

# Magic Avebury: Prehistoric Monuments and Their Spiritual Significance

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## 1 Introduction

Avebury is a village South of London where some of the most important Neolithic sites in Europe are located. In this paper I will give a description of some of the monuments in the area and discuss some interpretations of their use in ancient and recent days.

What fascinated me most about these ancient monuments is that they are in use by modern day pagans. Around the area there are left over flowers and other signs of ritual offerings by the neo-pagans. I had a vivid discussion with Sam Fleming because I do not condemn the use of Neolithic monuments for ritual use. She wrote A plea to practicing pagans, an article about the ritual use by neo-pagans of ancient monuments (Fleming, 2000), an article on psychic vandalism around prehistoric monuments. Sam opposes any neo-pagan use of the monuments. Her arguments are that it causes a lot of physical as well as spiritual damage to the monuments.

I will argue in this paper, that using these monuments for ritual purposes is the best way to preserve the monuments as it transforms them from mere ancient curiosities to places of meaning.

## 2 West Kennet Long Barrow

The West Kennet Long Barrow is one of 27 similar structures in the area. It is dated about 3,500 BC and was used in ancient times as a burial place. The barrow can be entered from the front and there are five separate chambers inside. The contents of the chambers included the bones of at least 46 individuals. Each person was represented only by a few, often scattered, fragments of bone. Many of the individuals buried were children or infants. It is interesting to note that young children actually had sufficient status in the society of ancient Avebury to qualify for burial in the tomb (Malone 1989, 76). In many other ancient and certain modern societies children below a certain age

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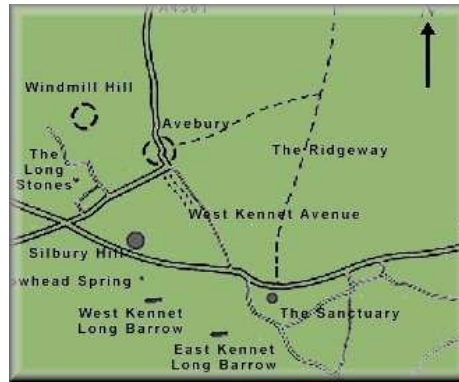


Figure 1: Avebury area map

or prior to their formal initiation into adult society, are not considered to have enough status for inclusion in such collective burials.



Figure 2: West Kennet Long Barrow

Inside the barrow were many visible traces of neo-pagan use of this site. This barrow, which used to be a place of death and mourning has become a contemporary temple for personal contemplation and group rituals.

#### West Kennet Avenue

The avenue originally consisted of about 100 pairs of standing stones. These stones form a corridor some 15 meters wide and has a length of about 1 kilometre. The stones appear to have been carefully selected for their shape. Generally stones of two different types are standing opposite each other. Some people interpret these as male and female stones.



Figure 3: West Kennet Avenue

Only a small part of the original avenue is visible today. Through the centuries many stones have been removed to use for other, more profane purposes. Many stones have been demolished in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by religious fanatics trying to wipe out all connections with the ancient pagan way of life. On the spot where archaeologists have found traces of such demolished stones we now see small concrete markers. Thinking about all the demolition, the concrete markers are like gravestones, marking the place where the original stone once stood.

### 3 Silbury Hill

Silbury Hill is a remarkable feat of Neolithic civil engineering; standing almost 40 meters high and it is surrounded by a kind of moat which occasionally fills up with water. The depression is the silted up quarry for the material to build the hill.

The reason the ancients built this gigantic monument is unknown to us today, and many speculative theories have been put forward: In some neo-pagan circles this outline is believed to be a Neolithic figure of the squatting pregnant goddess with Silbury Hill itself as the fecund womb, giving birth to all things. To some Silbury Hill is a giant sundial or even a natural battery (Crystal, 2004).

None of these neo-pagan interpretations have a direct link with the intentions of the original builders of the site. They should be viewed as to give new meaning to these structures, within the context of neo-pagan religion.

Attaching new meaning to these old monuments is a good way of dealing with an ancient sites like this. It certainly gives the place more depth and interest as when one just looks at it as some gigantic Neolithic civil engineering project.

The neo-pagan explanations of Avebury are contemporary mythology, countering the disenchantment of our technological world.



Figure 4: Silbury Hill

## 4 Avebury Henge and Stone Circles

The great circle is formed by a deep henge with a ditch on the inside. The irregular circle has a diameter of approximately 350 meters. The shape formed by the ditch is no way near the geometric perfection of the more recent Stonehenge circle, but more like an amorphous 'D' shape, divided by two causeway entrances into four unequal arcs. The bank on the outside of the ditch is also very irregular at the top and curls itself like a serpent around the village. On the inside of the ditch there used to be a stone circle with erected sarsens, but most of these stones have disappeared.

Inside the great circle there are two separate smaller circles. Inside each of these circles there are also erected stones. The original function of the monument is not known and just as in the case of the Silbury Hill, many speculations have been made about the function and use of the circles.

The irregular shape of the circle rules out any astronomical function, like the Stonehenge circle. It most likely was used as a central meeting place for the community to celebrate festivals and perform rituals.

Inside one of the circles used to be a big stone called 'the obelisk', the original stone has disappeared and is now replaced by a concrete marker. The marker is the focus some neo-pagan activity. Quite a few small crystals, gemstones and other objects are put near the stone, as some kind of offering.

We can never know the original meaning of these monuments, but by using them in our own way in present time, we can bring them back to life and turn these monuments into places of meaning instead of tourist attractions to keep people from being bored for a day or so. If we only rely on the scientific perspective of these monuments, then we can also easily be detached from them.

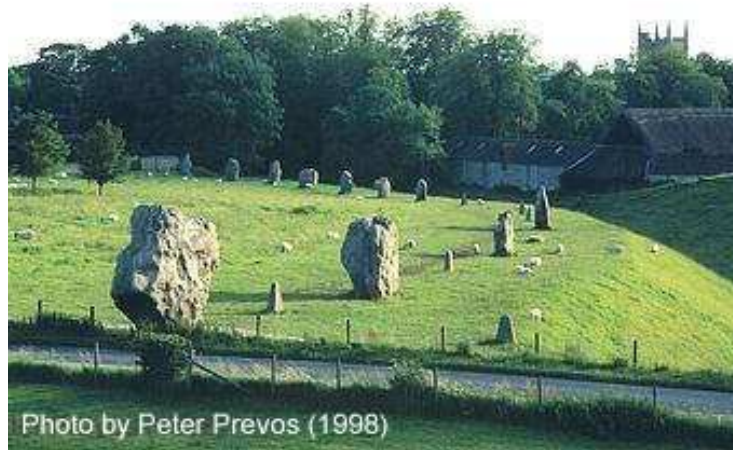


Figure 5: Avebury Henge

## 5 An ethical perspective

Using ancient monuments for neo-pagan rituals is a controversial subject. In modern society we all agree that preserving ancient monuments is very important and there are many reasons we do this.

### 5.1 Physical damage

Absolute preservation of monuments is impossible. Everything in the universe is subjected to decay and also megaliths will eventually crumble and disappear. But this damage is inevitable and therefore has to be accepted.

Human usage of the monuments causes the greatest damage to any monument. In the case of the Neolithic monuments around Avebury there are basically three different users: visitors, archaeologists and neo-pagans.

Archaeologists who research the sites and excavate artifacts from its soil cause considerable damage to the sites. Contemporary archaeologists therefore try to excavate as less as possible. The earth is an archive, but paradoxically, by 'reading' it one has to destroy its original configuration. This is an ethical dilemma all archaeologists have to deal with. One has to balance the benefits of scientific knowledge between the destruction of the original configuration of artifacts. To reduce the negative effects of excavation they are done in an extremely careful way, trying to record as much as possible. But one is never able to record everything and destruction is inevitable.

Culture is, always has been and always will be, a continuous process of destruction and creation. When performing neo pagan-rituals we cause damage. The benefits to our culture of pagan rituals are more important then the damage caused by this activity. Physical damage should, however, always be avoided, don't leave rubbish behind, don't make drawings on rocks or perform any other intentional damaging act. Leave nothing



Figure 6: Neo-pagan offering in West Kennet Long Barrow

but footprints and take only photographs is a rule of thumb that applies very much to the monuments and their use in neo-pagan ritual.

## 5.2 Spiritual damage

Sam Fleming (2000) writes in her article *A Plea to Practicing Pagans* that neo-pagan use of ancient monuments also causes spiritual damage. She writes how the ‘feel’ of a popular site like Stonehenge has deteriorated. She writes:

“Thus, for me, Stonehenge, while being an undeniably powerful place, has too many decades of tourism and strife etched into its original pattern, and I cannot feel the call of the Mother Goddess at Avebury, for the pattern is irreparably cracked and fractured and I suffer intense headaches whenever I am near the inner circle.”

Using an ancient site for ritual does change the energy of the site. But also this is inevitable like the physical deterioration. Ancient energies have gone even long before there was any neo-pagan activity. It is a romantic illusion trying to maintain the spiritual energy of ancient cultures. All we can attempt is to reconstruct these cultures and try to learn from this, although every reconstruction will be laced with 21st century cultural influences. The original intent of these monuments is lost forever.

## 6 Some final thoughts

It is impossible to make reliable inductions about the belief systems of the people who have built the ancient monuments. Most theories on ancient religion are based on analogies with modern day primal cultures as interpreted by anthropologists who have studied them.

The ideological subsystem of a long gone culture can be reconstructed by studying primal cultures which are still around today and comparing the known aspects of the ancient culture with the contemporary one, assuming that - *ceteris paribus* - when the material aspects are the same the ideological subsystem will be similar.

We must guard not to confuse scientific reality of what we can know for sure about the ancient past and modern day interpretations. They both have their own value but only together they can help towards a better understanding of our world.

The photo below shows a contemporary work of art, designed by Robert Morris. The work is called Observatory and is inspired by ancient monuments such as Avebury and Stonehenge. For this monument we do know the intentions of the artist who designed it. Morris clearly stipulated that this object is merely a work of art and should both be used in a 'practical' way for any kind of ritual by neo-pagans. The intention of the work is to experience a sense of space when walking through it.



Figure 7: Robert Morris, *Observatory* (1977), Flevoland, the Netherlands

Some people also try to re-live the ancient times by constructing their own stone circles. Go to the website of the Geo Group to find out more on this subject.

How will future archaeologists and other enthusiasts interpret these objects Will future neo-pagans write about mysterious cultures and magic rituals held at these sites?

Ancient monuments have become new spiritual sites with an almost completely different function as in the ancient days. This is the best way towards a deeper understanding of the ancient concepts of reality. Learning about the roots of Western culture, our pagan heritage, we can redeem a some of the mistakes that have been made in the name of Christianity (which is based on Judaic and Hellenistic concepts, rather than our own cultural history) of the past fifteen hundred years.

## References

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