

ANCIENT MONUMENTS, SACRED LANDSCAPES

By Brian Haughton

By exploring the ancient monuments and sacred landscapes of the world using a combination of archaeology, legend and folklore it is possible to obtain a unique insight into the hidden world of our ancestors. But what marked out a place as “sacred” or “special” in the mind of ancient man? There may have been a number of factors, varying from culture to culture and over different time periods.

One characteristic which must always have been of prime concern when constructing these ancient monuments or ritual complexes was the dividing up of the landscape, the separation of the sacred from the profane. Of course the place may have already possessed natural characteristics that made it unique. Recent research into geological anomalies and acoustics at ancient monuments is coming up with some interesting results. However, it seems more likely that it was something much less tangible, more “in the mind” of the inhabitants that made the place “special.”

Designing and building structures such as the ritual complex of monuments at Avebury in the UK, the Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, USA, and the standing stones at Carnac in northern France may have been a way of “monumentalizing” or enhancing this aura of sanctity, but it was the place itself that possessed the sacredness. The buildings acted as an expression of this sacredness. Often, nothing at all was constructed at a sacred site, its own personal myth-history being enough for it to be venerated (Ayers Rock in Australia is a good example of this).

In any attempt at understanding sacred places, perhaps a good way to begin is by examining some of the legends and lore that have become attached to the sites over time. However, the legends and even the archaeology of ancient sacred places are not sufficient in themselves for an understanding of how our ancestors viewed their sacred landscapes. In the words of American geographer Donald William Meinig “any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads.”

To gain even the slightest insight into what was going through the minds of ancient peoples when they designed or visited monuments like the prehistoric temples of Malta or the vast Ohio Serpent Mound, we not only have to reunite ourselves with ancient values and traditions, but also attempt to cut ourselves off from our increasingly materialistic technology-based 21st century worldview.

The stories connected with ancient sites can take many forms, from legends at least a thousand years old, such as that of the wizard Merlin transporting the bluestones to Stonehenge, to modern accounts of UFOs and Bigfoot at, for example, Mount Shasta in California. There is a plethora of folklore connected with ancient sacred sites, especially the megalithic monuments of north Western Europe, a number of which are included in my new book, *Haunted Spaces, Sacred Spaces*. The folklore of ancient places has

become fairly standardized over the years: they are inhabited by fairies, built by giants or the Devil, haunted by ghosts, guarded by dragons, visited by spectral black dogs or cursed by witches. Stones are said to conceal buried treasure, dance at midday, walk down to a stream at midnight to drink, cause people to lose all sense of time and resist all attempts to move or to count them. The parallels between such folklore motifs and modern “paranormal” accounts reported at ancient monuments are obvious.

Indeed, whilst there is a significant record of folklore directly associated with ancient sacred places, the evidence for the occurrence of paranormal phenomena at these sites, reported in many books, internet sites and magazine articles, is largely unconvincing. Additionally, much of the research into such phenomena is remarkably uncritical, and the conclusions premature to say the least. A good deal of the evidence for supposed “window areas,” places that apparently attract or produce strange phenomena, is either media generated or consists of exaggerations of local folk tales and legends, as is the case, for example, with a large part of the material related to the San Luis Valley, Colorado, Mount Shasta, California and to a certain extent Mount Penteli, just outside Athens in Greece.

However, in all of these areas there are some genuinely baffling elements to a few of the accounts collected, and this criticism does not mean to suggest that unexplained phenomena are never reported at ancient sites. But if the reports of strange lights, crop circles and bizarre creatures at ancient sacred places are indicative of anything, it is that these places are still regarded as significant enough to attract and generate myth and legend thousands of years after their construction. The important question is, whether these myths, ancient and modern, can tell us anything about the beliefs, ideas and motivation of our ancient ancestors. It is in this sense that ancient sacred sites may be viewed as windows into the past.

But just how reliable is folklore and myth as a guide to prehistory and history? Can legends shed any light on the construction and purpose of ancient sacred landscapes, such as at that around Stonehenge, and the ritual complex centered on Newgrange in Ireland? The majority of scholars of folklore and myth remain unconvinced that such tales can give us any genuine insights into the mind of ancient man. On many occasions the traditional tales surrounding prehistoric archaeological sites are “modern” (post 18th century), as with the tale of the Witch at the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire, UK. If this is the case then it is obvious that although the lore may reflect contemporary ideas about the monuments, which is in itself important, it can tell us nothing relating to the purpose of the site it is connected with.

Nevertheless, if research is undertaken combining folklore and legend with archaeology, as it was at Troy by Heinrich Schliemann in the late 19th century, and is currently being done with the archaeology of Stonehenge and the story of Merlin and the bluestones, then perhaps we can begin to create a richer ancient past, one inhabited by people rather than merely their artifacts and buildings.