

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/2016/11/stone-circles-phenomenology-and.html>

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Stone Circles, Phenomenology, and the Neolithic Mind

Some notes on the cultural context of Stone Circles, and the function of observations made with them.



How could we ever understand the function of these objects, in the absence of any contemporary account? Archaeology and scholarship have been applied to the problem of these mysterious objects, but we are apparently still none the wiser. When it was first noticed that these objects were in some way astronomically aligned, that was a step forward, but in fact the observation did not advance us much in understanding the function of the monuments. They mark rising and setting points, and other extreme positions, and so there is the possibility of a calendrical function.

It is hard however to imagine that keeping tabs on the seasons was a principal function of these objects. You don't need to observe the heavens in any detail in order to know it is time to sow, and time to harvest. If you want to know the length of the year, this can be established with simple observation. After that you could tell that you were in midwinter or at midsummer, at least until the precession of the equinoxes and the imperfection of the quarter day at the end of the year gradually moved things out of kilter. And so leap years would be invented to keep the seasons roughly where they should be, and intercalary days and months would be introduced where necessary over longer periods of time. All this has been done elsewhere, and through time, in the context of relatively basic observations.

The work of Alexander Thom, who surveyed the megalithic monuments in Britain over a period of more than 40 years, from the 1930s onwards, confirmed to those of us with eyes to see, that indeed

the circles have a serious astronomical function. He also confirmed that the circles, with their observational platforms and their distant farsights, often on hills and mountains many miles away, have in many cases, a fearful precision about them, whether these farsights mark the rising and declination of the principal stars, the rising and setting of the sun at different points in the year, the solstices and the equinoxes, and the peculiar movements of the moon at various points during the 19 year metonic cycle.

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.

Yet we do know that other cultures had a concern with precision, and with precise measure. Egypt is well known to have had such a concern, at least during some parts of its history, as the orientation of its temples show. Precision is a feature of Mesopotamian civilization, as exemplified in Babylonian mathematics; and Hebrew literature also contains precise descriptions of objects. Ancient Greece likewise understood precision (*akribeia*), exemplified in the design of the Parthenon.

What does this concern with precision mean? We can start from what we know, and throw off what we only think we know about the Neolithic mind. One of these presumptions is that intelligence and intellectual sophistication is relatively new, and that consequently these things are not to be found in the Neolithic period. If we presume instead that it is present, and in fact it is not, we will know our mistake soon enough. If we presume that intellectual sophistication is not present, and in fact it is, we will be left with the intractable puzzle we are attempting to solve.

I have argued elsewhere that, for 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.

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.

In the *Republic*, 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.

In his dialogues, Plato shows that most arguments about the nature of the ultimate reality fail – particularly in his dialogue most concerned with Being, the *Sophist*. Here the participants in the dialogue agree to accept that a communion between man and the divine must be granted to exist, even if it cannot be argued certainly to be the case. The necessity of this communion is vital to religion, otherwise it is not possible for man to connect with the divine, and therefore he would be powerless in the world in which he finds himself.

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.

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.

Since the divine is transcendent, there must be only a limited set of properties of the divine which can have exemplars in the world of appearance (the mundane earthly world). These properties cannot be things which have no meaning or permanent reality in the divine world. Thus one would not expect arbitrary sizes and colours, for example, or things which are changeable and impermanent. Since the reality of Being is at the extreme of our understanding, and is in itself necessarily an extreme, those who would look for things on earth which are exemplars of the divine would look for things which were in some way extreme, and which exist in conjunction with other things which participate in the divine extremity.

In both Greece and Assyria (I suggest), during the inauguration of divine statues, the statues, which are treated as markers of divinity on earth, representing and, in some instances, creating divinity through the will of the inaugurators, were pointed at the sky at a key point in the ritual. This is so that the statues could see (and know) Being, as represented by the heavenly bodies. In the ritual from Nineveh, the gaze of the statue is pointed at different parts of the sky and different parts of the horizon, in a precise sequence.

So we have an understanding of what was understood to be taking place in such a ritual, once we have a clear understanding of the model of reality in which the ritual served its function. There is evidence from Mesopotamia that this conceptual model was in existence at least as far back as the eighteenth century B.C.E.

It is possible that this model of reality, essentially established through logical argument, was very widely spread, and was not confined to the near East, and was in fact something like a standard view for those who had the time and the liberty to think about such matters.

The evidence from the megaliths makes the importance of the sky very clear. The hypothetical argument to be tested here, is that also in Britain and around the megalithic world, the sky was seen as a representation of divinity, of Being. As an image of the divine, it was an image of totality itself.

The megalithic observatory, or temple, according to this hypothesis, was a device to embody aspects of divinity, of Being, actually in its structure, in the same way in which the gods in Mesopotamia might be invited to occupy their representations on earth.

What about this representation of divinity might qualify as capable of representation on earth? Not the motion of the planets in themselves, since they appeared to be subject to a degree of arbitrariness (with the exception of Venus). The most obvious candidates for the establishment of extreme rising and setting points were the Sun and the Moon – the most prominent aspect of the heavenly representation. The equinoxes would also be of interest, since these represent the points at which the Sun and Moon pass along the path of the ecliptic and cross the celestial equator.

The doctrine of totality is common to both Pythagoras and Plato, and also surfaces, much earlier, in Assyria, as far back as Shamshi Adad I, who reigned in the eighteenth century B.C.E. One of his titles was: 'King of Totality' (Shar Kishati). This doctrine makes it clear that many aspects of the world have something of a double nature: Plato argued for example that 'greatness' implied participation in 'the great'. Likewise the divine reality is total, and participation in the divine reality implies the presence of a form of totality in whoever was regarding the heavenly representation of the divine. The sacred is, in some respects, always present in the secular. Both Pythagoras and Plato held that things only come to be by wholes through wholes.

We can now make a preliminary list of things which, if we assume an intellectual sophistication, born of a culture familiar with logical argument, would perhaps have been of particular interest to observers who were part of megalithic culture:

Extremity, Totality, Perfection, Completion, Invariance, Integral (whole) numbers, The incorruptible, Greatness, Rising, Setting, Beginning, Ending, Duration, Periodicity, Points of transformation.

This list illustrates the sort of abstracted interest I propose the megalithic builders had in aspects of the world, which interest follows from the conceptual model of reality which I have described. All of these have exemplars on both the earth, and in the sky. These characteristics would, within this conceptual model, have been understood to provide points of contact, and a bridge to the divine.

A megalithic circle might therefore be conceived as a representation, in an abstracted form, of the perfection of the heavens, and of Being itself. It would demonstrate its perfection to those who had the understanding to see this for themselves, and would mark the extreme points of the movement of the heavenly bodies. It would be constructed only using integral values, derived where possible, proportionately, from the movement of the heavens in relation to the earth. It would be built out of the most incorruptible materials (most often stone), and where possible, the stone would remain unworked, as something which, in its natural state, already possessed commonality with divine Being. The stones would be large, since their largeness by itself represents unworldliness, and another commonality with Being. The arrangement of the stones would be the way in which this commonality would be reduplicated and intensified. Heavenly cycles would be embodied in the structure where possible, together with indications (in some cases) of their duration.

As we know from the studies made by Alexander Thom, the stone circles were built on the basis of various sizes of Pythagorean right-angled triangles, and laid out with ropes of precise length. The construction process was designed and executed in such a way that the circumference of the circles, whether truly circular, egg-shaped, or flattened, would always be an integral number of the units used. This interest in integral numbers seems to have been universal among the builders of the circles. The connectivity the integral numbers opened to Being is the reason why this was important.

We are told by Julius Caesar (in his Gallic Wars), that the Druids, at the time of his arrival in Northern Europe, taught astronomy and mathematics, and held to a doctrine akin to Pythagoreanism. In fact this section of the text seems to belong to the Roman equivalent of the CIA factbook, so it is probably a fairly accurate assessment by those in Rome whose job it was to collect useful information about cultures around the known world, into which Rome was expanding.

There are strong parallels between the ideas of Plato and Pythagoras as has already been noted, and Plato is reputed to have made significant efforts to obtain texts from the Pythagoreans. Both regarded the world as the product of mind: both the transcendental realm of Being, and the world of appearance. So there is, at a conjectural level, a series of connections between the divine world and the world of appearance, which can be discovered. All other stories about the world are mere likelihood. Modern scholarship on Greek philosophy stops short of this understanding of Greek

thought. Plato's highest level of reality is never explored, and even the approach to it is left shrouded in mystery.

The presence of an articulate idea of Being explains aspects of Mesopotamian theology and ideas about creation, as well as illuminating aspects of Homer's Iliad, which of course precedes both Plato and Pythagoras by several centuries. There are strong parallels between Greek and Mesopotamian ideas of Being, which I have explored elsewhere. Both cultures practice theurgy (though the term does not make an appearance until much later), and the theoretical basis for this is similar, in that the twofold aspect of creation makes it possible for workmen (under the direction of the king, who in himself embodies several aspects of divinity in his official position) to have their sacred aspect initialized, so that they can set up gods in heaven. They can do this because they have had divinity put upon them by the king who is directing operations, in conjunction with instructions from his diviners. This is possible because they already possess divinity and connection to the divine, though 'they are blind and deaf' to this understanding throughout their lives, as Esarhaddon tells us.

Thus, they, like everyone else, and the world, are representations and images of Being, and the divine reality.

What I suggest Plato is doing, during a period of intense cultural crisis in Greece, is transmitting in writing, in a scrambled and elliptical fashion, 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.

What was once a complete and deafening silence is now filled with many voices. We can never know the words they used, but we can know what they talked about, since anyone who talks about Being, and the connections between Being and the world of appearance will talk about the same things, and come to the same sort of conclusions. Some of these arguments have a practical upshot in the creation of sacred sites. They would look for extreme points in the heavens, since the heavens comprise a representation of the divine. The extreme points of the motions of the heavenly bodies represent a connection between the extreme of Being, and the secular world.

The principal concern was the nature and reality of Being, and the nature of reality itself. All philosophical instruction would have been designed to lead the neophyte, by dint of the repeated failure of argument to establish any solid and reliable conclusion within the confines of common sense, to the conclusion that the reality that we perceive is essentially transcendental in nature. And that the nature of the divine is a conjecture which must be held as just that, a conjecture. Anything less and it becomes an opinion, which isn't real knowledge.

Many practices in the ancient world emanate from this perspective on reality. Sacrifice is one. The origin of the idea is that something which has been completed is connected with the divine, which is also complete. Even if the termination of life is artificial and precipitate. The idea is also reflected in the conversation between Solon and Croesus in Herodotus, where Solon, in response to Croesus, says 'call no man happy until his end'. Divination by entrails also is based on the same idea, that by inspection of the entrails of an animal whose life has been 'completed' (even now we may say 'totalled,' to mean something utterly ended), something of the divine can be understood.

[The BBC Chronicle documentary from 1970 - 'Cracking the Stone Age Code', on the work of Alexander Thom, is available to watch (complete) by clicking on the image at the head of this article.]