

Thomas Yaeger's Blog

The long view of the history of ideas. Two of my books, 'The Sacred History of Being', and 'Understanding Ancient Thought', explore the origins of philosophy in ancient divine cult. Available from Barnes & Noble, iTunes, Inktera, Blio, Smashwords, etc.

<http://shrineinthesea.blogspot.nl/2017/12/patterns-of-thought-in-late-neolithic.html>

Thomas Yaeger, 10 December 2017

Patterns of thought in Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Britain



For the past three weeks or so I've been writing a paper on aspects of mind during the late Neolithic and the early Bronze Age in Britain, during the period when most of the megalithic circles were built. I wrote a paper in 2016 (Stone Circles, Phenomenology, and the Neolithic Mind) which explored the possibility that we might have enough information from the structures to infer thought and motive of their builders.

In that article I wrote:

The main objection of the archaeological community to the acceptance of this view of the circles as sophisticated tools for the observation of the heavens and its movements is two-fold. The first is that there is nothing (beyond what these objects seem to show) which suggests to us that the megalith builders and their contemporary culture was concerned at all with precision. The second is that, even if the circles can be shown to mark certain astronomically precise points, we have no clue at all about why the megalith builders would want to do this. We have no understanding of the function and purpose of such observations, and so we can say virtually nothing about either the purpose of the monuments, or about the culture which gave rise to them. In other words we are no further forward in our understanding.

This two-fold objection is sound, at least from the archaeologists point of view. We have no contemporary description of anything at all from the time and culture of the megalith builders. We have no understanding of their intentions, and no understanding of the function of the circles, and it is unlikely that archaeological interpretation by itself will reveal these things to us. It seems to be gone altogether, and all we are left with is insupportable speculation. Perhaps it would be best to draw a veil over this apparently anomalous aspect of the past, since we can have no understanding of it.

The upshot of the article was not as negative. I argued that:

[in] both Greece and Assyria, the heavens, and what the heavens represented, were of particular importance for cult practice. Plato is clear that the heavens represent an image of divine Being, also spoken of as the 'Living Animal', created out of the materials of other gods, by the demiourgos (the 'Living Animal' is created by the Demiourgos rather than by God directly, so that there should be not

too much of the divine present in the world). He is also quite explicit that the body of the 'Living Animal' was created with precision.

In which case astronomy is important for the understanding of divine Being. An infamously unintelligible passage in Plato's *Timaeus* talks about the perception of images being possible only because the soul already contains exemplars of these. If the heavens represent an image of divine Being, then all other images are poor imitations, and we should direct our attention principally to the heavens. The soul represents the heavens most closely, and in antiquity was notionally the part of us which is most connected to the divine. It is the soul which recognizes divine knowledge when it is presented to it.

We already know the importance of the soul in Britain in the late 1st millennium BCE, from several sources, including Julius Caesar. It may be that these ideas were similarly tied together in Britain, and perhaps at a much earlier period. I explored a Mesopotamian parallel:

In ancient Assyria, part of the ritual for creating an image of a god (thereby conferring divinity on the object) involves the image being exposed to the sight of the heavens. As a god, it needs to have perception of Being, of which it is an aspect. We have this ritual from the reign of Esarhaddon (7th century BCE), who was the predecessor of Ashurbanipal, one of the last Assyrian kings, and the owner of the famous palace library, much of which is now located in the British Museum.

So the point is the establishment of contact - even an identity with - what is divine. It is possible to see this concern with connecting Heaven and Earth as a parallel to what Plato describes more abstractly in his *Republic*. I wrote:

...Plato argues that the philosopher should ascend to the idea of the Good, which is another way of referencing the idea of transcendent Being, by a series of connected images, without specifying what those images might be. These images, as imperfect representations of Being, are subject to change. Matters are complicated by the fact that the things which are imaged are also subject to change. Thus both subjective impression and objective reality are subject to change and uncertainty.

So the process is problematic, and complex. To some extent it is a matter of conjecture, as well as knowledge.

A key characteristic of ancient religion was that it entertained conjecture regarding knowledge of the gods. Plato refers to this in his discussion of the divided line in *The Republic*. We cannot know Being itself directly. We cannot know the lesser gods directly either, but we can understand some of the characteristics of these gods, though full knowledge is necessarily beyond our understanding. We can approach some limited understanding of Being via the images and descriptions of the lesser gods however, which is one reason why they were deemed to have some kind of reality.

In which case knowledge of divine things is a journey through the problematic and sometimes paradoxical aspects of reality as it presents itself to us. You need a priesthood for dealing with that. They were dealing with ontological questions, and did the best they could within the limitations of human knowledge.

This limited set of characteristics and properties emerges from thorough and precise discussion of the nature of ontology (Being), as the focus of human conjecture. This is quite clear in both Plato and also in what we know of the teachings of Pythagoras. The paradox of knowledge is the consequence of the idea that all knowledge is present in the divine, and that we only have knowledge because we have a soul. In other words, we can have knowledge as the result of the divine having a presence in us already.

I suggested that Plato, rather than exploring a pattern of ideas created in the Academy in Athens, was in fact transmitting and refurbishing some

...key aspects of a Bronze Age philosophy, which has its roots in the Neolithic in both Europe and the near East. The transcendental doctrine which is enshrined in his work is actually in plain sight to anyone who can follow his reasoning that all the merely likely stories are just that: no more than likely. The single argument which is not a mere likelihood, is counterintuitive, paradoxical, and beyond common sense. And it remains a matter of conjecture. This argument about the nature of the world used to be the apex of learning and knowledge. Reality is transcendental, and neither subjective or objective. Nothing lay beyond this fundamental understanding of the world.

If this argument is correct, then we can know what Neolithic man was up to, and in some detail. In short, for the intellectually sophisticated in the Neolithic period, the heavens represented, as for Plato much later, a moving image of eternity. To measure the parameters of this moving image of the divine was to know God, and to have knowledge of divine things.

This represents a radical departure in our understanding of the development and the history of human thought. We know that the heavens were important in the neolithic and the early Bronze Age in Britain, and if that importance stemmed from an understanding that the heavens represented a moving image of eternity, then the people who built the megalithic circles had a concept of Being, and of a reality which transcended most human experience. Such an idea is the most abstract of all. It transcends all images of what is real. It implies a culture built on responses to questions about the nature of reality, and many conjectures about what can be known.

The Pythagoreanism which the surveyor of many of the megalithic sites in Britain, Alexander Thom, detected in his findings, was very basic in nature, and based on statistical analysis of his data, and the geometrical construction which could be found in the monuments. Which means the observance of the importance of the Pythagorean right angled triangle, and the concern with whole numbers. Both of these were of importance to the later Pythagoreans, as we know. A further clue was the statements by a number of ancient authors to the effect that the religious belief of the Britons in the late 1st millennium BCE was akin to Pythagoreanism.

But there is very little detail about what Pythagoreanism in Britain might have entailed, if the identification is correct. This is rather surprising, since we have a great deal of information about Pythagoras and Pythagorean doctrine available to us from sources other than Julius Caesar, and the authors whose opinions have survived as a result of being quoted by Eusebius (though often inconsistent, and sometimes quite obscure in meaning). We have a biography of Pythagoras from both the neoplatonist Iamblichus, and also from Porphyry. We also have an extensive and rather good account from the author of the Lives of the Philosophers, Diogenes Laertius. Plus we have the works of Plato, who is constantly referencing the doctrines of the Pythagoreans.

So this new paper looks at the material we have concerning Pythagoras, in order to know a fuller range of what Pythagoreanism implied in the late sixth century BCE, both in Italy and in Greece. As it turns out, certain key ideas in Pythagoreanism arise as the logical consequence of the kind of discussions which they entertained, mainly concerning number, mathematics and geometry. And these key ideas shape their ideas about religion, divinity, the nature of reality, of Being, and of Eternity.

The paper concludes with the suggestion that, if key religious ideas emerge in the Pythagoreanism of the 1st millennium BCE, in the course of logical argument concerning number, mathematics and geometry, then we should entertain the notion that parallel discussions may have taken place in the late Neolithic and the early British Bronze Age, on account of their own evident concern with number, mathematics and geometry.

The title of the paper is:

Patterns of thought in Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Britain

Abstract: Pythagorean elements detected in megalith circles in ancient Britain have no easy explanation, and precede 1st millennium Pythagoreanism by an extraordinary period of time. This paper explores the idea that there is a connection between some core Pythagorean mathematical and geometrical concerns, and ideas of divinity and eternity. On the basis of a close examination of Pythagorean ideas in the 1st millennium, for which we have extensive documentation, it is suggested that this connection is based on a series of logical inferences. It is therefore possible that similar conclusions were arrived at in the Late Neolithic.

Key words: Megalith, Pythagoras, Philosophy, Religion, Mathematics

Paper sections are:

- 1 The Longevity of Ideas
- 2 Pythagoreanism in 1st Millennium Britain
3. The Principal Sources for Pythagoreanism
- 4 The Core of Pythagorean Doctrine

- 5 Diogenes Laertius on Pythagoreanism
- 6 Pythagorean Thought in Italy
- 7 The Existence of Irrational Numbers
- 8 Religious Aspects of Pythagoreanism
- 9 The Pattern of Eternity
- 10 Pythagorean Syncretism
- 11. Transcendentalism in Late Neolithic and early Bronze Age Britain
- 12 Walking back the Insight into Ancient Mind
- 13 Pythagoreanism and the Deep

Publication details will be available in the near future (probably March 2018).

TY, December 10, 2017.