On the Salisbury Plain in southwest England stands a circular structure of large sandstone rocks known as Stonehenge. The monument has altered little in recent centuries, apart from a few fallen or removed stones.

Despite this changelessness, Stonehenge has recently been a happening place, with archaeological excavations providing extensive new information to help us understand its original character.

Since the 1960s, Stonehenge and the surrounding plain have attracted repeated archaeological explorations. These have revealed the history of Stonehenge itself and its place in the settlements and structures nearby. Discoveries have occurred at a rapid pace, with the Stonehenge Riverside Project announcing in October that they discovered a 33-foot diameter "mini-Stonehenge" less than two miles to the northeast. This find is the most dramatic evidence, although not the first, indicating how Stonehenge was connected to its environs.

Archaeologists now know Stonehenge was constructed in three phases over a period of 1,500 years, from approximately 3000 B.C. to 1500 B.C. In Phase I, a large henge (330 feet in diameter) was dug. A "henge" is a circular trench with a raised bank outside it built from the excavated earth.

Phase II, from approximately 2900-2500 B.C., wooden structures within the henge were built on large tree trunks sunk into the ground. These may have been buildings or arrangements of posts in significant patterns. Unfortunately, not enough of the postholes have been identified to be able to determine their specific use.

During both phases, the henge site was used as a burial ground rather than daily living. Several dozen buried cremations have been found, but remains from residential life are almost non-existent.

Phase III of Stonehenge lasted roughly from 2500-1500 B.C. At this time, stone circles replaced the wooden structures. The massive stones were arranged and rearranged until they took the pattern represented today. There were two circular structures of large Sarsen sandstone rocks with raised lintel stones on top of them separated by a ring of smaller, Welsh Bluestone boulders. Burials of cremated corpses continued during this period.

It was also at this time that Stonehenge's builders connected the shrine to the surrounding countryside by building a wide avenue, about 1.75 miles long, to the nearby Avon River. The recently discovered mini-Stonehenge stands on the Avon's banks where the road meets the river.

The Stonehenge road's first straight stretch is oriented with the rising sun on Midsummer's day and the setting sun on Midwinter's day. Stonehenge is built at the exact latitude where these points stand 180 degrees opposite each other.

Less than three miles north on the Avon River lies the Durrington Walls site, the largest henge in England. Unlike Stonehenge, this is a residential site where migratory peoples lived during the winter months. It was occupied primarily during Stonehenge's third phase. If estimations prove correct, it is the biggest Neolithic village in Britain identified to date.

Durrington Walls' inhabitants connected the village to the river by a short avenue, built in a manner similar to Stonehenge's road. This straight avenue runs in the direction of the sunrise on Midwinter's day.

Professor Michael Parker Pearson of Sheffield University, one of the leaders of the Stonehenge Riverside Project, hypothesizes that the three sites were connected by an annual burial ritual. At dawn on Midwinter's morning, he suggests, the corpse of a high-status person would be carried in procession down the avenue from the Durrington Walls settlement towards the river. Symbolically, it would be carried toward the rising sun.

The corpse would then be placed on a boat and ferried south to "mini-Stonehenge." Here, the corpse would be cremated during the day.

Toward dusk, the ashes would be gathered and another procession would bear them to Stonehenge itself. As the sun began to set, the parade would proceed directly toward it, symbolizing the final presence of the dead individual on Earth. As the light faded, the ashes would be buried. The day's procession symbolized the deceased's movement from the land of the living to the realm of the dead.

Thanks to the ongoing archaeological excavations, our understanding of Stonehenge and its surroundings is beginning to move from baseless speculation to explanations founded on solid information concerning its own time. In coming years, the newly discovered and analyzed data will lead to further knowledge of this important, ancient site.


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