

New findings on Stonehenge point to continent-wide socio-cultural network

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Archaeologists have discovered that a body excavated near Stonehenge last year is a man who originated in Switzerland, Austria or southern Germany. The 4,000-year-old burial is contemporary with one of the early phases of building at Stonehenge, suggesting that the man may have been connected with the monument.

Andrew Fitzpatrick of Wessex Archaeology, the company that carried out the excavation, commented, "He would have been a very important person in the Stonehenge area and it is fascinating to think that someone from abroad—probably modern-day Switzerland—could have played an important part in the construction of the site."

The grave, which dates to 2,300 BC, is lavishly furnished for the period. It contains 100 objects including three copper knives, 16 flint arrow heads, wristguards, five pots and two gold hair ornaments—making it the richest Early Bronze Age (2,400-1,500 BC) find ever in Britain.

The man was between 35 and 45 when he died. He was strongly built, but had an injury to his kneecap that would have left him unable to bend his left leg. A bone infection would have meant that he was in constant pain.

Tests on the oxygen isotopes in his teeth enamel show that he must have grown up in the Alpine region of Switzerland, Austria or Germany. Almost all the oxygen contained in tooth enamel comes from drinking water, which leaves a record of where the individual was living at the time when a tooth was formed. The oxygen isotope ratios in the man's teeth indicate that he came from somewhere much colder than Britain would have been at the time and has a pattern that is consistent with him having originated in the Alps.

Interestingly, a younger man buried nearby, who shares a skeletal abnormality with the older man suggesting that the two may be related, had a different oxygen isotope ratio in his teeth. He seems to have grown up in southern England or Ireland, while a wisdom tooth seems to have been formed while he was in Northeast Scotland.

Archaeologists have suggested that the older man migrated to the British Isles where he settled and raised a family. The younger man, who may be his son, was aged about 25 and had the same gold hair ornaments or earrings made from sheet gold as the older man. Only a handful of these objects have ever been found. To find two such graves together marks these individuals out as something quite exceptional within Early Bronze Age society.

The pots found in the burial are of a type known as bell beakers, which are found over a wide area of Europe and even in North Africa. They are associated with the first evidence for metal working in Europe. These early metal users had not yet learned to alloy copper with tin to make bronze. But they had a wider range of technology at their disposal than the existing inhabitants of the area, who could not

work metal.

The presence of copper presupposes enough geological knowledge to identify copper ores, the ability to organise mining and the metallurgical knowledge to extract the metal, the skill to construct heat resistant crucibles for melting the copper, the ability to make moulds for casting and the ability to sharpen and temper the finished casting. In the older man's grave was a distinctive stone object which, it is thought, was used as an anvil or hammer stone for working copper, suggesting that he possessed the new metal working skills.

His arrowheads are still made of flint, but are of a sophisticated type with barbs and a tang that fitted into the arrow shaft. A piece of deer antler that is suitable for working flint arrowheads like this probably means that he could make these too. His bow may have been of a relatively complex design, made from more than one material rather than the simple wooden type that is known from earlier periods. Other sites where similar objects have been found suggest that these early metal workers had domesticated horses, wheeled transport and kept particularly large cattle. They almost certainly had boats, since the copper used in the man's knives came from Spain.

The source of bell beakers and their associated artefacts has long been a matter of controversy. In the nineteenth century when they were first systematically studied, they were thought to be evidence of a migration or invasion of new people. But by the later twentieth century this explanation was increasingly being rejected. It was then suggested that instead of the beakers being evidence of a movement of people, they were the result of a change in fashion that was connected with the emergence of a social elite who wanted to distinguish themselves by the display of luxury goods.

The discovery that the Stonehenge burial is of man who originated in the Alps tends to confirm the earlier theory that this style of pottery and the associated artefacts were brought to the British Isles at least by immigrants, although it may not be the same people who used bell beakers everywhere they are found.

What these people were is another matter. It has been suggested that they were a warrior elite, that they were merchants, metal prospectors, or itinerant smiths. The warrior theory is supported by their possible possession of horses and by the suggestion that their beakers contained an alcoholic drink. Certainly one beaker from Scotland contains a residue of honey, indicating that it may have contained mead.

But the evidence does not allow us to assume an alcohol-fuelled rampage of Swiss horsemen across Europe. The man's copper knives were not really suited to any kind of rampaging and the beakers may have contained nothing more stimulating than milk. As for the arrows they could suggest hunting, or a smith with a well-developed sense of

self-preservation.

What is clear about the man is that his wealth was based on labour, probably his own, since he was buried with the equipment to work both flint and metal and to light a fire. He had been sent into the next world with a toolkit, not simply objects of display, and definitely not with servants or slaves to do the work for him.

Nonetheless the first appearance of bell beakers represents a major social change in the European farming communities that had already existed for at least 2,000 years. It is a change that is evident in the forms of burial that were practised. Bell beaker burials are individual burials, often but not always placed under a round earthen mound. Prior to this, the form of burial in northwestern Europe had been in collective tombs, sometimes under long mounds. Early farming communities seem not to have distinguished individuals or rank in death. This probably reflects a primitive form of egalitarian society. The change that is evident in the beaker burials may indicate a move to greater social distinctions.

However, the extent of that change may not be so great as to suggest the emergence of classes in which wealth was inherited or some people had the right to appropriate the labour of others. Not only are the beaker burials those of men with craft skills, but the wealthiest ones, as in this case, are all those of older men, so that wealth does not appear to have been inherited. The objects found in the graves represent status gained over a lifetime and if the man found near Stonehenge is anything to go by it was a life of some pretty hard knocks, not a leisured existence.

What the beaker burials show most clearly is a social division based on sex. It seems that only men received the rich burials. This may still be misleading, since the apparent poverty of women's graves may indicate that women's wealth took a different form such as mats and textiles that were perishable. Notably missing from the Early Bronze Age archaeological record is any trace of large or more permanent dwellings that might have housed a wealthy elite. The surplus labour of the community seems to have gone into building ritual sites that are as yet little understood but show considerable knowledge of astronomy.

Stone circles and henges predate the appearance of bell beakers and do not occur everywhere that bell beakers are found, being confined to north-western Europe, but there is good evidence that the people who used beakers were involved in some of the later phases of their construction. The earliest phase of Stonehenge dates to about 3,000 BC, but Phase II when the 20-tonne Sarsen stones were erected into the trilithons that still survive and the four-tonne blue stones brought 240 miles (380 kilometres) from Preseli in Wales, is contemporary with the recently discovered beaker burial.

The media have been quick to dub the man the "King of Stonehenge." This is an attention grabbing title, but somewhat misleading if taken seriously. It is often suggested that a monument such as Stonehenge could not have been built without the emergence of some form of central state-like political authority. Only in this way, it is argued, could the large numbers of labourers involved be organised and the extensive territory controlled that would have been necessary to erect such a monument. This may be too rigid a view. Relatively egalitarian societies are capable of mobilising an extensive labour force by gathering neighbours in a collective effort for special projects.

It has been estimated that no more than 70 able bodied men would have been necessary for the work involved in Phase II of Stonehenge. If the users of the beakers possessed teams of draft animals, the work

would have been made considerably easier than if men had to haul the stones. Nor need their ability to get stones from Wales mean that some overall political authority existed, any more than their ability to get copper from Spain did. These were people with an extensive network of social contacts.

The importance of the discovery that a man from the Alpine region was connected with the construction of Stonehenge is that what has always been thought of as a uniquely British monument has for the first time been set in a European context. It shows that Stonehenge was part of a much wider interconnected socio-cultural network that reached from modern-day Budapest through the Western Mediterranean to North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, France, Holland, Denmark and the British Isles.

This discovery is all the more significant in the light of government plans for Stonehenge. It has recently been announced that the road that runs past it is to be widened, threatening not only Stonehenge but the many other archaeological sites, known and as yet unknown, in this extremely rich historic landscape. After considerable protests it was agreed that the length of road closest to Stonehenge will be buried in a tunnel, but even this plan threatens to damage a unique archaeological environment.

Stonehenge is not an isolated monument, but existed within a complex social context of which the archaeological record is the only surviving evidence. It is a record that is still only partially understood. These burials were found some three miles away from the stones quite unexpectedly during excavations of what had been anticipated would be a Roman site that was being investigated in advance of a housing estate being built. What remains is unknown and the damage caused by a road can only be guessed at.

The Labour government's decision to give the go-ahead to the road scheme was undoubtedly influenced by its desire to set up a potentially profitable visitor centre at Stonehenge. In 1996, under the previous Conservative government, it was proposed that the site should be handed over to Madame Tussauds. This plan provoked numerous protests complaining that Stonehenge would be turned into a Disney-style theme park and was dropped. But part of the government's road widening plan is a similar privately financed visitor centre that aims to make a private profit out of a monument that is part of the common cultural heritage of mankind.



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