

Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age

An appraisal for the research by Terence Meaden into the meaning of stone circles

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Although hardly anyone would disagree with the fact that plants and animals are alive, there is still a widespread agreement in the Western world on the fact that stones are not alive, among scientists and also among the common people. A distinction is being made between the animate world – which includes us humans, all the animals and the plants – and the inanimate world – which includes stone. So this way by definition stone is considered to be mere dead matter. We may find it hard to believe that there have been people – particularly our ‘primitive ancestors in distant past, but also more recent, the surviving indigenous populations on our planet – who considered stones in some sense to be alive as well. Because the life of stones extended over vast periods of time – far exceeding the lifespan of humans – it was definitely different and perhaps harder to recognize as such, but it was considered life all the same.

Temples expressing a communion of subjects

Because we are used to study the megalithic structures of our prehistoric Stone Age ancestors from within the modern context or archaeology, which – in line with our general outlook – considers stone to be dead matter, we have missed something essential about them. Perhaps by referring to them as megalithic *structures* we might already be on the wrong track. When we open our minds to the way our Stone Age ancestors considered stone to be an integral part of living nature, we might start realizing that for them they were actually *temples* – temples as part of an outdoor or open-air form of spirituality that we are gradually rediscovering in our time.

We know that for our ancestors it mattered a lot what kind of stone they used to build their temples. In this regard they were very selective. Sometimes they used stones that were carried to the spot over great distances, when there was definitely enough stone available in the direct vicinity. This has been the case, for instance, with the *Blue Stones* of Stonehenge, which somehow were carried all the way from Wales to Wiltshire, a distance of 225 kilometers. But this is not all. It is also becoming clear that the *shape* of the stones they used mattered a lot as well, and in what *particular spot* they were placed: in relation to the other stones and to the surrounding the landscape which included the sky above.

Thomas Berry's well-known saying 'the universe is not a collection of objects, but a communion of subjects' captures the spiritual attitude of our ancestors very well (although I know he didn't have prehistoric stone temples in mind when he wrote it.) We must realize that to our ancestors not only humans, animals and plants, but also the stones were subjects who were engaged in an ongoing, reciprocal communion with the world around them. All were considered an integral, living part of Mother Earth. So through the centuries – and especially after the rise of materialistic science – we have gradually moved from considering the universe a communion of subjects to considering it a collection of objects, and now we are rediscovering our original position.

Terence Meaden and crop circles

Someone who can help us a lot with rediscovering of the universe as a communion of subjects is the English archaeologist and meteorologist Terence Meaden. He has been a very adventurous researcher all his life, and – despite the fact that his work is still largely unknown (particularly outside the UK) or even consciously ignored – the work he has done with regard to understanding the meaning of the prehistoric stone circles and other megalithic buildings is invaluable. He has opened a door that most people had not even noticed it was there. In this article I want to show why his research is so important. I will not go very much into the details of his findings here but focus on the general outline of his ideas. For the details one should consult his books and articles, and one should even go out into the fields to get some firsthand experience of this prehistoric communion of subjects! Below it will become clear why.

As a meteorologist Meaden's first interest – from the 1980s on – was focused on the phenomenon of the crop circles. This was the time when the formations increasingly appeared in the English landscape. At that time their shape was still quite simple and Meaden became quite popular with this conviction that they were made by some plasma vortices whose nature we did not fully understand yet. He considered them natural phenomena, and differed in this respect from other researchers who believed they were more likely created by 'paranormal' entities. When the crop circle formations gradually got more complicated from the 1990s onwards, Meaden held on to his plasma vortex theory for a while, but his explanation of the phenomenon gradually lost credence among the other researchers and the media.

From crop circles to stone circles

Meaden's early research into the crop circles was very important, however, as it laid the foundation for his later research into the prehistoric stone circles and other megalithic temples. I'm sure that without it his ideas about the

deeper meaning of the stone circles would not have been the same. He was convinced that the crop circle phenomenon was of all times. As there was a lot of evidence of crop circles appearing before the 1980s, even going back several centuries, Meaden assumed that they must have appeared to our prehistoric ancestors as well and must have inspired them to build their stone circles. Although he might have distanced himself a little from this connection in his later writings – as he emphasized it only in his first publications on the stone circles –, the fact remains that the creation of crop circles by a force coming from the sky provided him with the important idea that the relationship between the sky and the earth also must have been the prime inspiration for our prehistoric ancestors to build the stone circles.

Unconventional but pioneering research

Central to Terence Meaden's ideas about the meaning of the stone circles is his conviction that they were created by people whose religion or spirituality primarily involved worship of the Earth Goddess. In this he had been inspired very much by the research of Marija Gimbutas, who even wrote a short preface to his first book on the stone circles, *The Goddess of the Stones*. This made Meaden's work in two ways quite unconventional, perhaps even controversial: by the way he connected stone circles to crop circles and to Goddess worship as well. I nearly think this must have blocked the general academic acceptance of his ideas about the meaning of the stone circles. If there was one way to make sure most academics preferred to kept themselves on a safe distance, it was taking the phenomenon of crop circles seriously but also being convinced that all our Stone Age ancestors had been practicing a Goddess religion or spirituality!

Whoever takes the time to actually read the books by Terence Meaden, will find out soon that he has always researched his subjects thoroughly and also in a very sound scientific way – which means having a lot of patience, paying a lot of attention to all the details, and this all with an open, inquisitive mind with regards to the facts. In this he has never been afraid to be a pioneer, to explore an as yet unknown territory. And this involves a lot of courage. It's about time that the importance of Meaden's insights is fully recognized, because they do not only put the stone circles into a plausible perspective, but they help to change our ideas about the intelligence of our ancestors. And on top of hat, we can actually learn a lot from them with regard to our place in the surrounding landscape.

The continuous interplay between God and Goddess

In Meaden's view the presence of the prehistoric stone circles can only be understood from within the context of the perpetually changing sky above and the exact location on earth where our prehistoric ancestors decided to

build them. For our ancestors it was precisely this landscape context which gave meaning to their stone temples. In a general sense, according to Meaden the circle symbolically represented the Earth Goddess and the beams of light or shadow touching and entering the circle in a phallic way on specific days of the year represented the Sky God. To enhance this play of light and shadow he points out that our ancestors distinguished two types of stones, female and male ones. He is not the first researchers to make this distinction. Before him Alexander Keiler and Stuart Piggott suggested this distinction, however hesitantly (*The Secrets of the Avebury Stones*, p. 3). Meaden built further on it. His insight comes down to the following: the female stones often had diamond or a large, round-like shape, on which sometimes some vulva symbolism was included. The male stones were phallic in shape.

At Stonehenge the *Heel Stone* outside the circle was a male stone, and the fallen down *Altar Stone* within the circle (which he preferred to call the *Goddess Stone*) was a female stone (at the heart of the female, womb-shaped circle): in this temple the phallic shadow of the Heel Stone fell on the Altar/Goddess stone on some days around the midsummer solstice. He argued that this interplay between the phallic stone throwing a shadow into the female womb of the circle can be witnessed at many other stone circles as well, for instance at nearby Avebury or at the less well-known Drombeg stone circle in County Cork in Ireland: also in these locations at a certain time and day in the year the shadow of the male stone fell (and still falls) in the womb of the circle, on a female stone that once had stood within it.

As said, Meaden is not the first one to have made the distinction between female and male stones. But he can be given the full credits, I think, for the idea of the phallic-shaped shadow penetrating the female womb of the circle. Of course, the importance of the use of (sun)light by Stone Age people had already been recognized at megalithic temples like New Grange in Ireland, in which only on the days around the midwinter solstice the rays of the sun fall into the mound. But when the light of sunbeams was consciously used by our ancestors in the building of their temples, there is no reason why they hadn't integrated the effect of the beams of shadow as well. I think Meaden is the first one to realize that not only sunbeams but also beams of shadow had a symbolic meaning for Stone Age people and were consciously integrated in the building of their stone temples.

Sacred Marriage

According to Meaden, the megalithic temples give expression to the concept of the Sacred Marriage between the Earth Mother and the Sky Father – a theme that has played a major role in many mythological traditions, like in the Celtic tradition in which the King could only rule when he had been married to the Goddess of the Land, to secure the prosperity of the people

and the fertility of the land. This way the rulers became aware of the importance of service – a very healthy and meaningful practice, which modern rulers today who seem to have forgotten their role as servants could learn something from. The symbolism of the phallus – representing the Sky Father – which penetrates the circle – representing the womb of the Earth Mother – shows that the European people in the New Stone Age were already very aware of the contribution of both woman and man to the conception of new life. Stone circles expressed their conviction that this ongoing interplay of female and male forces is an integral part of nature around them, but of course to them this interplay was much more than a purely physical affair.

Importantly, Meaden emphasizes that in this Sacred Marriage between Earth Mother and Sky Father – in this interplay between Goddess and God – the Earth Mother or the Goddess has been the prime deity. In fact, when one looks at the reality of our planet as a gigantic organism, as it is expressed today in the Gaia theory, this is quite understandable: the whole atmosphere above us, the sky, is naturally a part of the earth. Our prehistoric ancestors must have considered the changeable sky as a part of the more permanent presence of the soil, water and rocks under their feet. In this context even the sun, which has often been considered one of the manifestations of the Sky Father, was – like the seasons and the changing weather patterns which were coming and going – also considered a mere part of the constant presence of the Earth Mother. In fact, we can see this relationship already expressed in the earliest anthropomorphic representations of the Goddess – going back into the Paleolithic – in which both feminine and masculine aspects have been included in one image. Meaden's insights into the meaning of the prehistoric stone circles and the interplay between the feminine and masculine that they expressed, show that these ideas continued to be a living reality in the Neolithic.

Sensitive Stone Age people

It's interesting that for Meaden the play of light and shadow is not limited to the male, phallic sunbeams or shadows touching female stones inside womblike stone circles. He argues that the Stone Age people also used the play of light and shadow at the erection of particular stones (for instance at Avebury), in which at certain times of the day female and male faces appear due to this play and sometimes animals as well, probably expressing the current mythological stories. He proves his point by including many photos of particular stones in his books (like in his book *The Secret of the Avebury Stones*). It's true that not everyone will agree with Meaden's view in this respect, but overall his research makes one aware of the fact that Stone Age people must have been very sensitive people, and intelligent as well, in any case much more sensitive and intelligent than the 'primitive' people who

were pretty ignorant or even quite stupid compared to us, 'civilized' modern beings, living an almost animal existence at the bottom of our human development. Meaden helps us to see that their approach to life was just different to ours, and in a certain sense even more advanced than our reductive treatment of the environment as a mere background décor to our economically driven society.

When Meaden is right in this, it is quite clever the way our Stone Age ancestors used the natural shapes of the stones and sometimes they added only a little carving to enhance the shape of the face or of the animal a little better. To let the shapes exist in a hidden way for most of the time, only to be revealed at certain times of the year and day is clever as well. For me this actually helps to explain why some of the stones, particularly the ones at Avebury, appear to have such erratic shapes. The stones at Stonehenge show that our Stone Age ancestors were very well able to cut stones in neat straight shapes if they want to. We can conclude that our ancestors must have been very aware of the locality where they were living, and were also sensitive to its particular power.

When we know that our distant ancestors have been very careful and sensitive beings who consciously erected every stone of their temple in a particular spot, not only in relation to the other stones of the circle, but also individually in relation to the movement of the sun, this can help a lot to make us look different at our own environment today. Our 'primitive' ancestors might even have something to teach us in this respect!

The Sacred Landscape

One thing that I find so interesting about Meaden's research into the stone circles is that it fits in well with the experience of the Sacred Landscape that we find among indigenous people until quite recently. This experience was expressed well by Native American Chief Seattle in his speech in 1851: 'Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.' When Thomas Berry stated that the universe is not a collection of objects but a communion of subjects, it is not a coincidence that he expressed the same kind of view: his view was very much inspired by the tradition of his Native American forebears.

The way that Stone Age people put so much effort into putting the stones of stone circles in precisely the right spot in the landscape; the way they arranged the stones in such a way that light and shadow fell on specific stones at specific times in the year; the way they chose the shape of each stone individually, so they could bring the faces and animals, as part of their mythic stories we can assume, to life – it all points to an experience of the surrounding landscape as a Sacred Landscape, a web that they hadn't woven themselves but in which they felt themselves to be just a strand.

Getting under the skin of Stone Age people

Meaden discovered these features because he dared to get under the skin of these Stone Age people, to try to catch the reality of their lives as it was experienced from within. It's quite understandable that these kinds of insights have escaped most archaeologists, because generally they are taught to analyze all the material finds from the outside, to study them merely in a material way. This fits in with the larger scientific culture which is also still materialistically driven. Despite the fact that Meaden definitely subscribes to the scientific method and approach, somehow he dared to open his mind to the consciousness of the people who created the stone circles. If we look at some of the newly gained insights in other branches of science – like the Gaia theory mentioned earlier, or the discovery in quantum mechanics that all matter including stone is really consisting of spinning energy and is therefore fully alive – and at the way indigenous people all over the world have kept an ancient way of being in the world alive for us, we might realize that Meaden's findings help to connect us back to our Stone Age ancestors in a truthful and enriching way. By learning to appreciate their lives as equals and including them in our concept of civilization (as Marija Gimbutas has also attempted before him), we are actually giving new content to what it means to be civilized.

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