



**MICHAEL WOOD ON...**  
REIMAGINING OUR ANCIENT PAST

## // These latest ideas show how much we don't know about Stonehenge //

Not long ago, I was strolling in the rain around the old Song-dynasty capital of Kaifeng, China, one of my favourite historical townscapes. There, in a

wooded park, I came across a small Ming-dynasty temple to Da Yu (Yu the Great), the legendary founder of Chinese kingship in around 2000 BC. As rain pattered on the roof, the temple custodian recounted the famous myth describing how Yu restored China after a great flood, assisted by supernatural companions, “Yellow Dragon, who used his long, powerful tail to create water channels, and Black Turtle, who pushed the river mud with his huge flippers to build up the dykes”.

Of course, flood legends abound in many cultures.

This one had been thought to date from the Han dynasty, overlapping with the Roman period. Recently, though, a bronze tureen dating from 900 BC was discovered, bearing an inscription recounting the story of King Yu. And in 2016, Chinese archaeologists discovered evidence that the gorge named in that ancient myth had once been blocked by an earthquake, and that the Yellow river had then burst out and flooded the plain below. That flood occurred around 1900 BC – matching the time frame of the legend.

Historians are taught to rely on written source material; oral tradition is usually frowned on. But the more I travel, the more I think that traditional societies can pass down narratives over huge spans of time. A friend once recalled how, during her 1940s childhood in Baghdad, the family's old gatekeeper – an illiterate man from southern Iraq, the land of the ancient Sumerians – told wonderful stories to spellbound kids. Much later, when she became a cuneiform scholar, she realised that his tales had been part of the Gilgamesh cycle, set in the third millennium BC.

Which brings me to the extraordinary discoveries about Stonehenge. It's long been known that the monument's

smaller “bluestones” were brought from Wales. Now, Professor Mike Parker Pearson of UCL suggests that they were first set up close to quarries in the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire around 3400–3300 BC, centuries before being transported to Wiltshire. This daring theory (explored in a BBC Two documentary) recalls the tale, written by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century, of how a giant helped Merlin the magician to load the stones onto boats in Ireland to sail them to Britain. A distant oral tradition?

Stonehenge must have been a massive communal effort – perhaps it was a unifying project ordered by a powerful “state” in southern Britain? It has even been suggested that the five huge trilithons symbolise five tribal groupings descended from five great ancestors. Perhaps their mythic ancestral homeland was in the Preseli Hills? Or was the shrine there deliberately dismantled by later conquerors? Needless to say these are as yet fascinating speculations.

Parallels with megalithic sites overseas suggest that Stonehenge was a huge open-air circular altar where astronomical phenomena were observed; where the living spoke to the ancestors; where the underworld, the land of the living and the heavens were connected. These ideas show how much we don't know – and how new finds can change the picture, as with the discovery last year of pits around Durrington Walls suggesting a Neolithic circle.

All of which brings us to the current furore over the plan to divert the A303, the main road that currently runs alongside Stonehenge, through a new tunnel in order to ease traffic congestion. The huge tunnel entrances would sit wholly within the designated World Heritage Site, and well within the wider prehistoric sacred landscape. English Heritage and the National Trust welcomed the scheme, however, expert opinion (notably the Council for British Archaeology, the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, and the 22 Stonehenge specialists who make a collective representation to the Examining Authority) broadly opposes it, and the Examining Authority advised the government to withhold consent. The slender time savings promised depend on seven further improvement schemes along the A303/A30 corridor; in reality, the tunnel will simply shift the intermittent traffic jams a bit further down the road. Nonetheless, the project has been given the go-ahead.

Discussed for decades, the tunnel now looks like an idea from another age. More importantly, in my view, it is fundamentally flawed in its conception of what constitutes a historical landscape. The more we discover about Stonehenge, the more we realise that the heritage site is not just the stones and their immediate surrounds but their entire setting. Stonehenge is our greatest historical landscape. To proceed with the plan, against expert advice, would risk losing untold ancient evidence. That would be not only a misfortune, as Lady Bracknell might say – it would look like carelessness. **E**

.....  
**Michael Wood** is professor of public history at the University of Manchester. He has presented numerous BBC series and his latest book is *The Story of China* (Simon & Schuster, 2020). His twitter handle is @mayavision

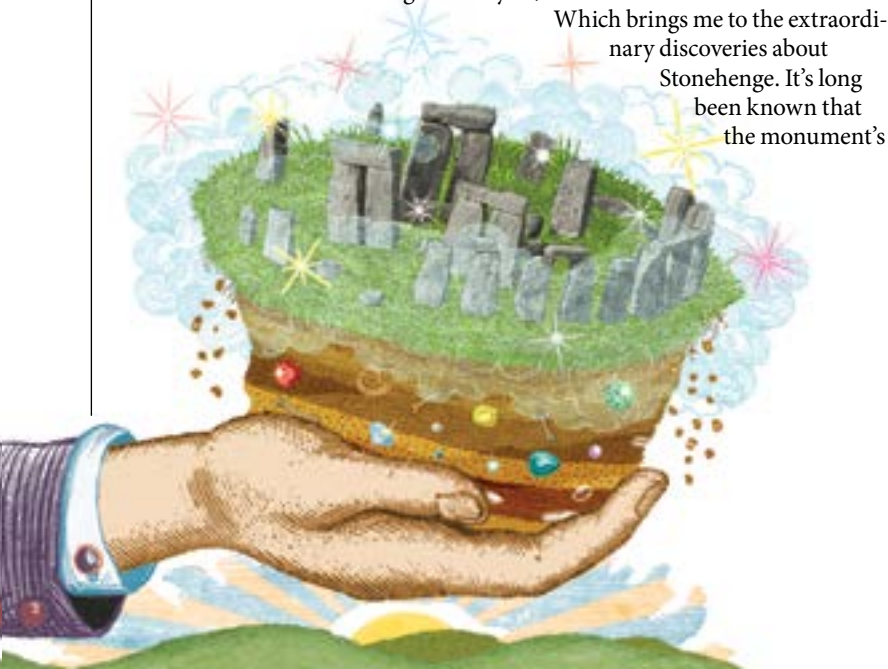


ILLUSTRATION BY FEMKE DE JONG