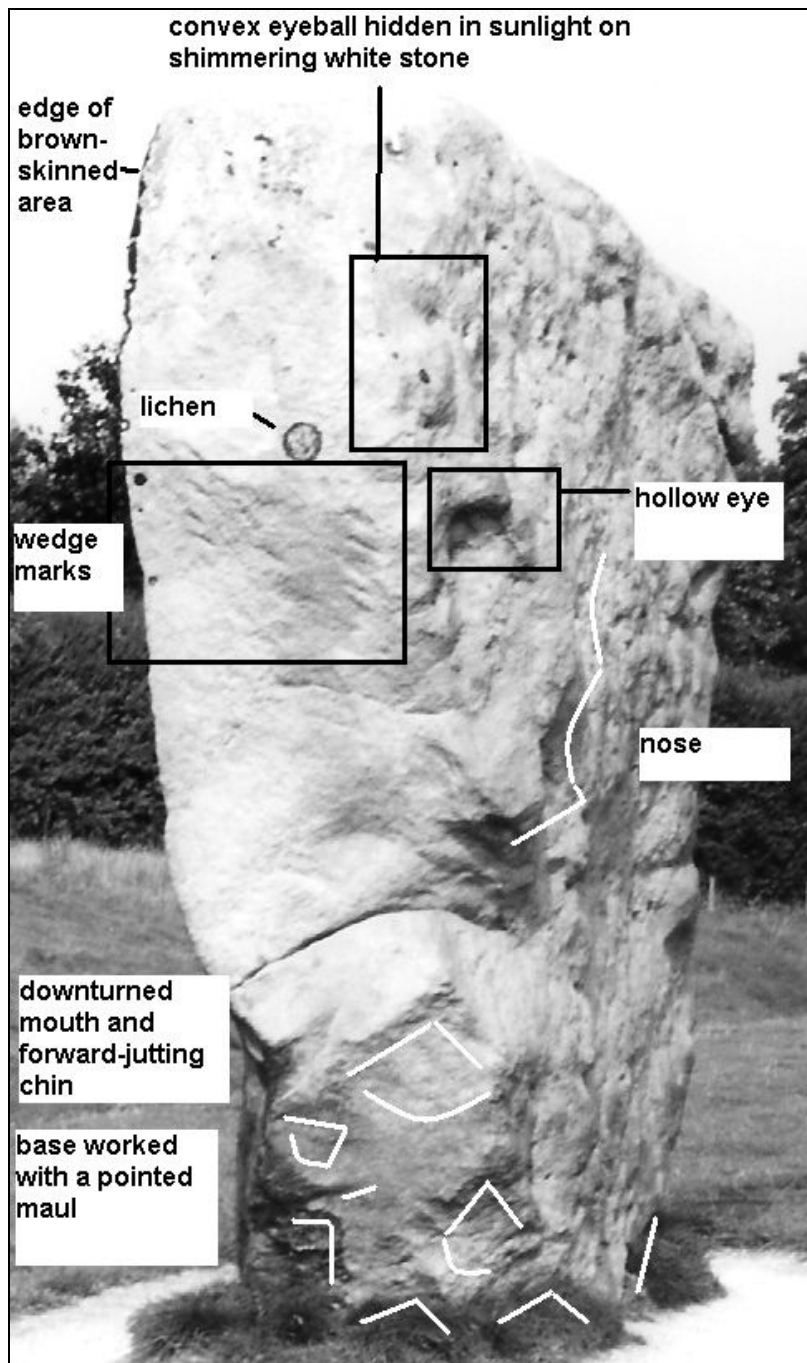


AVEBURY'S STONES:

SELECTED, SHAPED, CARVED

ABSTRACT



Stone 16 in the Great Circle

Showing evidence of how the stone was shaped by mauling and wedge-cutting as the first stage in a sculptural process. The finished image is a curious face with a hollow eye, long thin bent nose, downturned mouth and jutting chin occupying the full height of the megalith.



Stone 16

Another view showing how the first face has altered as the spectator has moved a step to the right. It now has convex eyeballs (annotated with circles) and a wider nose. The hollow eye is now concealed in shadow. Radiating chisel grooves are visible above the right eyeball, and a large curving groove below its left. The whiteness of the stone has been used to express the great age of the character.

About 80 of the original 600 megaliths erected at Avebury, our largest stone circle and a UNESCO-designated World Heritage monument, remain today. They are understood to be natural sarsen stones selected from the local downland for their size, shape, and historical importance as whetstones and landmarks. Other qualities such as the simulacra contained in the boulders were important too.

Many were shaped using techniques not unlike those employed at Stonehenge, which they predate. Their surfaces were then refined using low heat, hardstone chisels and hammerstones. But the intention differed: Avebury's stones were differently shaped and also carved on an astonishing scale.

Chapters compare natural downland sarsens and worked sarsens at Stonehenge with Avebury's monumental stones. All previous claims made about Avebury's stones having been worked and containing simulacra are analysed in detail.

The stoneworking and sculptural techniques are described with detailed illustrated examples. Every one of the carvings is recorded in photographs and chart form. Ten case studies and a glossary provide some of the tools for future study.

The sculptural corpus features heads of human and human-like beings together with body parts, plus occasional animal and more abstract subjects. The work is often composite in that multiple images are grouped purposefully and skilfully in a borderless fashion on many stones. It is reactive in that the carvers took inspiration from the natural concavities and projections within the material. Many images were worked from, and meant to be appreciated from, wide arcs of view. It is interactive in eliciting physical, intellectual and emotional responses and is time-related not only in changing as the viewer moves but as the sun and shadows move around through the day and year. Its elusive and illusive four-dimensional quality is the defining characteristic of the corpus. Carved heads interact between themselves and make stony eye-contact with other landscape features. Grouped stones are sometimes positioned and carvings orchestrated in symbolic light- and shadow-play.

Grey sarsen is a hard stone made more workable and deliberately discoloured by gentle firing, less tough than the red variety that was preferred for tool-making. Softer and chalkier when initially dug, it hardened on exposure, locking in ancient toolmarks, eroding extremely slowly. The stoneshaping and sculptural process can therefore be analysed, sometimes in minute detail. Particular tools and the handiwork of individual carvers can be identified. Therefore the technical progress of the craftsmanship from its earliest beginnings to its pinnacle of achievement may be tracked and related to the monument's known history. Expert and very sophisticated handiwork may be distinguished from that of supervised beginners and others. Some kind of formal school of stonecraft probably existed in Avebury for as much as a millennium.

Planned from the time the stones were selected, probably initially shaped at the find-spots, the final appearance of the megaliths is integral to Avebury's architecture and religious purposes. The sculpture and stoneshaping appears to be concerned primarily with the endless cycle of life, death and regeneration, and with the people's wish for prosperity and future well-being when death was a constant threat and the fertility of humans, crops and animals a constant preoccupation.

Avebury is considered as the regional centre of a highly innovative and fully developed art form, distinctly creative and displaying great fascination with aesthetics, perception, abstract visual language and the formal sculptural elements of composition, proportion, scale, colour etc - its output is fully commensurate in quality, quantity, scale and scope with the magnificence of the monuments themselves.