

## THE ANTIQUITIES AT STONEHENGE

Kelsey Jackson Williams

O come, and wrapt o'er fleeting time, disclose  
 How, and from whom, th' unperished dome arose.  
 Place the rough heroes round their lasting fane,  
 Whose date the antique sage hath sought in vain;  
 Which braves the wreck of time and swift decay,  
 That sweeps the labour'd domes of man away. (Anon. 1792: 2-3)

The ruins at Stonehenge, Wiltshire, have piqued the curiosity of Britons ever since, and no doubt long before, the twelfth-century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth attributed their construction to African giants under the foremanship of no less a figure than Merlin. William Camden included a brief description of the site in his landmark *Britannia* (1586), a survey of antiquities across the British Isles, and the Elizabethan poet Samuel Daniel ruminated in his poem 'Musophilus' (1599) on 'the misery of dark forgetfulness' as he gazed on 'that huge

*Stonehenge. From William Stukeley, Stonehenge: A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids, 1740 (Plate xviii)*



dumb heap, that cannot tell us how, / nor what, nor whence it is' (Daniel 1599: n.p.). By the seventeenth century this trickle of observations had become a flood, as scholars and architects waded into a decades-long argument over the megaliths' origins. Were they Roman? Danish? Saxon? Something else? It was not until 1666 that the antiquary John Aubrey proposed a new solution, one which was to have a tenacious afterlife: Stonehenge and circles like it were temples of the ancient Druids.

One avid reader of Aubrey's theories was William Stukeley. Stukeley was fascinated, almost obsessed, with Stonehenge and the nearby circle at Avebury, measuring, sketching, and pondering over them for decades. His studies came to fruition in a lavish folio volume, *Stonehenge: A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* (1740). In it he developed Aubrey's theory, arguing not only that Stonehenge was a Druidic temple, but that the Druids themselves were the remnants of an ancient prehistoric religion common to all humanity. He was also the first scholar to identify the astronomical alignment of the stones and, with his friend Edmond Halley, he attempted to date Stonehenge on the assumption that it had originally been aligned with magnetic north. The date he arrived at was 460 bc, but Halley, at least, believed that this was far too recent and had, according to one contemporary 'a strange, odd notion that Stonehenge is as old, at least almost as old, as Noah's Flood' (Hearne 1906-21: vol. 7, 350).

Stukeley was mocked for his fanciful ideas of a global ancient religion, but the twin shibboleths of Druids and astronomy became essential tenets of megalithic interpretation in the generations that followed. John Wood, the architect of Bath, designed the famous Circus there based on his measurements of Stonehenge, and in his *Choir-Gaure, Vulgarly Called Stonehenge* (1747) elaborated Stukeley's ideas by attributing the stones' erection to Prince Bladud, the legendary founder of Bath itself. In 1771 John Smith, another physician, published his own *Choir Gaur; the Grand Orrery of the Ancient Druids, Commonly Called Stonehenge*, a study that, as its subtitle claimed, 'Astronomically explained, and Mathematically proved' the site to be an ancient observatory. Meanwhile, the handful of learned visitors from previous generations had become a horde of tourists, with one local man setting up shop within the circle itself and renting out measuring equipment for the satisfaction of visitors. Topographical poets of the period tirelessly

speculated on its mysteries, while William Wordsworth would figure Stonehenge as an unfathomable site of human sacrifice in the series of poems that would eventually be published as *Guilt and Sorrow; or Incidents Upon Salisbury Plain* in 1842. By the end of the eighteenth century Stonehenge was already a locus for scholarly speculation, a fertile source for alternative histories, a tourist attraction, and an architectural wonder – just as it is today.

### References

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## GLASTONBURY ABBEY

Nick Groom

Where is the Abbey's each once-stately Tow'r?  
 Oh! how defac'd the venerable Pile!  
 Disfigur'd how! by Eld's all-conquering Pow'r!  
 The glory long of Avalonia's Isle! (Andrews 1793: 60)

Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset, was reputed to be the first Christian foundation in England, established by the missionary Joseph of Arimathea, and a mystical tradition developed in the nineteenth century that claimed that Jesus Himself had walked there. Notwithstanding this, however, the Abbey had been sacked by the Danes in the ninth century and, as the most splendid of the English abbeys, was dissolved by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century (the last Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Whiting, was notoriously hanged at Glastonbury Tor). A summary of this history is given by Joseph Cottle in *Alfred, An*

*Glastonbury Abbey*. From R. Goadby, *A new display of the beauties of England: or, A description of the most elegant or magnificent public edifices, royal palaces, noblemen's and gentlemen's seats, and other curiosities, natural or artificial ...*, 1173–4

