lived concern with the question of reliability, epitomized by the work of Ucko *et al.* (1991), which painstakingly compared published engravings with the original field notes and unpublished drafts in an attempt to distil the objective from the creative in Stukeley's work – essentially extracting the Avebury from *Abury*. This was an impressive piece of scholarship, characterized by ferociously detailed analyses of the surviving Stukeley archive and the ways in which the raw materials collected in the 1720s were assembled and presented some 20 years later. The aim in this work was to refute, question, challenge and otherwise interrogate the archive, rather than actively use it. Keiller's blueprint had once again become a record.

### Worshipping at the Temple

Although a developing body of work, and especially that of Ucko *et al.*, highlighted the caution with which Stukeley's *Abury* should be approached, there still exist remarkable instances of academic and pseudo-academic writing that treat this 18th-century vision of Avebury as authentic (Dames, 1996; Sims, 2009a & 2009b). Such works represent one of the more extraordinary developments in the story: researchers who deliberately and actively elect to work with

Stukeley's published syntheses rather than the archaeological detail of the late Neolithic monumental complex that is emerging from recent campaigns of excavation (e.g. Pitts, 2001; Whittle, 1997; Gillings et al., 2008; Leary & Field, 2010). The latter fieldwork is revealing a monument complex whose creation spans as much as a millennium, its final shape and form less the result of any single overarching design, than the sedimented product of creative reworking and addition over many generations. Thus, we now know that the earthwork at Avebury is of at least two phases of construction, that the stone settings within the henge are not all contemporary, and that the avenues come very late in the Neolithic sequence; a materialization perhaps of the evolution of religious, cosmological and ideological structures that took place during the third millennium BC (Pollard & Cleal, 2004; Gillings et al., 2008, p. 202-4).

In recent discussions, anthropologists have sought to demonstrate that the configuration of the Avebury complex was 'consistent with the predictions of a recent anthropological model of lunar-solar conflation' (Sims, 2009a, p. 386). Curiously, the real theoretical agenda of the work was hidden behind a critique of postmodern approaches to the interpretation of processes such as monumentality and a call for a marriage of conceptual/analytic scales through the merging of phenomenological and archaeo-astronomical approaches that would achieve a nirvana of 'methodological transcendence' that 'can reconstitute a [past] reality' (Sims, 2009a, p. 389). In Stukeley fashion, here was a search for religious truth (or, at least, an over-arching model of the development of human ritual structure) through the realization and exploration of an 'authentic' Avebury. To achieve this, the authenticity of other studies of the monument complex had to be questioned. Without even a hint of irony, the authenticity that is interrogated is not of *Stukeley's-Georgian-Avebury* or *Keiller's-version-of-Stukeley's-Georgian-Avebury*, but the prehistoric archaeological evidence that has been revealed through recent excavations.

The resultant interpretation is grounded upon the rock of Stukeley's published account which has once again adopted the mantle of unquestionable-authority originally bestowed upon it in the early 19th century by researchers such as Colt Hoare; Stukeley's *Abury* taking on the mantle of canonical text (Colt Hoare, 1821). The results of excavations on the Beckhampton Avenue undertaken from 1999 to 2003 (Gillings et al., 2008) are thus interrogated and found wanting (Sims, 2009b), because the archaeology did not provide the structural symmetry required in the model, which in turn had to conform to Stukeley's image of the monument complex in order to work. In a move that is telling of the faith that is held in Stukeley's *Abury* above that of latter researchers, the study illustrates the Avebury complex through the use of

two images: the first a 19th-century re-drafting of Stukeley's panorama of the reconstructed complex; the second Colt Hoare's plan which itself derived directly from Stukeley (Sims, 2009a, figure 1; see also figure 5.6 here).

In this dismissal of a substantial body of later research, much of which was aimed at ground-truthing the detail of the prehistoric monument through painstaking excavation, research such as this is merely continuing a tradition begun in the 1970s with the work of Michael Dames, which viewed archaeology with suspicion, equating purity of vision with primacy of observation and interpretation. Dames' debt to Stukeley was never in doubt and he relies upon his published work throughout his account. Indeed, in stating that 'there has been one previous attempt to consider the overall meaning of the Avebury monuments... by the antiquarian, Dr William Stukeley' (Dames, 1996, p. 12), it could be argued that Dames was setting himself up as the good Doctor's heir and successor. His interpretation that the complex was dedicated to the worship of the 'Great Goddess' blended elements of Stukeley, generalized folklore and the work of Marija Gimbutas (Gimbutas, 1974), with a twist of the mystical romanticism of Blake, into a heady and immensely popular cocktail. The result is a highly sexualized landscape capable of accommodating not only the serpents of Stukeley but even the gendering of standing stones introduced by Keiller. Since the aims of works such as those of Sims and Dames is to *explain* Avebury's singular purpose – its mystery – it is perhaps no surprise that Stukeley's records better fit the idea of a single coherent and profoundly esoteric plan, given they were a reflection of precisely such a scheme.

### Ancestral Values

If one significant recent trend has been the selective academic reinstatement of Stukeley's *Abury* as the authentic Avebury, a second has manifested itself in a stubborn adherence to the Stukeleian orthodoxy that the site was a temple, and a Druidic one at that. Although the equation between Avebury and Druidry was first drawn in the 17th century by the academic discoverer of the site John Aubrey (Piggott, 1989, p. 114-5), Stukeley's treatment was by far the most ornate and highly developed and it is perhaps not surprising that *Keiller's-version-of-Stukeley's-Georgian-Avebury* has proven a potent magnet for adherents of modern Druidry. As a loose amalgam of adherents to neo-pagan belief systems, modern Druidry is itself 'a construct of 20th-century engagements with (18th and 19th century) antiquarian imagination on "druids"' (Blain & Wallis, 2007, p. 11), much drawn from Stukeley's work.



As Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis highlight, these modern-day pagans are true *bricoleurs*, borrowing from disparate indigenous religious traditions, and from the evidence-sets and interpretations provided by archaeology (2007, p. 26). For many authenticity as derived from a connection to the prehistoric past is not so much an issue (Blain & Wallis, 2007, p. 11), but for a vocal faction claims of indigenous rites, ancestral legacy and direct lineage provide an opportunity to raise political voice. This has become most evident in a recent request by the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO) to have Neolithic and early Bronze Age human remains from selected sites in the Avebury landscape re-interred on the grounds that they represent the remains of their ancestors (CoBDO, 2008, p. 1). The need for reburial was couched in the language of acts of respect, love and human decency, but the sub-text was one of ancestral identification and a perceived continuity – an attempt to appropriate the success of indigenous post-colonial politics in North America and Australia, particularly that of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which was cited in the CoBDO request. Following extensive consultation, a final ruling by the National Trust (the holders of the human remains under contestation) and English Heritage went against the CoBDO request.

It is unlikely that this will be the last case in which prehistoric human remains and ancient monuments in the UK will be appropriated as part of legitimacy claims, and questions of authenticity (whether defined by experts or other interest groups) will always play their part. What remains striking in the case of Avebury is the continued resonance of Stukeley's *Abury* in such matters. Whilst it would be simplistic and misleading to claim that modern Druidry, like the physical Avebury that serves as a focus for contemporary Druidic practices, sprang entirely from the writings of Stukeley, it can certainly be argued that 'the achievement of William Stukeley had been... to turn the Druids into ancestors whom all the British could hold in common' (Hutton, 2009, p. 182). In the recent call for the reburial of selected prehistoric human remains by one sector of modern Paganism, this fundamental irony went unnoticed.

### **Authenticity, Artifice and Avebury**

It could be argued that with regard to the discipline of archaeology, authenticity was more of an explicit issue in its formative stage when the status of discoveries – sites and artefacts such as Glouzel and the Piltown remains – was key. Today the question of verification is normally provided

by scientific dating and characterization techniques, a critical approach to the interpretation of excavated data, and a much enhanced awareness of the natural and cultural processes that transform archaeological sites and deposits. Where the issue of authenticity and discussions of its relevance and meaning have been more visible is within the heritage sector (Larsen, 1995; Jones, 2010). This is where the presentation of 'correct' information and accurate reconstructions is deemed to matter, though the question is sometimes one of who this authenticity is designed to serve – the public or the professional? As Cornelius Holtorf and Tim Schadla-Hall have observed (1999), the public does not always put the same value on 'genuineness' as archaeologists.

Within the heritage world there is a growing acknowledgement that authenticity is not necessarily an inherent quality. As Sian Jones has argued 'The authenticity of objects is experienced and negotiated as a numinous or magical relationship that, I argue, is linked to the networks of inalienable relationships they have been involved in throughout their social lives' (2010, p. 199) and to regard it as in any way essential to the character of the site or landscape is at best limiting. In many ways Avebury exemplifies this point. The physical presence of Keiller's Avebury masks the considerable levels of interpretation, uncertainty and compromise that underlay its (re) construction. It also masks the extent to which the site reflects, in chalk, turf, stone and concrete, an idealized Georgian take on the idea of a temple. In Walter Benjamin's terms (1992), Avebury has performed the unusual trick of being a mechanical reproduction (quite literally) that has generated an aura more powerful than the original. There is also an intoxicating hyper-reality about the Avebury that you can today visit and wander around, made all the more visceral by the authority that its sheer physicality and apparent timelessness can muster.

So where does this all leave us, and Avebury? We *can*, if we choose, treat the Stukeley archive as a unique record of a prehistoric structure and interrogate it on those terms, ignoring the archaeological evidence of what preceded it. Alternately, rather than take a forensic approach to the various Aveburys that compete for our attention in order to validate/invalidate the academic truth claim *du jour*, we can focus instead on its strange alternating nature (flipping from record to blueprint and back again) and start to think creatively through the ironies and tensions that emerge from this – not least of which being modern Avebury itself. The deliberately inauthentic can serve to clear as productive a heuristic space as the slavishly authentic, and archaeology should not shy away from the interpretative possibilities such simulacra open up (Pollard & Gillings, 1998; Gillings, 2002; Goodrick

& Gillings, 2000; see also Lowenthal, 1992). A further, potentially productive interpretative pathway draws its inspiration from Hutton's erudite study of the ritual year in Britain and the folk practices it encompasses. This is the important realization that it is not so much the possibility that essentially prehistoric pagan practices survived in an encoded form within early historic (and contemporary) folk traditions, but why people are so desperate to believe that they might have (Hutton, 1996).

### Postscript: Time for a New Avebury to Emerge?

Rather than a historically specific image (*Abury*) of a prehistoric reality (Avebury) we hope to have shown how the former has generated a biography in many ways as rich and complex as the latter. Reaching out to embrace other times, places, histories and flows – from New Kingdom Egypt and radical currents in 18th-century religious thought to the design of gentrified gardens – *Abury's* biography has not stood apart from that of Avebury but has instead been deeply and thoroughly interwoven with it, to the point where it is difficult (indeed unwise) to tease them apart. And on that story goes.

Figure 5.9 The Avebury Cove (the 4.9-metre-high Stone I is in the foreground)



Avebury seems incapable of standing still, and the last decade has witnessed at least one concerted attempt to re-erect a fallen megalith *a la* Keiller (Mike Pitts, personal communication), a programme of work to stabilize two others, and questions being raised as to the verisimilitude of elements of Keiller's reconstruction. Perhaps the most interesting of the latter is the claim that the Cunnington stone he pointedly re-erected on the grounds that it had been placed upside down was in fact correctly placed all along (De Bruxelles, 2003). We will end with a recent example that shows that Avebury is not ready to be preserved in faux-prehistoric aspic just yet. In the centre of the northern inner circle of Avebury is a setting of enormous megaliths called the Cove (figure 5.9). Originally taking the form of a three- or four-sided box, two of the stones survive today. In 1997 the decision was taken by National Trust engineers on health and safety grounds to fence off the area of the Cove, as it was believed that the stones were progressively leaning inwards (towards the notional centre of the structure) and might topple, crushing any unsuspecting visitor that happened to be in the way. In 2003 engineering works, preceded by archaeological excavation, were finally carried out to correct the lean by excavating away the soil at the back of each stone, straightening them to their original vertical standing and then packing the bases with concrete (figure 5.10). In the case of the southern stone (I), it became clear that the stone was indeed leaning, and that this had been caused by the structural purging of the village started by Keiller and maintained by the National Trust. When the outbuildings of a row of cottages were constructed against the stones in the late 18th century, the builders had dug away the rear of the original stone socket and thus the support it had provided. Fortunately, the weight and bulk of the cottage walls acted as a satisfactory replacement, and it was only with the demolition of the structures in the 1950s and removal of the support that instability was introduced (Gillings et al., 2008, p. 153-69).

The western stone (II) was also regarded as possessing a dangerous lean, which required rectifying. However, excavation categorically demonstrated that this 4.4-metre-high megalith (weighing in the order of 100 tonnes), was in exactly the same position as when set up; the idea that it had developed a progressive lean being completely unfounded. The observation that at least one of the stones originally bent subtly towards the centre of the notional box is important as it may shed crucial light upon the original role(s) played by the stones of the structure – the looming inwards creating a very deliberate visual effect perhaps designed to choreograph or engender a sense of enclosure and awe on the part of any viewer located in its midst. What is of interest in the context of the present account is that, despite

Figure 5.10 Engineering verticality (Stone I)



this, there still existed an imperative to set Stone II vertical, the will of managers and engineers only being thwarted by its sheer size and weight. The question of why the Cove stones were *expected* to have originally been vertical utterly escaped critical discussion, though there is a temptation to draw an analogy with the aesthetic assumptions that underpinned the work of Keiller. What is clear is that we perhaps need to add the imperatives of late 20th-century health and safety legislation and fear of litigation to the rich list of ingredients that make Avebury the remarkable site it is today.

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