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Barrows, Bluestones, and the Secrets of Stonehenge

Mark Merrony interviews Timothy Darvill about his extraordinary career in prehistoric archaeology

We are privileged that Professor Timothy Darvill has given the magazine this exclusive interview. A prehistorian with a prominent international public profile, he has conducted pioneering research into the history and development of Stonehenge in the most important excavation in British prehistory. His groundbreaking research also extends to other related Neolithic monuments. He continues to lead major research projects and publishes widely on the archaeology of early farming communities in north-west Europe, and on archaeological resource management. His research takes him to many parts of Europe, and he has directed projects in Germany, Russia, Greece, and Malta, as well as in many parts of England, Wales, and the Isle of Man in order to answer key questions, which are addressed in considerable detail below.

Timothy Darvill at his home in Bournemouth in 2017. All photos unless otherwise stated are © and courtesy of Timothy Darvill.

What inspired you to become an archaeologist and a prehistorian in particular?

Being able to experience our prehistoric past at an early age hooked me. I was fortunate to be brought up in and around the Cotswolds, which really is an archaeological wonderland. It has everything: Neolithic long barrows, Bronze Age round barrows, some of the best Iron Age hillforts in Britain, extensive Roman villas, castles (most still occupied!), medieval towns and villages, and the list

Belas Knap long barrow, situated near Winchcombe in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds. It features a false entrance and independently accessible side chambers. View of Chamber C on the north-east side of the monument. Neolithic, built c. 3000 BC.

goes on. At primary school we were taken out to visit these places and I remember the headmaster announcing to my class one day that the trip he was leading would be especially interesting to Tim – we went to the Iron Age hillfort on Painswick Beacon, had a delightful picnic, and explored the ramparts. A truly memorable day! My parents were also very supportive, took me to museums and monuments, and arranged for me to participate in local excavations while I was still at school. I was a site supervisor on the summer excavations in Cirencester even before going to university. Archaeology is all about understanding the world around us, understanding how people lived out their lives. To me, prehistory, and the early farming communities in particular, were exciting subjects to study because they are so different from the modern world. Just about the only thing we can say with absolute certainty is that they were not like us!

What is your favourite prehistoric site and why?

My favourite site is the Neolithic long barrow at Belas Knap near Winchcombe in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds (page 13, bottom). It was one of the first sites that I really got to know well, and we used to visit it regularly when I was a child. The best blackberries in the area could be found beside the track leading up to it, and we spent many happy hours looking at the monument and foraging for fruit. It was also important to me because at an early age, four or five I think, my father gave me a copy of Grahame Clark's book *Prehistoric Britain* that he had bought through the book-club he belonged to. I was too young to read much of the text, but there was a photograph of Belas Knap so I knew it was an important site. Belas Knap is a classic Cotswold–Severn–type long barrow with what is often called a 'false-portal' at the end of the mound, nestling in the back of the forecourt between two projecting horns. There are three chambers opening from the long sides of the mound, and a fourth at the narrow end. It was reconstructed in the 1920s so is a great site to explore and really captures something of the scale and magnificence of these barrows built by the earliest farming communities in the area soon after 4000 BC. Around thirty people – men, women, and children – were buried in Belas Knap. But Belas Knap is challenging, and that's why I like it. So many questions open up once you start looking at it.

A key area of your research concentrates on ceremonial monuments and why they were first constructed. Has your research provided any evidence to shed light on this issue?

Belas Knap was also the reason that I became interested in the big question of why people started building monuments. The huge effort needed to build long barrows needs explanation. One of the things I have come to understand is that although we tend to seek a singular embracing explanation, things are often more complicated. In the case of long barrows they certainly contain multiple human burials, so could be seen as communal cemeteries. But the burial chambers are very small in comparison to the mounds, and some don't contain burials at all. Burial is part of the picture, but not the whole story. The mound or cairn is important, too. Look at a site such as West Kennet, near Avebury – it's nearly 100m long (below). Perhaps the size of each barrow somehow reflects the

West Kennet long barrow near Avebury in Wiltshire viewed from the east, with its impressive façade of huge sarsen stones aligned north–south. Neolithic, built c. 3650 BC.

Ronaldsway jar from Billown in the Isle of Man. It has the red, white, and black colouring common in Neolithic contexts, c. 3000–2000 BC. Height: 60cm.

power or scale of the community that built it. The presence and positioning of a long barrow may be a way that communities engraved their identity onto the landscape. We are currently excavating a long barrow called The Sisters on Abbey Home Farm just outside Cirencester and what we are finding here gives new insights (right). The barrow developed through a series of stages, with each generation extending and modifying the structure. What we see in its final form, what gets handed down to us, is the culmination of efforts spread over perhaps seventy or a hundred years, four or five generations. And where this all takes us is an appreciation that the process of building a monument may have been more important than the final product; indeed, it was perhaps never 'finished', but always in a state of becoming. As I said earlier, one thing we can be certain about is that these people were not like us; they did not see the world as we do!

You are also concerned with the role of material culture – notably pottery and stone tools – in the lives of Neolithic communities. What symbolic meanings did these materials have for those who selected and used them?

Material culture is a code-word that archaeologists use when referring to all the things that people make. As such, it ranges from monuments of the kinds we have already touched on, and many other kinds as well, through to tools, weapons, and pottery and all the other paraphernalia of everyday life. For most periods we only find a small subset of what people once had in their lives, generally items made from long-lasting material such as stone and clay. All the other stuff, by far the largest portion, made of wood and leather and cloth and all sorts of other organic material has long since vanished, or is found only in very rare circumstances. Why this is important to archaeology is because artefacts talk! Not with language that can be heard, but with language that can be seen – non-verbal communication, as it is called. Decoding such communication is far from easy, but objects of all kinds are imbued with meanings so that the materials used to make them, the decoration applied, the colours and textures, and where things are used (or not used) and deposited can say a lot about key themes such as identity, gender structures, power relationships, trade networks and interactions between communities, and so on. Amongst Neolithic farming communities along the Atlantic coastlands of Europe three colours seem to have been really important, as they are found in monuments, houses, and pottery: black, white, and red (left). What did they mean? Probably many specific things, but at one level perhaps night, day, and life.

Another important area of your research is concerned with how people understood, structured, and occupied the landscapes they created for themselves. I wondered what your opinion is on this and how it informs your research into the role of the past in shaping places and people's lives today?

Landscapes are in a sense material culture at a big scale. People don't live their lives within the confines of a 'site'; they experience the world at many different scales radiating out from the hearth, the home, the settlement, the neighbourhood, the territory, and

Timothy Darvill with two of his students at Bournemouth University excavating an antler pick on the floor of a quarry at The Sisters Neolithic long barrow near Cirencester in summer 2019. Photo: courtesy of Gay Gilmore.

ultimately the edge of the world as the furthest distance it was possible to travel. Recent scientific analysis has shown that individuals in prehistory moved vast distances. The Amesbury Archer, an elderly man buried in a grave at Amesbury near Stonehenge in about 2300 BC, grew up in the Alps before travelling to southern Britain as a teenager. What is important for archaeology is that people make the world they inhabit both physically and metaphorically. They give structure to space in the way they situate and build their houses, settlements, monuments, and burial places. They embed beliefs and understandings of the world into those structures: the long barrow, for example, can be seen as the 'house of the dead' that was built in much the same shape and layout as the houses of the living. Beyond everyday experience the world is structured through myths and legends and stories of what lies beyond the horizon. And we need to think about the skyscape as well. How did prehistoric people explain and rationalise the movements of the celestial bodies, the Milky Way, and things such as shooting stars? Skyscape archaeology is an exciting and relatively new area of research.

You have undertaken fieldwork at Carn Menyn in Pembrokeshire, a site that has been linked as a source of the Stonehenge bluestones, with the late Professor Geoff Wainwright. What were your findings and how do these relate to other suggested sources in this area?

Geoff and I had been working on Stonehenge through the 1980s and early 1990s, mostly on plans for moving the visitor centre and sorting out the roads in the area. Much of that has now been achieved, with the undergrounding of the A303 south of Stonehenge the only remaining challenge. During that work we came to realise that, compared with the vast scale of research in the Stonehenge landscape, very little had been done in and around the Preselis, which had been recognised as the source of the Stonehenge bluestones since the 1920s. Geoff was born and brought up in Pembrokeshire and following his retirement as Chief Archaeologist at English Heritage moved back to his home county. That gave us a base and a lot of local contacts so we developed a programme of survey and excavation. Our focus was on sites that were broadly contemporary

Part of the fieldwork area in 2019 showing a broken pillar stone at Carn Menyn in the Preselis, Pembrokeshire.

Geoff Wainwright and Timothy Darvill at Stonehenge, taking a break from their extraordinary excavation in 2008.

with Stonehenge, and included work at one of the recognised bluestone quarry sites on Carn Menyn (page 16, left). What we found is a complicated and structured landscape whose use extended well back before the time of Stonehenge. Indeed, it was probably that depth of interest in the place that underpins the reason why a handful of outcrops on and around the Preseli Hills provided the bluestones for Stonehenge. Transporting the stones was really about transporting the power of place. Understanding the bluestones means understanding their sources and this, we believe, is bound up in the perceived magical properties of the stone for healing and a close connection with sacred springs in the Preselis.

In 2008 you excavated Stonehenge with Geoff Wainwright. It would be interesting to hear your thoughts on this extraordinary, once-in-a-generation dig in light of your ongoing research.

Excavating inside Stonehenge was a great privilege and is yielding many insights on the construction and use of the monument (page 16, right and below). It was a logical extension of the work we were doing in the Preselis as it allowed us to explore the use of the bluestones at their destination as well as their source. We took a lot of soil samples to work on in the laboratory after the excavation itself and at the time I don't think we realised just how long it would take to work through all that material. Three things are very clear though. First, is that previous work has underestimated the Roman and later activity at the site. It seems to have been seen as a sacred place well beyond prehistory, and continues to be considered in this way today. Indeed, as part of our work we involved the modern Druid community by holding opening and closing ceremonies. Second is that the bluestones were treated very differently from the sarsen stones. The sarsens provided the framework of the monument and once in place stayed put. We see the bluestones as the power of the place and they were regularly moved about and broken up to make talismans and lucky charms, such as miniature axes. Third, we are wrong to seek one unifying explanation of Stonehenge. It was a long-lived structure that changed purpose and meaning over time, starting as an enclosed cremation cemetery and later becoming a ceremonial structure unique in the whole of north-west Europe and itself probably embedding many roles in the lives of its builders and users.

The excavation team at Stonehenge in 2008 with some of their finds within the sarsen horseshoe of the monument. The dig, the first for 44 years, captured the imagination of millions of people when it was broadcast in two episodes of *Timewatch* on the BBC.

In a recent television production and in media coverage it has been proposed that a circle of bluestones was originally erected at Waun Mawn in Pembrokeshire around 3300 BC and re-erected at Stonehenge around 3000 BC. What are your thoughts on this research?

Certainly the Waun Mawn story captured attention in the media, and one might ask why that was? One factor is, of course, that interest in Stonehenge seems to be insatiable, so any snippets of news get lapped up. Another is that the basis of the story is the legend wrapped up in the account of Stonehenge by the medieval monk Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was writing in the 1130s. He undoubtedly made some things up, but underneath the tales of Merlin and his magic powers there are some interesting observations that most probably come from oral traditions and earlier texts. Cutting a long story short, we are told that the stones we now see at Stonehenge were brought from Africa by giants to a place called Mount Killarus in Ireland, erected there as a circle, and then captured by Merlin and brought to Stonehenge because of their perceived healing powers. There is plenty of scope for interpretation here! The African connection is something to think about, and the idea that the stones were believed to have healing powers accords with other folklore and the use of bluestone for making talismans. One way of untangling the link with Ireland is to accept that Geoffrey was geographically confused and that he meant south-west Wales, which was indeed the source of the bluestones at Stonehenge. Whether they once stood as a stone circle at or near their source in the Preseli Hills is a matter for debate, but the published evidence from Waun Mawn is far from convincing. What has been uncovered to date is not like any of the other stone circles from this period, all of which are characterised by a full ring of regularly placed pillars and a narrow but clearly defined entrance. At best we have a half-made circle at Waun Mawn, but some of the proposed sockets could be the result of stone clearance and the three reasonably secure stones are better seen as a stone row rather than part of a circle. More work is obviously needed, but the case illustrates the excitement and attraction of prehistoric archaeology: posing questions and trying to figure out answers while always remembering that back then they didn't think like us!

Timothy Darvill, OBE, is Professor of Archaeology in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at Bournemouth University.

Further Reading

Darvill, T. (2006). *Stonehenge: The Biography of a Landscape*, Stroud.

Darvill, T., and Wainwright, G. (2014). 'Beyond Stonehenge: Carn Menyn Quarry and the Origin and Date of Bluestone Extraction in the Preseli Hills of South-West Wales', *Antiquity*, 88.342, 1099–1114.

Darvill, T. (2016). 'Roads to Stonehenge: A Prehistoric Healing Centre and Pilgrimage Site in Southern Britain', in A. Ranft and W. Schenkluhn (eds), *Kulturstraßen als Konzept. 20 Jahre Straße der Romani*, Regensburg, 155–166.

The midsummer solstice at Stonehenge in 2019, arguably the most celebrated annual cosmological event in the world.