Written on Stone

Written on Stone:
The Cultural Reception
of British Prehistoric Monuments

Edited by

Joanne Parker

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FOR RONALD HUTTON

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INTRODUCTION

JOANNE PARKER

Five years ago, I first visited South Zeal – the Dartmoor village where I now live – and was shown two massy slabs of rock standing erect in the Oxenham Arms Inn. One slab is in the little lounge behind the bar, inconspicuously set into the wall (see Fig. i). The other stands proudly in the centre of the breakfast room, as a pillar for the ceiling (see Fig. ii). One of these rocks, I was told, was a 5000-year old megalith – part of a stone circle around which, more than eight hundred years earlier, lay monks had chosen to build the medieval hostelry which had preceded the current pub. But which was the megalith, and which was simply a stone? The correct answer was the stone set into the wall, which according to local legend is so massy an edifice that its base has never been uncovered – despite various attempts at excavation. But what of the other stone? No one seems certain why the monastic builders, if they had built around a genuine megalith, should have felt the need to add another upright stone to the building – this time more prominently positioned.

It is possible that the second stone was a late addition, introduced at the end of the sixteenth century when the Burgoyne family developed the hostelry (assuming it ever existed) into a small manor house. Or it might have been added even more recently, when the manor had become an inn, to satisfy those visitors who had heard the tradition about the megalith but felt less than fulfilled on seeing the stone itself, incorporated with little dignity or drama into the wall. If so, the Oxenham Arms megalith would not have been the first or the only stone to have disappointed sightseers. A peeved visitor to Stonehenge in the late nineteenth century lamented: "the average description of Stonehenge which sets forth the grandeur and stupendous size of these stones, is pumped up fudge and flapdoodle of the damnablest kind".[1] To avoid such disillusionment, day-trippers were advised to approach the edifice with their carriage blinds down – otherwise, viewing it at first from a distance it might "appear nothing, and by the time you are at it all astonishment cease".[2] It seems that prehistoric monuments require the viewer to bring to them as much, or more, meaning as they find in the remains themselves. Certainly, I have often seen visitors

to South Zeal admiring the breakfast-room upright, touching it tentatively to sense a little of its ancient atmosphere. The fact that it is not the right stone doesn't seem to have any effect on the enjoyment that it gives, or how authentic the experience feels to those willing and happy to be impressed – which is perhaps unsurprising, since in geological terms at least, the stone is certainly of a similar vintage to its more officially acknowledged neighbour.

Earlier this year, I escorted an archaeologist friend to the Oxenham Arms and was soberly informed that no part of the building was medieval and that the stone in the bar wall was as unlikely to have ever formed part of a stone circle as its rival in the breakfast room. This has not stopped me from regularly showing the megalith to less sceptical acquaintances – or from continuing to view it as a site of local interest, a village personality, and an old friend. In a sense, that is what this book is about. The collection of essays is not interested in the still unresolved questions about the origin, original use, and authentic meaning of the prehistoric monuments of the British Isles. It is not concerned with their prehistory. Rather it deals with the history of the stones: with the ways in which they have been viewed, the meanings that have been attributed to them, and the significant impact that they have had over the centuries on British life and culture – from motivating artists and authors, to acting as the source of inspiration for the traffic roundabout.[3] It is thus as interested in stones commonly believed to be megaliths – like the Oxenham upright, or the foundation stones of the chapel in South Zeal – as in the "real" stone rows and circles (many of them re-erected in the nineteenth-century, in any case) that can be found on the moor up above the village.

The Prehistory of the Monuments

In her recent study of Stonehenge, the historian Rosemary Hill asserted: "Stonehenge does not belong to archaeology, or not to archaeology alone".[4] Likewise, this book is not written primarily for archaeologists – or not for the interest of archaeologists alone. It should also be of interest to social and cultural historians, to those interested in fine art, literature or film, and to anyone fascinated by the construction of national, local, or counter-cultural identities. For this reason, while this is not a book about the archaeological understanding of prehistoric monuments, it is perhaps of use to begin with a very brief introduction to the current archaeological thinking about those remains.[5]

South Zeal is not unusual in its wealth of prehistoric – or allegedly prehistoric – monuments. Almost every parish in Great Britain can boast

some relic of the prehistoric past. Those remains include stone circles, stone rows, and single standing stones, as well as hillforts, boundary earthworks, and hut circles, and more esoterically-named remains such as dolmens (which have a large, mushroom-like capstone resting on four or more legs), chambered cairns (a rounded or conical heap of stones used for burials), barrows (circular or rectangular earth burial mounds), and henges (a circular area enclosed by an earth bank and ditch). To get a basic idea of their antiquity, as Julian Cope pointed out succinctly in his recent gazetteer of Britain's megaliths: "were Jesus Christ to have visited even the most recent of those great megalithic Stone Age monuments, that sacred place would have been older to Jesus than he is to us".[6]

More specifically, the oldest of these remains are from the period between 3200 and 2500 BCE. Those very early constructions comprise mainly of dry-stone enclosures – perhaps used for livestock, perhaps for permanent habitation, perhaps as temporary dwellings – as well as round cairns, dolmens, and long barrows in which tens of bodies were interred together. Both types of construction – the enclosures and the burials – have been linked to the expansion of farming which took place around this period.[7] The more settled populace and the surplus labour that arose from successful livestock-husbandry and agriculture (as opposed to hunting and gathering) would have provided the manpower and the community-identity necessary for monumental tombs, and the barrows may also have served as territorial markers.

Several thousand tombs from that early period are still evident in the British countryside. In the centuries after 2500 BCE, however, the building of such edifices seems to have declined and new classes of monument emerged. These included round barrows, in which far fewer individuals were interred, and which took over from long barrows – perhaps indicating a shift in social structures. Cursus monuments – long, lozenge-shaped ditches with internal banks, that may have been processional ways – also emerged at this time. And this was also the period when henges began to be built – circular enclosures, looking rather like defensive structures, but with an earth bank set outside (rather than inside) a ditch, making them useless for defence. There is currently a consensus that the henges were ritual monuments, but that most probably had several functions, and changed their role over time. Some seem to have been half-way between burial-monuments and enclosures. Timothy Darvill suggests that they may have defined neutral territory where rival social groups could meet: that they were "focal points in the complicated exchange systems which were obviously developing at this period".[8] It is also possible that the henges, because of the vast reserves of labour needed

to construct them, were symbols of power and prestige – it's been suggested that Avebury, for instance, took 1.5 million man-hours to build.[9]

From around 2400BCE, a new sort of circular monument began to be constructed – built not of earth, but of stone. The earliest stone circles to be built were small and appeared only in the far north and west of Scotland and England but by 1700 BCE, larger circles with widely-spaced stones were being constructed across the British Isles. Both multiple circles and single circles were common, and around the same period stone rows also began to be built in some areas – often in conjunction with the circles. Like the earlier cursus monuments, the rows were perhaps for processional purposes. The circles themselves, like the earlier henges (inside which they were sometimes built) are thought to have functioned as both meeting places and ritual spaces. The care with which their stones were positioned also suggests a new interest in celestial movements. Indeed, it has been widely argued that they may have been aligned so as to allow observation of the rising or setting of either the sun or the moon, and could thereby have functioned as simple calendars for the timing of rituals.

Today, hundreds of stone circles survive in the British Isles. Less disturbed by ploughing, livestock, and erosion than earthen structures, they remain the most instantly recognisable and best-known of Britain's prehistoric monuments, and continue to attract widespread popular interest. Best-known of them all, is Stonehenge in Wiltshire. Numerous texts on the possible origin, use and meaning of Stonehenge have been published to satisfy the popular interest in this monument – particularly in the last three decades. Nevertheless, it requires at least a brief mention here in order to clarify exactly how it differs from the other British stone circles. As Aubrey Burl memorably states in the introduction to his study of stone circles, "to begin a book about stone circles by referring to Stonehenge is like starting a discussion about birds by describing the Dodo. Neither is a typical example of its class. Both are above average in size, of peculiar construction and both represent a dead-end in evolution".[10]

Stonehenge, as we know it today, was constructed gradually in three phases, over the course of fourteen or fifteen hundred years – the equivalent of nearly seventy generations at that period.[11] As its name suggests, when it began life around 3000BCE, it was not as a stone monument but as a simple earthen henge, which was perhaps used as a site for the internment of cremated remains.[12] This monument may have gradually fallen into disuse, but around five hundred years later, a wooden structure was probably added it. It was not until the third phase of construction – long after the completion of most of Britain's stone circles

– that stones were added to the monument, making it gradually recognisable as the structure we see today. This phase itself took place over around four hundred years, with the smaller "bluestones" and the larger "sarsens" added gradually – in an order over which there is still fierce disagreement. So Stonehenge was both used and constructed over a far lengthier period than Britain's other stone circles – a period stretching from the stone age into the dawn of the bronze age. Unsurprisingly, therefore, it also combines a far wider range of architectural styles. Its horseshoe arrangement of stones is more like Breton monuments than other British structures, while its famous "trilithons" – constructed from two upright stones and one horizontal stone lintel – have been classified as "an imitation of a timber ring", rather than a relative of the more common stone circle.[13]

The History of the Monuments

That, then, is the brief and rough outline of the prehistory of Britain's stone age and bronze age remains. This book continues their story into the historic period, surveying over eight hundred years of rediscovery, study, superstition, inspiration, fear, restoration, and destruction. In certain periods, naturally, there was more widespread interest in prehistoric remains than in others, as different generations saw their own anxieties, beliefs and concerns reflected to different extents in the mysterious lives of the prehistoric builders. Religious turmoil in the seventeenth century led to a variety of responses to prehistoric remains. The Romantic Period spawned a fascination with the obscure and primitive which led – among other results in the nineteenth century – to the coining of the term "megalith", which still designates a large stone forming part of a prehistoric monument.[14] And in the 1960s and '70s, the so-called "Celtic Renaissance", the development of environment activism, and the growth of neo-pagan religions all contributed to a resurgence of the phenomenon which the cultural historian John Michell has famously dubbed "megalithomania".[15]

Those identifiable periods of intensified interest are reflected in the focus of many of this book's chapters. Others address periods – like the early twentieth century – when only a fascinating minority turned away from more culturally dominant interests, and towards the remains of prehistory. The chapters are arranged in broadly chronological sequence, beginning with "Megaliths and Memory" – Ronald Hutton's broad introduction to the ways in which megaliths have been viewed across the centuries. Hutton's study opens by addressing the vexing problem of

divining how medieval thinkers viewed prehistoric remains, before turning its attention to the association between megaliths and druids which developed in the early eighteenth century and survived tenaciously until the 1950s. In particular, it challenges the powerful and persistent belief that folk traditions about megaliths preserve echoes of pre-Christian belief – or even of the rites for which the monuments were originally built – and calls for a general rejection of this doctrine of cultural "survivals" among archaeologists.

The second chapter is likewise interested in folklore, but addresses the association of prehistoric remains not with druids, but with the devil. In particular, "The Devil's Chapels" traces the ways in which Satan displaced giants and other mythical figures in folklore connected with prehistoric sites. It investigates when exactly this shift took place, and why it did so in England, but not in Wales or Ireland. Like the first chapter, it also attempts the difficult task of discovering how prehistoric remains were viewed before the seventeenth century – in this case, whether they were feared and dreaded from an early date.

Chapter Three, "Breaking Megaliths" turns its attention to the seventeenth century, when tens of megaliths were destroyed at Avebury. The study reveals the extent and organisation of this operation, which must have involved nearly all of the village's population. It corrects the lack of research into Avebury's destruction, presenting it as a subject of study in its own right and arguing for stone breaking as a lost "craft tradition". Like Ronald Hutton and Jeremy Harte, Gillings and Pollard also investigate the connections between prehistoric remains and religion – in this case, the links between stone breaking and non-conformism.

"Standing Stones and the Poetry of Prehistory" turns its attention to the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century and to depictions of megaliths in poetry and fiction. It examines the ways in which Romantic and Victorian authors popularised antiquarian traditions of viewing megaliths, but also the new conventions which they themselves introduced – many of which endured until the late twentieth century, and some of which in turn influenced modern archaeological descriptions of the stones.

The early twentieth century period is dealt with in Chapters Five and Six, by David Matless and Sam Smiles. In "East Anglian Stones", Matless, like Ronald Hutton, turns his attention to interpretation of the folklore of prehistoric remains as the survivals of primitive beliefs. This chapter focuses, however, on the pervasiveness of that interpretation in the 1920s. In particular, it examines the responses of early-twentieth-century regional antiquarians to the lack of megalithic remains in East Anglia and Norfolk by claiming that natural boulders moved during glaciation, had fulfilled

the same function in prehistory. These claims are investigated in the context of the development of regional and national identities, as well as competing attempts at the time to locate the "birthplace of man".

Chapter Six – "Imagining the Past" – turns to the 1930s, identifying it as a cultural moment which produced both the concept of "artistic modernism" and the notion of "British prehistory". Smiles investigates the surprising interactions between artists and archaeologists in this period – both the interest of archaeologists like Stuart Piggott and Alexander Keiller in the arts, and conversely the meetings with archaeologists and the visits to prehistoric sites made by the artists John Nash and John Piper. Like "Standing Stones and the Poetry of Prehistory", this chapter interrogates any notion of simplistic oppositions between artistic and objective approaches to archaeology.

The following chapter, "Pulp Archaeology", begins its survey of prehistoric remains in the popular media from the 1950s. Neil Mortimer traces the direct influence of archaeological discoveries upon cartoonists, film-makers and television producers, as well as their use of the folkloric motifs associated with megalithic monuments. In particular, the chapter examines the prevalence of prehistoric sites in the genre of science-fiction during the 1970s, and analyses their importance during that period as cultural symbols, and more specifically as icons of Britishness.

The 1970s is also addressed in Chapter Eight, "Mystics and Mavericks", in which Andy Worthington identifies the different factors which led, in that period, to Avebury being reinvented as a spiritual centre. Worthington examines Avebury's role in the "earth mysteries" movement that was born in that decade; its use by neo-druidic orders in the 1980s; and the interest that feminist activists took in the monument from the 1980s into the 1990s. Finally, he considers its use by anti-roads campaigners – an interest which continues to the present day.

Worthington's focus on Avebury, feminism and "new age" movements is developed further in Chapter Nine, which examines the reception of standing stones in Cornwall between 1970 and the present day. Shelley Trower traces the association that folklore about living stones had with Cornish nationalist discourses from the 1970s, looking in particular at the fiction of Donald Rawe and Daphne Du Maurier, and the folklore collections of Michael Williams. The chapter then investigates how nationalist claims of connection with prehistoric sites became linked at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century with feminism, environmentalism, and what might be dubbed "eco-nationalism".

The period between the 1970s and the present day receives further attention in chapters ten and eleven, which examine the relationship of prehistoric remains to popular music and to children's literature in those decades. Timothy Darvill's "Right Here! Right Now!" considers the use of prehistoric remains in the popular music industry –as images for album covers, as sets for live performance, and in the nomenclature of both bands and albums. Darvill analyses the way in which monuments were used in late-twentieth-century music to signify the past generally, but also to suggest power and permanence on the one hand, or ambition and megalomania on the other. Stonehenge receives particular focus, but is considered alongside rock-art more generally, and in the context of musical interest in the Pyramids and Ziggurats.

Darvill's chapter demonstrates how new archaeological research and the growth of counter-cultural interest in prehistory both fed into late twentieth century popular culture. This is also the case in Charles Butler's "Children of the Stones". Butler examines the use of prehistoric sites in children's fantasy fiction, tracing the way in which authors have drawn on a mixture of folklore and mythology, the theories of early antiquaries like William Stukeley, New Age beliefs about megaliths, and even recent conflicts between archaeologists and protestors. In particular, the chapter focuses on the novels of Alan Garner and Catherine Fisher, demonstrating how in their works prehistoric monuments often function as a means of connecting with the past – or as portals to other worlds.

The children who read Catherine Fisher's fiction today may determine the fate of Britain's prehistoric heritage tomorrow. This book ends by looking from children towards the future, with Bob Trubshaw's concluding chapter on "Processes and Metaphors" – a theoretical overview of the ways in which we construct and reconstruct ideas about the past. Trubshaw investigates how the meaning of prehistoric sites is produced and consumed in today's society – whether that is via the "folkloric" transmission of information using the internet, the publication of academic research, or as a result of the activities of neo-pagans at prehistoric sites. Echoing Hutton's chapter which opened this book, he suggests that our mythmaking about the past should be viewed as a process. The chapter's ultimate argument also represents the rationale and principle of this book as a whole: that the past is multiple and man-made. Thus, if we are to effectively interpret and fully understand the prehistoric remains of that past, a variety of disciplines and a range of approaches – both traditional and unconventional – will need to work together. This jointly-authored book – as a collaboration between archaeologists, folklorists, historians,

journalists, English scholars and others – is, we hope, one step in that direction.

Notes

[1] Charles G. Harper, *The Exeter Road* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 200.
[2] Richard Fenton, *A Tour in Quest of Genealogy through Several Parts of Wales, Somersetshire and Wiltshire* (London: Sherwood, 1811), 268.
[3] On Stonehenge and the history of the traffic roundabout see Rosemary Hill, *Stonehenge* (London: Profile, 2008), 80.
[4] Hill, *Stonehenge*, 3.
[5] This brief introduction draws on Timothy Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain* (London: Routledge, 1987) and Aubrey Burl, *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
[6] Julian Cope, *The Modern Antiquarian* (London: Thorsons, 1998), 3.
[7] See, for instance, Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain*, 48, 67.
[8] Timothy Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain*, 88
[9] Timothy Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain*, 92.
[10] Aubrey Burl, *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (Yale University Press, 2000), 1.
[11] Rosemary Hill, *Stonehenge* (London: Profile, 2008), 10
[12] Aubrey Burl, *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (Yale University Press, 2000), 349.
[13] Aubrey Burl, *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (Yale University Press, 2000), 371.
[14] The term was first used by F. C. LUKIS in *Archaeologia*, 35 (1853), 233.
[15] John Michell, *Megalithomania* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982)

CHAPTER ONE

MEGALITHS AND MEMORY

RONALD HUTTON

The purpose of this contribution is to look at the ways in which British megalithic monuments have been viewed through the centuries, at different levels of society. It is an exercise in seeing how attitudes change and traditions mutate. As such, it takes its place amid an exciting matrix of related research, concerned with topics such as the history of the discipline of archaeology, the folklore of prehistoric sites, the historical development of ceremonial landscapes, and the manner in which structures surviving from earlier periods seem to have been regarded in later prehistory and early historic times. Some authors, notably Richard Hayman, have already produced work that focuses directly on the themes of this paper. What is attempted here is the construction of a broad framework for the history of attitudes to megaliths in Britain, which in varying degrees builds on the achievements of others, complements them, and provides alternative perspectives to theirs.

Retrieving medieval viewpoints is extremely difficult, as contemporary references are very few and material evidence equivocal. It is no longer possible, as has often been done in the past, to project back folklore recorded in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and assume that it represents timeless popular tradition.[1] What is certain is that the medieval British did not regard prehistoric monuments as a single class of phenomena, any more than they do now. In a category of its own was Stonehenge, which was clearly recognised as a unique structure built by human hands, or at least for human purposes. The prevailing explanation for it, apparently invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the early twelfth century, was that it had been designed by the wizard Merlin (himself half a demon by blood, and so equipped with superhuman knowledge) as a war memorial to post-Roman Britons treacherously murdered by the invading Saxons.[2]

Then there were barrows, some with megalithic chambers, which were often recognised as burial mounds. This was simply because human bones were commonly found in them when people dug into them, as were grave goods, sometimes of precious metal. This perception was well established by the opening of the medieval period. It is built into the most famous Anglo-Saxon text of all, *Beowulf*, which could have been composed at any point between the seventh and eleventh centuries, though an earlier date seems currently more favoured. The climax of the story is based on the existence of "a treasure in a huge burial mound, containing a hidden passage" This treasure was "ancient", representing the "immense ancestral wealth of some great race"; it was "pagan gold".[3] The *Life of St Guthlac*, which dates from the early eighth century, and so may be older or younger than *Beowulf*, portrayed its hero as setting up a hermitage in a chamber in an old earthen mound at Crowland in the Lincolnshire Fens. This structure had been uncovered by men digging into the tumulus in the hope of finding valuable objects. As the saint concerned had died only about twenty years before the *Life* was written, the description is probably an accurate one.[4] The twelfth-century Viking inscriptions in the chamber of Maes Howe attest that the association between ancient sepulchral mounds and treasure was also found at the far north of Britain. To my reading, they represent something like a Norse chain-letter, keeping a running joke about a particular treasure going.[5] During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the rifling of barrows was regarded as an accepted means of gaining wealth, and one which the English royal government attempted to control, by issuing licenses to individuals to carry out such work. The most exalted of these was Richard, earl of Cornwall, the brother of Henry VIII, who was authorised to open mounds on his Cornish lands and keep the proceeds.[6]

Not all the attention paid to ancient burial mounds was primarily concerned with grave goods. In or around the year 1178, the monks of St Albans opened some near their abbey in the hope (which was fulfilled) of finding an ancient skeleton which they could identify with the martyr Amphibalus, and add to their collection of saintly relics.[7] From the beginning of the medieval period, also, tumuli were sometimes regarded specifically as the resting places of heroes or giants: the *Historia Brittonum*, completed in Wales in 830, identified a large one in what is now northern Monmouthshire or southern Herefordshire as traditionally the grave of Anir or Amr, "son of the warrior Arthur".[8]

Finally, there were standing stones, whether singly, or in alignments, or in circles. The problem here is that there seems to be no solid evidence that anybody in medieval Britain thought that any of these, except

Stonehenge, was a monument. In the mid seventeenth century the general opinion seems to have been that the huge megalithic complex of Avebury was a natural outcropping of stones.[9] This could have been a traditional perception of such structures, and the explanation of why they apparently find no place in medieval literature. It is plausible that, to a society which believed the whole earth to be God's creation, the notion that natural phenomena should appear shaped by an intelligence presented none of the difficulties that it does today. After all, until the opening of the nineteenth century fossils were commonly considered to be animal forms spontaneously generated from the rocks, or ornaments planted in the interior of the earth by the deity as flowers were planted in the exterior.[10]

This problem is linked to another: that there seems to be equally little solid evidence that any person in medieval Britain regarded prehistoric circles or tombs as religious structures. For many years it has been suggested that some of the stones at Avebury were buried in the fourteenth century as part of a campaign to violate a heathen temple. Recently, Joshua Pollard and Andrew Reynolds have argued that the burial of stones was a haphazard business spread over a long period; so that there is no evidence for any such campaign.[11] Paul Ashbee has noted that the chambered barrows of Kent were systematically wrecked in the late thirteenth century, by people who came from outside the locality, and favoured the hypothesis that this was an act of religious desecration. He himself, however, also considered the possibility that it may have been the work of treasure-hunters, and this remains open; his readiness to accept a spiritual motivation for the damage was explicitly influenced by what he then regarded as the proven example of such action at Avebury.[12]

What is clear is that, once the middle ages had ended, patterns of interpretation both began to alter and to diverge between nations. By the 1520s, the Scottish historian Hector Boece was confident that stone circles had been pagan ceremonial monuments. Furthermore, and most significantly, he stated that this was by his time a generally accepted belief among his compatriots: these "roundis of stanys" were "callit the ald temple of goddis be ye vulgare pepill".[13] Perhaps this was simply because those in the hinterland of Aberdeen (his own university) looked even less "natural" than most. They form a large, thickly-concentrated group known to archaeologists today as "recumbent-stone circles", because they have a standard feature of a massive block lying in the southern part of the circumference between two unusually tall uprights. This looks very much like an altar, which may be just what it was. The recognition that they were ancient religious monuments persisted in early modern Scotland. In 1692 another leading scholar at Aberdeen, James Garden, could declare

that the "general tradition" concerning stone circles was that "they were places of worship and sacrifice in heathen times", and that "the vulgar" called the recumbent stone "the altar".[14] Whether this was a tradition confined to Aberdeenshire, and whether it had been present all through the middle ages, the records do not tell. As for the Irish, their native literary and oral tradition gave a major role to the Druids, as the priests and sages of pre-Christian Ireland. There was a firm tradition among some of them, by the early seventeenth century at the latest, that prehistoric chambered tombs had been Druid altars.[15]

As Daniel Woolf has recent emphasised, the sixteenth century produced a new consciousness among English scholars of the alien nature of the past and of a relative chronology in it. This served to separate them, in a novel fashion, from perceptions of it held by people in general.[16] In the case of megaliths, popular and learned attitudes certainly both developed and diverged, but the divergence was also between English (and Welsh), Scottish and Irish scholars. The Scots picked up a new enthusiasm for Druids, as heroic and patriotic national ancestors, that had been pioneered by the Renaissance Germans and French. It was the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France that took this straight from Paris to Aberdeen, and so in the 1530s the Druids were grafted onto the Scottish disposition – whether old or very recent – to believe that stone circles had been pagan temples.[17] Partly in reaction against this Scottish enthusiasm, English and Welsh intellectuals took a different tack. Some, such as William Camden and Walter Charleton, attributed specific stone circles to the Danes, as part of a growing realisation, propelled by the energy of Danish and Swedish antiquarians, that megalithic monuments also existed in Scandinavia. Inigo Jones and John Webb proposed the Romans as the builders of Stonehenge.[18] The Welsh continued to ignore their own prehistoric remains, concentrating on their medieval bardic literature as the expression of their nationhood.[19]

In the same period, West Country folklore, from Somerset to Cornwall, enlisted them in a new cause: that of sabbatarianism. This process could only have commenced with the campaign against Sunday games and dances, which appeared in the later reign of Elizabeth. The common theme of the new folk tradition was that stone circles represented groups of sportspeople or revellers who had been petrified for enjoying their pastimes on Sunday. It may have been spread by preachers, but the apparent complete absence of any reference to it in surviving sermons suggests that in large part, at least, it was a genuine folk motif. It is first recorded in Cornwall in 1602, specifically as a belief of "the country

people", and was attached to several monuments in the region by the early eighteenth century.[20]

Political and intellectual developments were, however, working against this diversity. The British peoples were drawing closer together, in a process epitomised by the union of England and Scotland in 1707. At the same time the pace of antiquarian research was quickening, and becoming much more collaborative and argumentative, with societies being founded to serve it in the metropolis. As a result, the period between 1660 and 1740 saw a growing realisation among English and Welsh intellectuals that their land contained a large number of ancient stone structures which demanded explanation. The result was a series of arguments, in which the claims of Druids, Romans and Danes were deployed against each other, with equal success.[21]

How far any of this rubbed off on popular perceptions is hard to say, but two particular case studies suggest that much of it did. At the Rollright Stones, Camden's theory that the monuments were a Danish sepulchre got mixed up in the seventeenth century with a local legend about a petrified king.[22] At Avebury, the growing interest of antiquaries in the stones was followed immediately by a systematic campaign by villagers to destroy them. Mark Gillings and Joshua Pollard have demonstrated that the scale of effort involved went far beyond that needed for simply utilitarian purposes such as getting building stone.[23] Furthermore, the stone breakers were mostly Protestant dissenters who had concentrated in the village to evade the Clarendon Code that persecuted their meetings in their longer-established centres.[24] It seems reasonable to conclude that, having got the point that they were living around a pagan temple, their response was to try to annihilate it.

In the tussle among antiquarians, it was the proponents of the Druids who won, after almost a hundred years of disputation. This was because of a particular sequence of events. It began with the formation of the Royal Society to promote British science at the Restoration. This attracted Scots, who told their English colleagues about their long-held belief that megaliths were the work of Druids. One of those colleagues was the Wiltshire squire John Aubrey, who applied the theory to British monuments in general, inspired by the surveys of national monuments made by Scandinavians. The Druid theory was, however, too novel for most of the English, and Aubrey was too timid and disorganised to publish his ideas. Instead, they circulated among scholars, mostly at Oxford, between the 1660s and 1730s, until they found an adherent able, long-lived and well-connected enough to give them victory. This was William Stukeley, who won it for them almost single-handed, in his two famous

books on Stonehenge and Avebury published in the early 1740s. What was so impressive about them was the unprecedented quantity of detailed fieldwork behind them, itself propelled by the intense religiosity that had eventually turned Stukeley into an Anglican parson.[25]

With arguments of that quality now behind them, the Druids could take advantage of the cultural context that had built up in their favour during the past hundred years. They represented some of the very few historical figures that the newly united British state could have in common. One of its biggest problems was that the traditional heroes of its component peoples had mostly achieved their fame in conflict with each other. The Druids now supplied them with a united and (thanks to their new association with megaliths) tangible and visually impressive past. Furthermore, the linkage made by some writers between Druids and wild natural places, especially oakwoods, exactly suited the new literary cult of the beauty and wisdom of the natural world, which was a hallmark of the early Romantic Movement. To the more prosaic sort of Georgian, the association of Druids with oaks burnished their patriotic credentials still further, as these were the trees that, above all others, built the royal navy and thus guaranteed British power. The result was that the second half of the eighteenth century saw a celebration of Druids as wise and noble ancestors among the Scots, Welsh and English alike, embodied in literature, music, drama, painting and sculpture.[26]

It seems to have pervaded the whole of British society within about forty years. By the 1790s, Welsh country people were happy to identify any standing stone as a Druidical monument, if an English tourist showed interest in it.[27] In that decade a Glamorgan stonemason, Edward Williams, forged documents that purported to prove that the Welsh bardic tradition preserved Druidic teachings and the form of the ceremonies that had taken place in those circles.[28] In London in 1781 a master builder founded an Ancient Order of Druids to supply middle and working class men with a safe space in which they could combine conviviality with a taste for music. By 1830 it had lodges all over England, being especially strong among artisans and factory workers in the new industrial areas of the Midlands and North.[29] It should not be wondered that the message that Druids and megaliths were synonymous, and summed up ancient Britain between them, should have travelled so fast between classes and regions. It was provided not only in all sorts of print, but in stage productions and civic sculpture in towns. John Fisher's delightfully dotty musical, *The Masque of the Druids*, was a huge popular success at Covent Garden in the winter of 1774-5.[30] The growth of domestic tourism in the final decades of the century ensured that the yokels of any district with impressive

megaliths would find themselves regularly supplied with educated visitors anxious to inform as well as question them.

The first half of the nineteenth century represented the high noon of the British identification of themselves, and prehistoric monuments, with Druids. One of the most convenient aspects of the latter is that the Greek and Roman texts that described them had provided two different images with equal utility. In one, the Druids had been great philosophers, scientists, teachers and priests, promoting peace between their own people and rallying resistance to foreign foes. As such, they were easily assimilated to Christianity, by suggesting that they had practised the true religion of the Old Testament patriarchs. Either they had simply retained this in the dispersal of humanity after Noah's Flood, or they had learned it from Abraham before being shipped to Britain by the Phoenicians. It should never be forgotten that the megaliths most familiar to the British between the sixteenth and ninteenth centuries were those in the Bible, erected by Jacob, Moses and Joshua as memorials to people and events. This made the assimilation of the Druids to the Hebrew patriarchs very easy.[31]

Opposed to this was the other view of Druidry in the ancient texts, as a religion of gloom, ignorance and gore, with a concentration on human sacrifice. This could also be assimilated to the Bible, by representing it as another aspect of the "abomination of the heathen", and megaliths as idols. In this reading, Britain was rescued from the Druids by the twin improving forces of Roman civilisation and Christian piety. It was an attitude more attractive to those with an adversarial approach to religion, and it had a natural affinity with the evangelism and imperialism that were two hallmarks of nineteenth-century culture. In the new ideology of progress, getting rid of the Druids could be regarded as the apprenticeship that fitted the British for reforming or eradicating native religions in Asia, Africa or Polynesia.[32]

Sometimes the impact of this second view on popular belief can be precisely identified. In 1754 the clergyman and antiquary William Borlase published his famous book that linked many prehistoric sites in Cornwall to gruesome scenes of human sacrifice. A hundred years later, local people told tales of how some of those places had been occupied by ogres who sacrificed human captives.[33] At Pontypridd and Llantrisant in Glamorgan, during the nineteenth century, some local professional men and artisans established a revived Druidic religion, which blended Christianity with Hindu and other beliefs to recreate the patriarchal faith of the Old Testament. They were roundly denounced by local preachers, and today it

is still said that a cliff in the neighbourhood is haunted by the ghosts of murderous Druids, still trying to lure victims to their deaths.[34]

It is also possible to find examples of the opposite process in action, whereby popular tradition resisted an attempt to impose images of Druids upon it. One of the best comes from Nottingham, where, in 1850, an anonymous author, supported by a local newspaper, published a reinterpretation of some of the cave systems for which the city is noted. Folk tradition held that Robin Hood and his band had stabled their horses in some of these. Folk memory held that some of the features associated with them, that suggested they had been worked by human hands, were of relatively recent date. The author of the pamphlet set out to reshape these traditions, and to claim for Nottingham a large and impressive Druidical monument to compare with the megaliths possessed by many other regions but sadly missing from his own county. He had read most of the principal authors on Druidry to publish in the previous hundred and thirty years, and applied a medley of their ideas to suggest that feature after feature of the caves and some associated earthworks could be taken as evidence for Druid practice. He was uncomfortably aware that his enterprise was at variance with local beliefs, and lambasted the latter as "idle tales", informing his readers that "verbal testimony is not always to be relied on, and, therefore, such desultory reports may be rejected".[35] His efforts seem to have been in vain, for the notion that the phenomena concerned represented an imposing ancient monument took no root in the city.

The consensus that megaliths were Druid temples fractured at the top of intellectual society in the 1860s, as a result of the importation of more Danish ideas. This time the latter emphasised the division of prehistory into successive stone, bronze and iron ages, each one produced by the invasion of a new, culturally superior people. This framework pushed the Druids to the margins of prehistory, as the priests of the last, Iron Age, invaders. It thereby broke their link to megaliths, which were now recognised as Neolithic or Bronze Age. This view suited the growing Victorian preoccupation with racial differences, and fitted the experience of colonial expansion across North America, Australia and parts of Africa. It was also, however, directed against a view of the past that took the Bible as the starting point for any narrative. As such, it was coupled with the new geology, with its revelation of the great age of the earth, and the theory of the evolution of species. It empowered a set of secular-minded antiquarians to displace the clerical scholars who had been dominant in writings upon ancient Britain for the past two centuries, and still ran the universities. There was, in fact, no pressing need for the Druids to leave the megaliths: it was quite possible to argue for a continuity of religion

across invasions, and a few authors did. The latter were, however, arguing against the intellectual tide: the Druids were expelled because they had been too successfully absorbed into the earlier, Bible-based, scholarship.[36]

The old orthodoxy – which associated Druids and megalithic structures – had been accepted by people in general within a few decades. Despite a much more professional group of national intellectual authorities, with much better national systems of communication, it took a hundred years for the new view of prehistory to take hold. By the 1870s it was already firmly accepted by the scholarly establishment, but at the end of the century members of the latter were complaining bitterly about the attachment to Druids exhibited by an ignorant and wilful populace.[37] In the 1950s they were still doing the same thing;[38] in fact, it was only in the 1960s that a mixture of books, radio and television finally got the mid-Victorian message across.

This was partly because the Druids had long, literally, remained on the map. It was not until the 1920s that the Ordnance Survey stopped calling prehistoric stone rings "Druidical circles" on the one-inch maps which had by then been for decades the mainstay of the rambling public. It was mainly, however, because the new scholarship had nothing to put in the Druids" place. Being confined to material remains, it could not supply the public with any confident reconstructions of the beliefs that had raised the megaliths or the rites that had occurred in them. Late twentieth-century novelists who have set stories in the era of Stonehenge, such as David Burnett, Edward Rutherford and Bernard Cornwell, have mostly recycled the old image of bloodthirsty Druidry without calling the people concerned Druids.[39] The main diference is that, whereas Victorian novelists had depicted women as innocent victims of Druidical savagery, in the recent stories, they are as likely to be found wielding the sacrificial knife as going under it.

Nor can it be a coincidence that, as soon as the general public finally let go of Druids when contemplating prehistoric monuments, a luxuriant new alternative archaeology immediately sprang up. This also centred on wise astronomer priests, concerned with channelling stellar and earth energies in stone circles pretty well exactly as Stukeley's Druids had done. Like that of the formerly imagined Druids, moreover, this system tended to collapse ritual structures from all parts of prehistory, and from early Christianity, into a united whole. All that was new was the addition of long, straight, invisible lines upon the landscape, linking the tangible ancient monuments and representing real or imagined currents of natural power; these "leys" were effectively spiritual equivalents to the railways and motorways that link modern centres of political, commercial and