Durrington

Woodhenge *(Photo by Tony Braime 2013)*

WOODHENGE

STORY OF RECENT EXCAVATION

A RECOVERED WILTSHIRE MONUMENT

(From a Correspondent)

Woodhenge, as a name formed on the analogy of Stonehenge, to signify a prehistoric structure made not of stone but of wood, and a structure, it may be added, no longer in existence as it would be if it were of stone, but decayed to the point of annihilation in the course of decades of centuries, is now a familiar word. It was originally applied, as is common knowledge, to a site in Wiltshire which was detected for the first time in December, l925 and has been since then carefully excavated; and another Woodhenge was discovered quite recently in a field near Norwich. Both discoveries were made possible by that new resource of archeology, photography from the air, and both have been described in archeological journals. There is now published, however, the complete story of the Wiltshire Woodhenge, by Mrs. B. K Cunnington, who with her husband carried out the excavations on the site during the summers of 1926-27-28. (WOODHENGE. By M. E. Cunnington. Devizes: Simpson and Co. 25s. net) It is a highly detailed piece of work, illustrated by a large number of photographic and other plates, and containing special reports on the human remains by Sir Arthur Keith, on the animal remains by Dr. J. Wilfred Jackson, and on other

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remains by Mr. A. S. Kennard, Mr. B. B. Woodward, Mr. C. D. Heginbothom, and others. The volume contains also what appears to be an exhaustive inventory of everything which came to light during the diggings.

Woodhenge lies in a field in the parish of Durrington, about a mile and a half north of Amesbury, nearly two miles north-east of Stonehenge, and a few hundred yards from the River Avon. Quite near to it are four circles and a certain egg-shaped enclosure, which have also been excavated, their contents being described in the present volume; and not far off are the site of a Roman-British village and other ancient remains. The discovery was made in the first instance by a singularly lucky chance on December 12, 1925, when Squadron-Leader Insall, V.C., was flying at about 2,000ft. over Stonehenge. When in the air, with both sites in view, he noticed a circle with white chalk marks in the centre near Durrington Wells. He took a photograph, and kept the site under observation, until in the following July. “when the wheat was well up over the site,” to quote his own words, “there was no further doubt. . Five or six or perhaps even seven closely-set rings of spots appeared.” Excavations were soon begun, and when the soil had been removed and the surface of the undisturbed chalk had been exposed, it became possible to recover the entire pattern of a long-lost monument, which, as Mrs Cunnington says, soon began instinctively to be called “Woodhenge” by the excavators. That the name is not a guess is proved here conclusively by Mrs. Cunnington’s arguments. The nature of the ancient holes, which were found to correspond with the spots in the wheat, shows that they could have been filled by no uprights but wooden ones, and from an analysis of charcoal found in the soil some of the uprights seem to have been of oak, others of birch, and others of pine.

THE SIX RINGS

Though the site has been subject to constant cultivation and some of its ancient features have been obliterated, Mr and Mrs. Cunnington have succeeded in tracing it with astonishing completeness. There are in all six concentric rings of holes, arranged with some geometric skill, from an innermost oval to figures which more closely approximate to circles as they extend outwards. From the innermost ring outwards they number respectively 12, 18, 18, 16, 32, and 60. The holes in the ring of 16 are larger than those in the other rings. Beyond the outside ring was a ditch, beyond that a berm, or flat platform, and beyond that a bank, which has in parts been worn down in the course of cultivation. The whole, area has been bought from the owner by Mr. and Mrs Cunnington, who have fenced it off, and set up in the holes, so as to make the nature of the monument permanently visible, low cylinders of concrete. These, therefore, occupy the places once occupied by tree trunks. The ground is being laid down to grass, and it is Mr. and Mrs. Cunnington’s intention to hand it over to the care of some public body.

The number of holes found, however, is not wholly made up of those which form the rings: for besides those holes there are others, and they are as important as any. One lies in such a position as to suggest a sighting point for the midsummer sunrise; another in prolongation with it suggests a like point for the winter sunset; a third seems to have a bearing on the equinox; a fourth may have been intended to mark the south point; while another lying within the inmost circle and on the line of the midsummer sunrise proved to be a small grave, only about a foot deep in the chalk. In it lay a crouched skeleton of a child about three years old; the skull appears to have been cleft before burial, which was therefore perhaps dedicatory or sacrificial. In the outer ditch the skeleton of a young man was found; his type is discussed here by Sir Arthur Keith, who also describes two skeletons from the adjoining circles.

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A PROTOTYPE OF STONEHENGE

What was the relation of Woodhenge to Stonehenge, two miles away? The plans of the two, as Mrs. Cunnington says, show many points of resemblance. It appears (though the reader must be referred to Mrs. Cunnington's book for the particulars of measurement, which all through her work are of the most scrupulous accuracy) that the four inner rings at Woodhenge are, in position and dimensions, almost exact parallels with the four rings at Stonehenge. Again, the long diameter of the outermost Woodhenge ring is half that of the Aubrey circle at Stonehenge; while the distance apart of the holes in that ring is on an average half the distance apart of the Aubrey holes. The central grave at Woodhenge occupies relatively the same position as the altar stone at Stonehenge. Both monuments are orientated towards the midsummer sunrise. On both sites there are indications of a deliberate geometry. Which, then, of the two is the older? Woodhenge, Mrs. Cunnington believes, because the general Iayout at Stonehenge is much better and more regular and implies in its stone work a greater architectural skill; so that it is difficult to imagine Stonehenge being followed, on a site so near, by a structure of less skillful design and in an inferior material. On purely technical grounds it recalls the conjecture made a good many years ago that Stonehenge must have had a wooden prototype. As to date, though the pottery found on the site seems to present various difficulties of interpretation, Woodlhenge, Mrs. Cunnington holds, "cannot be earlier than about the beginning of the middle Bronze Age, so if it is indeed the forerunner and prototype of Stonehenge, that monument must be least as late as the middle Bronze Age, and may be later, as some independent evidence suggests."

Mr and Mrs. Cunington deserve the thanks of all British archeologists far this admirable volume and for the steps they have taken to make Woodhenge a permanent object of interest beside its great stone counterpart.

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