

British Museum di Londra

The World of Stonehenge

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Towering above the Wiltshire countryside, Stonehenge is perhaps the world's most awe-inspiring ancient stone circle.

Shrouded in layers of speculation and folklore, this iconic British monument has spurred myths and legends that persist today. In this special exhibition, the British Museum will reveal the secrets of Stonehenge, shining a light on its purpose, cultural power and the people that created it.

Following the story of Britain and Europe from 4000 to 1000 BC, you'll learn about the restless and highly connected age of Stonehenge – a period of immense transformation and radical ideas that changed society forever.

The human story behind the stones reveals itself through a variety of fascinating objects. Among these are stone axes from the North Italian Alps, stunning gold jewellery and astonishing examples of early metalwork including the Nebra Sky Disc – the world's oldest surviving map of the stars. A remarkably preserved 4,000-year-old timber circle dubbed Seahenge also takes centre stage in the show, on loan for the very first time. All these objects offer important clues about the beliefs, rituals, and complex worldview of Neolithic people, helping to build a vivid sense of life for Europe's earliest ancestors.

Informed by ground-breaking recent archaeological and scientific discoveries, this landmark exhibition offers new insight on one of the world's great wonders, bringing the true story of Stonehenge into sharper focus than ever before.

AN INTRODUCTION TO STONEHENGE

What is Stonehenge? How old is it? And why was it constructed? Find out how and why Stonehenge was built and learn more about the people creating these extraordinary monuments and their beliefs in Britain, Ireland and continental Europe 4,500 years ago.

The ancient stone circle of Stonehenge is known around the world, surrounded by myths, folklore and speculation. But who built it and what went on there?

It's a story that transcends where the monument stands in Wiltshire in the south of England, and reaches far into continental Europe. Let's take a closer look ahead of our next major exhibition – *The world of Stonehenge*.

Stonehenge was constructed about 4,500 years ago at around the same time as the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. Despite their differences, these distant sites had much in common. Most importantly, the desire and ability to bring together – often over long distances – the people, materials, objects and ideas required to undertake creative feats that remain compelling after millennia.

Far from being static places, monuments like these have their roots in the changing religious, political and social practices of their era. To unravel the many mysteries these famous sites still hold, they must be set in the wider context of their time. The story of the landscape that Stonehenge was built in, the people who built it, the objects they carried and the world it belonged to provide an opportunity to see the monument with new eyes.

What is Stonehenge?

Around 5,000 years ago, people in Britain, Ireland, Germany and France starting building large monuments in the landscape, some of these we refer to as 'hengés'.

So what is a 'henge'? A 'henge' is a term, originally coined by British Museum curator Thomas Kendrick in the early 1930s, used to describe a series of ceremonial monuments defined by ditches and banks of soil, usually circular or oval in shape, used to enclose a sacred space. Strangely, despite its name, Stonehenge is not a true henge! This is because, according to Kendrick's definition, a henge is supposed to have the bank outside the ditch. At Stonehenge the opposite is the case. The usefulness of the term is questionable and insignificant by comparison with the social and religious role played by these important monuments.

When was Stonehenge built?

Scientific dating techniques and painstaking archaeological research undertaken around the monument over the last few decades have brought the timeline of the site into focus. It is not possible to talk about 'one' Stonehenge – the monument was built, altered, and revered for over 1,500 years. That is equivalent to around 100 generations – it is worth pausing to let the sheer length of time sink in!

The first Stonehenge was built around 5,000 years ago and comprised of 'bluestones' transported on a remarkable long-distance journey, or more likely a series of journeys, from west Wales. The term 'bluestones' refers to a type of blue volcanic rock that were specially quarried in the Preseli Mountains. They were transported on sledges, taking approximately 40–60 days to make the 200km journey from Wales to Wiltshire. The epic journey the stones made enhanced their value, meaning and symbolic significance.

At this time, the monument served as a cremation cemetery and it is estimated that possibly 150–200 people were buried there. Analysis suggests that several lived and died in west Wales before their remains may have moved with bluestones to become part of the monument. Many objects from this period have been found buried with the dead – including a beautifully crafted mace-head made of banded Gneiss (a type of rock with distinctly coloured bands), probably brought from the north of Scotland and symbolising the authority associated with several important religious centres across Britain and Ireland.

By the time the first monument at Stonehenge was raised 5,000 years ago, the surrounding landscape was already an established and impressive place. A considerable number of similar ceremonial complexes emerged across Britain and Ireland around the same period. The monumental enclosure just a few miles away at Larkhill enshrined solstice alignments as early as 3750–3650 BC, raising the possibility that Stonehenge's key solar alignments marking the longest and shortest days of the year were prefigured by one of the earliest monuments built in the landscape. It may have inspired the construction of the 'first' Stonehenge using the Welsh bluestones.

Around 500 years later, the monument underwent a major transformation. The bluestones were rearranged, and the great sarsens (a type of hard silicified sandstone) were painstakingly moved, each requiring at least 1,000 people to transport them the 25 kilometers from their source. Each of the massive stones were pounded into shape and raised into the central setting of uprights and capping lintels – the familiar image we know today. This work required unprecedented co-operation, planning and patience in the name of social and religious service. There were perilous and dramatic moments, and the looming fear of failure must have stalked the inspired and innovative builders.

How is Stonehenge connected to the sun?

When the sarsens were raised at Stonehenge around 4,500 years ago, they enshrined an important solstice alignment within the fabric of the monument. The centrality of the solstices

at Stonehenge, other henge monuments and stone circles suggests that linking the monument to the cycles of the cosmos was an expression of religious and symbolic ideas.

At Stonehenge, the axis of the stones at its centre marked the position of the rising midsummer and setting midwinter sun. On midsummer, the sun rises on the horizon approached by the Avenue and would be framed by the upright known as the Heel Stone. On midwinter, the sun sets in the opposite direction, between the two uprights of the tallest trilithon at the heart of the monument. Recent examination of the surfaces of the sarsen stones has shown that great care was taken to shape and dress those that framed the sun on these auspicious occasions when the sun was at the extremes of its solar journey and the fortunes of the community were thought to hang in the balance.

Across Britain, Ireland and continental Europe, monuments of equal standing to Stonehenge were being raised between 5,000 and 4,000 years ago. It is estimated that there are around 1,300 of these stone circles still standing. Distinctive objects, decorative motifs and art from this time also convey new religious and social practices and principles. In Orkney in the northern isles of Scotland, some of the most impressive feats of ancient architecture were underway as stone circles, henges and sophisticated stone-built villages were constructed alongside grand houses of the dead, such as at the Ness of Brodgar and Ring of Brodgar shown below.

In northeast Ireland, along the Brú na Bóinne, massive stone passage tombs like Newgrange and Knowth were constructed with long, stone-lined passageways leading to a central chamber. The magnificent tomb at Newgrange (shown below) constructed around the same time as the first monument at Stonehenge, was designed to let light into the interior of the tomb through an ingeniously placed opening in the roof, illuminating the long passage with new light at the midwinter sunrise. The intentional illumination of burial chambers by the sun at turning points in the year has clear metaphorical associations with rebirth and regeneration, and would no doubt have spoken to communities about the cyclical nature of time, the journeys of celestial bodies across the sky and of humanity's place in the wider cosmos.

The flint macehead from deep in the chamber at Knowth shown below is a miniature masterpiece worthy of its final resting place. Carved from a single, colourful nodule of flint, it is one of the most elaborately decorated objects unearthed in Britain and Ireland from this period of remarkable stone-working at every scale.

The sun was a dominant element in the world of Stonehenge. For farming communities, the length of the days and the turning of the seasons was central to the patterns of life and religious belief. As people started to transition to using metalwork around 4,000 years ago, gold was turned into jewellery and cult objects (see below) imbued with the power of the sun.

Is Stonehenge related to Seahenge?

In 1998, a well-preserved timber circle emerged from the shores of Holme-next-the-Sea, on the coast of Norfolk in the east of England. This unique survival was called 'Seahenge', in a reference to its similarity to timber circles that once stood in the Stonehenge landscape. The circle had originally been built on a saltmarsh, between land and sea. In the wide horizons of this flat landscape, the land appears to touch both sea and sky. It consisted of 55 large oak posts, many of which were half-split trunks from 15 to 20 substantial oak trees felled from the same piece of oak woodland. A narrow entranceway was positioned exactly to align on the sun's path – the midsummer rising sun illuminating the interior of the monument. The posts were tightly packed with the bark-covered sides facing outwards, creating the form of a giant tree.

Inside the circle is the base of a mighty oak weighing two and a half tons, its roots turned towards the heavens like branches. The tree had been hauled to the site and maneuvered into place using a rope made from honeysuckle vine. This powerful vision invokes trees of life from other cultural traditions, including *Yggdrasil*, a huge ash tree that linked different worlds in

Norse cosmology. Inversion of the everyday world may have brought the other world closer within the confines of the timber circle.

From a study of the tree rings, it is known that Seahenge was built in the spring or summer of 2049 BC, at a time when stone tools and weapons were rapidly being replaced by metal as the material of choice for social and economic life and for offerings to supernatural forces. During that period, circles of wood and stone were in decline. Seahenge was constructed near the end of a religious tradition that had lasted for almost a millennium.

Why did Stonehenge fall out of use?

In the centuries that followed the raising of the great sarsens, burying bodies with valued objects on sacred land became the dominant way of expressing cultural and spiritual meaning across Britain. At Stonehenge, hundreds of burial mounds were raised for the illustrious dead. In fact, the site has one of the densest concentrations of surviving burial mounds anywhere in Britain. The emphasis of people's labour had shifted from building large-scale monuments requiring massive communal effort to the smaller-scale construction of mounds that reflected relationships between individuals, families and communities.

Even in these changing circumstances, Stonehenge was still at the centre of religious and cultural life.

Around 3,500 years ago, there was little perceptible activity or building work at Stonehenge. This date marks a major threshold. Rather than being an active place where episodic acts of construction and modification had previously renewed the circle's vitality, Stonehenge became a monument in stasis, a situation that has continued to the present day. Several archaeologists have suggested that the circle was already in ruins by the middle of the second millennium BC, although undoubtedly the monument remained a powerful symbol.

Stonehenge stands not for a landscape, region or even country, but for the generations of people who have made meaning from an enduring place in a changing world.





