

MORE MYTHS FOR A MEGALITH

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The Stone of Folly

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Images on reverse from William Cobbing's collection of
Albert Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus' books

DOWN STAIRS

AT GREAT BRAMPTON HOUSE

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much as gaze because "everything is older than we think".⁷ Knowledge comes by looking, but also by breaching the skin of the landscape's body.

Welcome to Arthur's Stone: A Late Neolithic Chambered Tomb Where a Giant Fell. (Dogs on leads)

"Ruin must be a fantasy, veiled by the mind's dark imaginings." — Rose Macaulay⁸

At OS reference 3189 4312, on the broad shoulders of Merbach Hill, between Bredwardine and Dorstone, stands Arthur's Stone - the remains of a chambered tomb of the late Neolithic period dating from between 3700BC and 2700BC. Its orientation approximately follows a North-South magnetic pole. The megalithic monument is formed of nine upright stones, with a capstone estimated to weigh more than 25 tonnes. Originally the 22 meters wide earthen mound upon which the stones stand would have covered the skeletal structure to form a central chamber; over millennia this has eroded away. Today the mound is most pronounced on the east side, an aspect self-taught archaeologist Alfred Watkins noted in *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club* in 1928: "It must be kept in mind," reads his address to the club, "that the method of hoisting the huge capstone to the top of its supporters was almost certainly by a tall mound of earth, up which the stone was slid, either on wet clay or on rollers."⁹ It would have been an effort involving the whole community. Although the Golden Valley is rich in prehistoric archaeology, the preservation of Arthur's Stone is unusual. County archaeologist Dr Keith Ray believes this is because during medieval times Herefordshire was heavily populated and much of the surrounding landscape would have been divided into fields to be farmed - many stones would have simply been extracted.

Mound-side English Heritage interpretation literature claims the chamber has never been excavated, but comparable examples in the region have been found to contain incomplete skeletal remains of several people, together with flint flakes, arrowheads and pottery. Ella Mary Leather, in her book *Folklore of Herefordshire* (first published 1912), tells a different story:

"The dislodgement of some of the stones led to certain protective work being carried out in 1901, when the leaning stone, one of the tallest separate monoliths, was placed in an upright position. During the work of excavation, stone hammers, heavy mauls for dressing the stone, and chips were found, and not a single metal tool of any kind was discovered, indicating so far that the stone were erected previous to the bronze age. The mauls were heavy, unpolished, and not fixed in handles."¹⁰

Later, in July 2006, at the time of repairs were made to the monument's perimeter fence¹¹, excavation, topographic and geophysical survey. The geophysical survey indicated that two distinct strata (different ages) were used in its construction. Material was discovered which demonstrated conclusively that the surviving passage and chamber were constructed within a long mound.

There is at least consensus that the monument was built as a tomb - this it seems, however, was not its sole use. In its use and design visibility is an important factor: the chamber, on the peak of Merbach Hill, is at a fulcrum of different looks. At the front is an isolated stone - perhaps, ventures English Heritage, a visual focus for ceremonies: "Built on summer pastures Neolithic people could have gathered at the calm on a seasonal basis." According to county archaeologist Dr. Keith Ray, the pitch of Arthur's capstone mimics a hill-top profile beyond the valley in Monmouthshire, and faces its direction in mutualistic acknowledgment.

Boring Landscapes
Geology, pioneered in the Victorian era, radically expanded and updated concepts of Earthly time. Suddenly, vertiginous spans dwarfed the lives of humans, diminishing anthropocentric illusions: species of animals and plants had come into existence, lived, and been obliterated, long before humanity appeared.¹ In 1783 the Quaker Thomas Storey observed cliff-face strata near Scarborough that convinced him Earth was "of a much older date than the time assigned in the Holy scriptures."² By the time Henry De la Bech was appointed director of the Geological Survey of Great Britain in 1835 - his task to "colour in the geology" - evidence had accumulated that suggested the prehistory of Earth was not thousands of years, but millions. "The Fall of Man," writes the historian Keith Thomas, "could no longer be held responsible for nature's physical characteristics; the earth and the species on it had not been created for the sake of humanity, but had a life and history independent of man."³ Similarly, in the biological sciences, Charles Darwin's nascent theory of evolution further diminished humankind's sovereignty on Earth by claiming its common ancestry with apes, and rejecting creationism: Earth and all upon it was not created by divine design, but by the struggle of things for existence. Despite the foundational evidence of geology and evolutionary science, still today assumptions of human separation from and superiority over nature persevere. In secular times this assumption is unlikely a continuing allegiance to the attitude that: "As man is made for the sake of God, namely, that he may serve him, so is the world made for the sake of man, that it may serve him."⁴ Alongside real needs - food, shelter and warmth for a growing population - it seems as much about our incontrovertible anthropocentrism as humans. We are human and inevitably experience reality with human interests.

In what is perhaps the best-known book on British landscape, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), historian W. G. Hoskins' stated aim was to dispel the common incorrectly held idea that the pattern of the land was a result of the eighteenth-century parliamentary enclosures. To do so, Hoskins traces the chronological development of the "English" landscape, beginning in pre-Roman times, by way of the Black Death, the Industrial Revolution to the then present post-World War Two years. He does not approach his subject region by region, but chronologically - paying attention to specific localities, factual details, and tramping about rural backwaters. Hoskins is suspicious of the superficial appearance of landscape. He introduces his book by acknowledging recent "good" books on geology, a field "concerned with facts... not given to the sentimental and formless slush which afflicts so many books concerned only with superficial appearances."⁵ Yet the geologist, good though he may be, is:

"concerned with only one aspect of the subject; and beyond a certain point he is obliged to leave the historian to continue and complete it. He explains to us the the bones of the landscape, the fundamental structure that gives form and colour to the scene and produces a certain kind of topography and natural vegetation. But the flesh that covers the bones, and the details of the features, are the concern of the historian, whose task it is to show how man has clothed the geological skeleton during the comparatively recent past - mostly within the last fifteen centuries, though in some regions much longer than this."⁶

Geology is the endoskeleton (human bones, like rocks, reserve minerals) and all the ways men have agri-cultured it - cleared natural woodlands; reclaimed marshland; created fields; dug mines - are the flesh, features and clothes that adorn the skeleton. Landscape is a body (presumably male); the metaphor is irresistible, inevitable even. Because of the sheer age of the landscape, all is not what it seems. A commonplace ditch may be the thousand-year-old boundary of a royal manor; a certain hedge bank may be even more ancient, the boundary of a Celtic estate. Topographical features lying on the surface teach us only so much: because, for Hoskins, the landscape is historical it has a depth, richness and complexity that makes it archaeological and geological, as well as scenic. To understand it we have to excavate as

¹ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800*, Penguin Books (1984) p.168

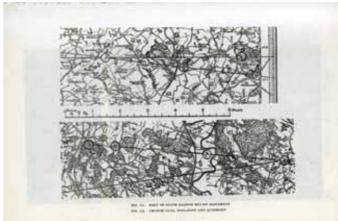
² Arthur Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry*, 1950, cited in Thomas, p.261

³ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800*, Penguin Books (1984) p.168

⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1936), cited in Kate Soper, *What is Nature?*, Blackwell Publishers (1993) p.34

⁵ W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, Pelican Books (1970) p.13

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.14



In *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club* Watkins avoids finally defining the original uses of chambers such as Arthur's Stone. Instead, he describes the studies of astronomer Sir Norman Lockyer who, following careful observations of a number of neolithic monuments, found them to frequently line up along their main axis with the sun at particular times of year, for example on the longest or shortest day, or the equinox. "Lockyer surmises that they were observation caves of the cult of skilled sun-observers, who supplied early man with his calendar for seasonal cultivation."⁷ Watkins, however, was unable to find any such alignment with Arthur's Stone. His colleague Mr W.H. McKaig's sketch shows the axis lies 24 degrees west of true north - not an alignment that pointed to sunrise or sunset at any season. "Thus," he concludes, "it can be noted that Arthur's Stone has apparently no seasonal alignments in the structure of its chamber."⁸ He finishes his address again by protesting the monuments containment: "I doubt whether the disfiguring, unclimbable iron fencing now round the monument is really necessary: it certainly is a great obstacle to examination."⁹

Align with the sun it may not, but Watkins, in his book *The Old Straight Track*, made a convincing case for the chamber's prominent positioning along sightlines in the landscape he called "ley lines". These ley lines were alignments of ancient features - apparent criss-crossing the entire British landscape - that could be picked out visually. "Trained sight (in air not polluted by smoke) easily picks out a distant hill peak 60 miles away, and dropping the eye in the line it falls upon many intermediate hill ridges; hence the mounds or making points in alignment on these ridges."¹⁴ There is:

"only one method, and it is one highly developed in primitive people - by sighting; and the practical way is to start such a sighted line by going to the top of the highest available hill; hence the natural peak in the alignment. It should be noted that these and other alignments are, and must be, exact and precise through the marked-points; "close to" must never be accepted. The sighting method is just as exact as the aiming of a gun, bringing the two sights and the object into line."⁵ Arthur's Stone is situated at the fulcrum of one of these site lines. The track in Watkin's picture passes through Newton Tump to the west and Bodcott Barn to the east. Another track aligns with Dorston Church to the south and northward to Knapp.

Countless Stones

Arthur's Stone is so-called because, as the story goes, sometime in the sixth-century King Arthur fought and slew a giant on the hill top who left the impression of his elbows on one of the stones as he fell. Species of animals and plants had come into existence, lived and been obliterated, long before Arthur's Stone acquired its folklore. There are, according to Ella Mary Leather, many Arthur's Stones in as many parts of the country.¹⁶ Indeed there is an Arthur's Stone in the Gower closely resembling Dorstone's own, neither of which should be confused with that other stone in Buel, Wales inscribed with the footprint of Arthur's dog Cavall.

In a 1970 article published in *Folklore* journal, historian S.P. Menefee describes a belief commonly associated with megalithic monuments called "Countless Stones."¹⁷ "The general version of this belief," he begins his article, "holds that the stones of a megalithic monument cannot be counted correctly."¹⁸ With Stonehenge as an example he recounts the many throughout history who have been unable to arrive at a fixed number of monoliths, among

¹² http://www.cantab.net/users/michael.behrend/repubs/watkins_misc/pages/arthurs_stone.html

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones*, Abacus (1925/1970) p.161

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.197

¹⁶ Ella Mary Leather, *Folklore of Herefordshire*, SR Publishers (1970), p.5

¹⁷ S.P. Menefee, "Countless Stones: A Final Reckoning" in *Folklore*, Vol. 86, No. 3/4 (Winter 1975), p.146

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.146

⁷ Hoskins cited in John Wylie, *Landscape*, Routledge (2007), p.12

⁸ Rose Macaulay *Notes on New Ruins* (1933), cited in *Ruins*, ed. Brian Dillon, Documents of Contemporary Art

Whitechapel Gallery / MIT (2011), p.28

⁹ http://www.cantab.net/users/michael.behrend/repubs/watkins_misc/pages/arthurs_stone.html

¹⁰ Ella Mary Leather, *Folklore of Herefordshire*, S.R. Publishers (1912/1970), p.5

¹¹ "The spiked iron railings which now outline the mound are deplorable." - Alfred Watkins commenting on the perimeter fence at the time of his visit in *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones*, Abacus (1925/1970) p.12

Images, clockwise from top left:

Arthur's Stone - Google Earth

Photographs of Arthur's Stone from Arthur Watkins' "The Old Straight Track"

Charles Jencks - Northumberlandia (2012)

Arthur's Stone Plan by W.H. McKaig

Hieronymus Bosch, The Extraction of the Stone of Madness (The Cure of Folly) 1475–80

Examples of Arthur Watkins' Ley lines

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.147

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.152

²¹ www.bbc.com/international.org/boschstoneoperation.html

²² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Vintage Editions (1975) p.125