

# Faces in the stones

**Kate Prendergast** takes a new look at the great henge monument of Avebury and examines theories that Neolithic artists carved cleverly hidden figures into some of the stones

The World Heritage landscape of Avebury in Wiltshire, home to a rich collection of Neolithic monuments, is a delight to visit. Set in a natural basin surrounded by hills, near the source of the River Kennet, the monuments follow the lie of the land and provide surprises at every turn. They include chambered tombs, a large stone circle (Fig 2), two stone avenues and the enigmatic mound known as Silbury Hill. The sites were described by 17<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian William Stukeley as ‘16 square miles of sacred ground’.

Monument building began in this landscape around 3800 BC and continued for more than 2000 years. The stone circles and avenues at Avebury date to the middle of this period,



Twisted horn

Headband

Hollow eye

Falling tress of hair

**Fig 1. Stone 206 with a profile of a carved face.**

**Fig 2. The large sarsen stones which form the Avebury henge monument.**

c. 2900–2400 BC. The architecture seems primarily designed to facilitate and orchestrate crowd-gathering and large-scale ritual activities. The Kennet and Beckhampton stone avenues begin at the periphery of this landscape and lead people into the central stone circle with its bank, ditch, and further inner stone circles. Stukeley also described and sketched a monolith known as the Obelisk, which was located within the henge monument but was toppled and destroyed in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. An altar-like setting of stones known as ‘the Cove’ still partly survives.

Avebury has much in common with its more famous neighbour Stonehenge. They are of similar date and both are constructed using huge sarsen stones taken from the Marlborough Downs. But whereas the design of Stonehenge channels people into a tightly defined and controlled ritual space, the circles and related settings at Avebury were constructed on a much larger scale. The Avebury henge also appears more open, and almost seems to invite meandering journeys, encouraging a sense of discovery that is rewarded by unhurried sojourn.

Avebury’s massive sarsen megaliths, the heaviest weighing over 60 tonnes, are among the most magnificent in the world. Originally up to 600 stones stood in this landscape, but now only around 80 remain, with the rest either buried or destroyed. The hardness of the sandstone sarsens varies greatly, yet all the stones display the effects of the natural processes that created them. The stones retain their mysterious and evocative natural shapes, and have an imposing presence in the landscape. Some observers argue there may be far more to the shape of the stones than the effects of nature. Many stones at Avebury have been modified by human hands to enhance natural effects and to create a landscape that in a very real sense is inhabited by ‘beings’ captured in the stones themselves.

It has long been recognised that many Neolithic megaliths of northern Europe have been worked, dressed and, in some cases, elaborately carved. The rock art at monuments to the south, west and north of Britain, such as Gavrinis in Brittany or Knowth in Ireland, has been extensively documented and interpreted. However, little work has been done to establish the existence of a Neolithic rock art tradition in southern England.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Herbert Stone was one of the first archaeologists to analyse the megalithic sarsens of southern England for evidence of possible stone-working. He argued

that those of Stonehenge had been mauled, hammered, pounded and ground into shape, pointing out that woodworking traditions are clearly echoed in the lintel joints. Bronze Age rock art, depicting daggers and axes, is also clearly present on some of the sarsens of Stonehenge; as recently as 1999 one fine example of fluent, deep carving was discovered on the broad edge of one of the stones.

In 1936, Alexander Keiller, a wealthy businessman and enthusiastic archaeologist, purchased large tracts of land in the area where he carried out a number of high profile excavations. Digging of the Avebury henge by Keiller, together with archaeologist Stuart Piggott, began in 1937. The site was cleared of undergrowth, sarsens that had been buried were uncovered and replaced in their original stone-holes, and holes marking the sites of lost stones were denoted with concrete pylons. Keiller and Piggott also argued that the stones at Avebury had been worked and dressed:

‘The stones... have hitherto been erroneously referred to as “rough unhewn blocks of sarsen”. Actually these megaliths have been... very carefully dressed, although not, it should be noted, to the flat surface obtained at Stonehenge. Moreover there can be no question but that the stones were dressed deliberately to conform to certain required shapes, and to this end were in the first place selected as near





V cuts forming a horn on the forehead

Hollow eye

Set of eight radiating grooves round the end of the nose

Criss-cross cuts below the nose

Lips formed by making two downward cuts

to the required form as possible, with a resultant economy in the labour of the final dressing' (*Antiquity*, 1936, p. 420).

Following Keiller, Isobel Smith argued that the lozenge or diamond, and long or 'phallic' shaped stones located in the Kennet Avenue were symbolic representations of males and females. While Keiller's astute assertion that many stones at Avebury were carefully selected and also worked by Neolithic artists was accepted by many archaeologists, others assert that the Avebury sarsens show no sign of human carving and were left entirely

**Fig 3. The evidence for carving on stone 206.**

**Fig 4. Stone 13B, with a profile of the face of a young woman.**



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in their natural state, although it is acknowledged by all that the stones had been carefully selected for their shapes.

It took the observational skills of Terence Meaden, former Professor of Physics at Dalhousie University in Canada, though a native of Wiltshire, to extend Keiller and Piggott's work when he noticed that many of the Avebury stones appeared to have been worked to represent human heads (Figs 5, 6). Meaden published the photographic evidence for the art in *The Secrets of the Avebury Stones* (Souvenir Press, 1999). Since then, social scientist and artist Di Pattison has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of the evidence for stone-working at Avebury: *The Avebury Stones: Selected, Shaped, Carved* (British Archaeological Reports, 2011). With her technical expertise, Pattison has meticulously documented the extent and complexity of such stone-working, and her findings leave no doubt that it was designed to produce subtle yet still powerful artistic effects.

The tools Neolithic sculptors were most likely to have chosen included very hard quartzite nodules, employed as hammerstones, pounders and mauls for primary dressing and shaping. Finer work would have been achieved by chiselling with hard stone tools, sometimes carefully positioning fire to soften and discolour the skin of the stone to ease the carving.

One of the most extraordinary stones to show evidence for carving is Stone 206 (Figs 1, 3). It weighs about 22 tonnes and stands about 3.5 metres (11.5 feet) high in the northernmost of the two inner stone circles. It fortunately survived intact and has never fallen, while most of its neighbours have been removed or badly broken. Viewed from the south-west, this stone has a finely-executed carved profile of a head. The mouth and chin are particularly well shaped: the chin rounded, the thin, precisely formed upper lip meeting the cheek as it swells out. The large curved horn has been created with clearly upturned V-cuts to give the impression of twists going back over the crown of the head.

Careful examination reveals a series of lozenge and 'V'-shaped indentations and linear grooves (Fig 3). These are

sculptors' tool-marks and can be most readily identified by looking at the shapes of shadows and the formations of the living lichen, as lichen tends to grow on the old original stone surface and not on the newer surface cut by tools. 'V'-cuts have been used to try and define the surface of the cheek and nose. In good sunlight, at least eight short chisel-marks are clearly visible at the tip of the nose. In fact, there is a network of smaller such marks forming groups under the nose. Natural features, like hollows and protuberances, were accentuated to define the desired form, a general characteristic of the Avebury sculptural style.

The hair and beardless chin of this imposing character appears to suggest a female character, while the horn evokes both masculine and animal elements. It looks east-south-east, the direction of sunrise in early November and early February – the time of year that heralds the beginning of winter and the start of spring, and so is a key period in the agricultural year. They are also moments of ritual significance and during the Iron Age the Celtic festivals of Samhain and Imbolc were held on these dates, in which death and rebirth were honoured and celebrated. Is it possible that this stone has been carved to represent a guardian of fertility? Clearly of great importance to the community that created it, many archetypal roles – herald, protector, hag and warrior – all appear to be blended into a single character.

Another extraordinary example of a stone that may have been carved to depict an archetypal figure is stone 13B in the Kennet Avenue (Figs 4, 5, 6, 7). This is only revealed when the



observer walks sun-wise round the stone, with the effects best experienced very early on a sunny morning in June or July. The first image the observer encounters is of a three-quarter back view of the head and neck of a young adult woman facing left and looking down (Fig 4). She has a small, sharply pointed nose, a hollow eye darkened by shadow, a full round left cheek and a high evenly curving forehead with a high-piled hairstyle.

Stepping round the stone, the image begins to change. (Fig 5) The woman still appears to be looking downwards at the ground, but now her lips have become visible, the chin has become more angular, the nose longer, and the neck thicker. She has grown a little older.

Passing on just one more small step and a new image emerges out of the old. It is still the same woman, but she has aged even more. The head is now erect, the chin is firmer and a lower thinner mouth replaces the full youthful lips. The nose begins to look broken and bent. She is a mature woman. We see increasingly clear evidence of tool marks and signs of burning, including maul marks which are now clearly visible on the side of the chin and neck.

One more step round, and viewed almost full frontal, the southern edge of the stone reveals a much older woman (Fig 7). Below the nose, faint chisel grooves and upturned 'V' and 'W' formations can be detected and the full extent of the mauling becomes clear. She is beginning to change from a lifelike person into a caricature of a misshapen hag. In a few short steps, following the sun, a vision of a woman who ages half a lifetime is revealed. Could this stone represent one of the most enduring archetypes of the ancient religions of the British Isles: the goddess in her three aspects of maiden, mother and crone?

In one last display, as the viewer takes one more step round the stone, the crone is completely transformed (Fig 6). The young, downward-gazing woman has returned to view, this time in right profile. She has the same neck, the same sharp nose, the same gaze, and the hint of a smile. It is almost as if she has been following the viewer (rather than the other way round) and now makes eye contact for the first time. Her return completes the cycle – youth is followed by age and maturity, while rebirth and regeneration lie on the other side of decay and death.

Di Pattison argues that, of the 80 stones still standing, the majority have been worked to a greater or lesser extent, many with comparable

More V cuts visible

More of the lips are visible

Maul scars

Gently fired area



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Fig 5. The older female face on stone 13B.

Fig 6. Stone 13B - The smiling young woman reappears.

Fig 7. The woman as crone on stone 13B.

In overcast conditions the old woman's mouth and chin are clearer and more realistic than the other imagery



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6

complexity in form and effect to stones 206 and 13B. Generic features of this art include a consistent interest in figurative and symbolic art, ambiguity, archetypal and super-human forms, and shape-shifting. All this is achieved by the interaction of the moving observer, and partly by the creative use of the changing sunlight. These features are intrinsically related to astronomical knowledge and alignment, and concepts of fertility and sexuality, death and regeneration.

It can therefore be argued that at Avebury there is a unique corpus of Neolithic rock art – one that reveals the true extent of the artistic accomplishments of our ancestors. Such art is masterful yet subtle; imposing yet in deep sympathy with its setting. The characters have moods that frequently

change according to changes in sunlight or the position of the viewer. Artfully planned and exquisitely placed, the figures dwell within the stones and help to define a megalithic temple that appears designed to foster the intrinsic human connection with the forces of nature.

While Avebury has been subject to systematic destruction and continuous habitation since the Middle Ages, its original grandeur has not been eradicated. Writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anthropologist Walter Evans-Wentz recorded the persistent prevalence of the 'fairy faith' in rural Brittany, Ireland and Scotland – beliefs that clearly had roots in very old world-views.

One common belief was that certain stones are alive and that beings dwell in them. At certain times of the year, such stones can literally walk, and unfortunate humans can get taken to the 'Otherworld' if they do not respect their power. It is now possible to see how many stones at Avebury could once have been considered animate. Through their stone-working ability, the Neolithic artists created a magical landscape in the living qualities that their stone-working artistry invokes – and the magic endures so we too can discover and enjoy it today. ■

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