

A New God in the North

Mercian Christianity and the Fallen Stones of Arbor Low



Arbor Low is regarded as one of the most important prehistoric sites in the north of England and a bastion of our ancient cultural identity. It is most definitely a place of wonder, but its vision comes complete with the seemingly unanswerable conundrum as to how its once magnificent stone circle came to be pulled down and laid flat. Could the mystery become a little clearer when placed against the location's direct and intimate connections to the religious wars of dark age Britain?

Stonehenge of the North

Those who visit the site of Arbor Low in Monyash, Derbyshire will find themselves treated to a smorgasbord of prehistoric delights, the like of which is unrivalled in the north of England. Set in the central uplands of Derbyshire's limestone plateau, the site contains a huge earthen henge, a stone circle and all manner of trackways and funerary structures that will leave even the most seasoned veteran of such topics with much to admire. Whats more, it appears that each feature at the site seems to have an element of rarity about it to. The huge earthen henge has clearly defined access points, which once provided entry and exit for those partaking in the rituals within, whilst inside circle itself are the remains of a *cove*; a central stone chamber in which it is thought the most exclusive ceremonial rites took place. Perhaps the most curious aspect of Arbor Low though, rests in the positioning of its stone circle, whereby more than 40 limestone slabs now lie on their backs facing the sky to give the appearance of a giant, magical clock.

They didn't start out that way, and their positioning being a consequence of rough weather seems highly unlikely. It would appear therefore, that at some point in the past, someone was sufficiently motivated to deliberately uproot them. The questions of who this was and why they did it have gone unanswered for at least two hundred years; yet, in consideration of how the site sits within the context of the historical events which have taken place

around it, I believe we can actually take a major step toward the answers to those very questions.

Arbor Low represents a prehistoric ritual centre of national significance, demonstrating the changes and adaptations of a local community over a period lasting more than a thousand years between 2500 and 1500 BCE. The comparisons to our most famous sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury are sometimes born from little more than convenience - it being an easy way to tether understanding to the general function and appearance of the site - but in many ways, those comparisons are far more appropriate than is often appreciated. As focal points in the landscape, such locations hold the secrets of our ancient past. Beginning with the farming communities that first came to mark their territorial centres with earthen henges in order to create sacred communal spaces, through to the era in which ceremony and gathering was deemed to require a more formal decoration courtesy of stone circles set within, it is these multi-use sites such as Stonehenge, Avebury and Arbor Low that have conspired to carry the story of our collective pagan past into the modern age.

An isolated spot even in modern times, with no clear conflict of location with the later Christian communities in its surrounding area, the laying of the Arbor Low stones would have required an awfully powerful set of emotions. Travelling out with the man power to tear down dozens of upright stones - each measuring between 1 and 3 meters in height - would have been no small feat. But to do so and then simply leave them there as opposed to repurposing

them elsewhere? It just doesn't make sense. Yet, that appears to be exactly what has happened and for me, historically speaking, when things that humans do don't make any rational sense, there's usually one common driver behind their actions; religious fever.

Causes for Concern

We know that the site of Arbour Low has been in its present condition from at least the mid-nineteenth century, when a series of excavations were undertaken by antiquarians including the famed Thomas Bateman. As is often the case with such excavations, they invariably tend to raise more questions than they answer, and despite Bateman's cluster of skeletal remains, cremation cists, urns and Antler picks, the archaeological record of Arbor Low is far from complete. That there has been no attempt to excavate further for more than 100 years suggests this is unlikely to change anytime soon; but it is from this relatively modern point of the 1840s that we can look back across the history of a site that has been around for four and a half thousand years in an attempt to identify the moments at which sites such as Arbor Low may have found themselves in conflict with religious views of the day due to the Pagan themes they intrinsically represent.

The first such point at which we arrive on this journey back in time is during the 1600's. The Puritans were no fans of false idols that's for sure, but their primary focus was eradicating such elements from Christianity itself. Their

battles with the perceived “Popery” of the Catholic church are well documented; in England, one particularly visible legacy of this time and the zealous spirit which typified it can be found in the white-washed interiors of many parish churches when we visit them today - the result of having being “freed” from any element of their previous iconography and dressing courtesy of billeted Puritan troops during the period of the Civil Wars. Stone circles however, seem to have been seen as far more of a curiosity than a concern during the period, in fact records attest to Stonehenge itself often being visited by troops during the conflict when they cause to pass across Salisbury plain. The only real contention for the tearing down of the Arbor Low stones across this period would have been as a result of the site being caught up with the witch-hysteria of the seventeenth century - and there is no such record.

Prior to the 1600’s we must go back quite a way to a point at which an ideological junction in history appears with the power to cause the action apparent at Arbor Low. During the Middle Ages, for the most part sites such as Arbour Low benefited from the fantasies employed in the minds of Arthurian writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth. They were mystical places yes, but they did not come complete with the kind of connotations that gave cause to concern the Church. If anything, they were seen as beacons of some distant romanticised idea of Britain to which Christianity was now intrinsically tethered.

No, to find a moment when the tide of religion may well have had cause to sweep the old stones down in its wake, we must go to the hinterland of post-Roman Britain; the *dark ages*.

Northern Mercia

The kingdom of Mercia emerged from the soup of post-Roman Britain as one of several regional kingdoms created by the juxtaposition of incoming Angles, Jutes and Saxons arriving from mainland Europe. At its height, it contained a huge swathe of territory stretching from modern day Lincolnshire in the East to Cheshire and Shropshire in the West and covered the whole of the Midlands as a result. Its early history is inherently pagan, old gods of old religions finding new life in the vacuum that was created following the withdrawal of the Christianised Romans in the late fourth century, with the remnants of the indigenous British - or *Celtic* - christianity surviving primarily in the more distant parts of Scotland and Wales. Together, this group of Kingdoms would go on to be known as the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy, the result of regional consolidations of power and influence throughout the period between 600-800CE.

Mercia's early rulers appear to have favoured a site at Repton in south Derbyshire as a ceremonial centre, the stretch north from which ultimately met its borders with the Kingdom of Northumbria in the very region in which

Arbor Low is located in an area inhabited by a group known as the *Pecsaetan*, or the Peak-Dwellers.

The last truly Pagan King of Mercia had been Penda, who reigned between 626 and 655 CE during a time in which Christianity was undergoing a resurgence in the wider Anglo-Saxon world that would ultimately stay forever. Its comeback may have been partly sponsored by the work of the Celtic-Christian monks in the surrounding kingdoms but the fact that Christianity provided serious advantages courtesy of an alliance with the Holy Roman Empire should not be ignored. Much as with Christianity's earlier success being partly due to it being the official religious currency adopted by the Roman Empire in 380CE, the religion of Christ during Penda's time too, was becoming increasingly difficult to resist.

Penda himself is understood to have been initially tolerant to Christian preaching within Mercia itself, which would be much in line with the cosmopolitan nature of life within such a cultural melting pot. But evidentially, his view on the matter changed dramatically, and he is believed to have taken a position in the 650's that a system of Christian colonialism was acting to undermine his authority - something specifically enabled by fractious elements within the neighbouring Kingdom of Northumbria and the people of a territory known as *Bernicia*. War duly followed.

In 655 Penda invaded Bernicia with a large force and besieged their leader Oswiu, at a site identified as the modern day Scottish city of Stirling. Following the battle, Penda's forces were returning south when a second great

battle was joined near Leeds in horrendous weather conditions. Penda's forces were defeated, and he himself beheaded. Paganism in England was dead, and come just three years later, Mercia has converted to a Christian kingdom.

As part of Mercia's official conversion, under the new King Wulfhere (Penda's son) there was naturally much making up to do for the damage caused by the religious wars that had characterised the end of his fathers reign. The Venerable Bede - the Northumbrian monk and chronicler from which most of our understanding of the period derives - recorded how Wulfhere went on to enthusiastically embrace this Christian conversion, striking up a keen friendship with Wilfrid, Bishop of York, and awarding the church "many tracts of land" in an endeavour to entice Wilfrid to become his own, Mercian bishop. This is just the tip of the proverbial, historical ice burg, and we really shouldn't underestimate the size of the charm offensive required for Wulfhere to assert himself as a genuine Christian figure in light of Mercia's long held pagan heritage. Nor perhaps should we underestimate just how far Wulfhere would be willing to go in his own kingdom in order to foster his chosen image as a loyal and passionate Christian King.

Out with the Old

During the period of Mercian conversion, a wider cementation of Christian life was already firmly underway throughout Britain; some elements of which had far more to do with force than choice. Barely sixty years prior to Wulfhere becoming the first Christian king of Mercia, Pope St. Gregory had sent personal orders to the Anglo-Saxon Kings of Britain to “surpass the worship of idols.” In context of the period, this can *only* hold reference to sites of Pagan practice. According to Bede, this edict was carried out first by King Earconbert of Kent, who ordered that all such pagan idols in his kingdom be “forsaken and destroyed”.

It was a practice of brutal historical revisionism that many others duly followed, and in some respects has perhaps most recently been exemplified to the modern world by the manner in which fighters of the Islamic State were ordered to attack and destroy ancient sites across Syria and Iraq in hope of eradicating any totems of cultural belief that existed before that which they consider their own. It is against this backdrop that we can place the Mercian transition to Christianity and the willingness to ensure that simply, there would be no going back.

How does this influence events at Arbour Low? Well, we know that Wulfhere had a whole lot of campaigning to do on the subject in order to bolster his dynastic credentials. We also know the area of Arbour Low would be familiar to the Mercian hierarchy courtesy of its proximity to its Northern borders, and

indeed, the nearby town of Bakewell was founded during the period. What perhaps has not been previously appreciated however is the extraordinary level of connection between Arbor Low itself and the Mercian elite. A connection by which the idea that the stone circle at Arbor Low would provide both a major and convenient scalp to be claimed in furthering the evidentiary hoard pertaining to just how serious the Mercians were about their Christianity, becomes shockingly stark.

Excavation of a burial mound at Benty Grange Farm, a site less than a mile from Arbor Low, in the year 1848 revealed something incredible. It was a project managed by the same Thomas Bateman that had earlier ran the dig at our site, this time though, having literally moved his endeavours a mile down the road, his work uncovered a high status Anglo-Saxon burial; from which the first ever Anglo-Saxon ceremonial military helmet in Britain was found.

The Benty Grange helmet was constructed with an iron framework, over which plates of horn were laid leading to an iron Boar located at the helmets apex. This ornament, synonymous with Pagan warrior culture, was then duely offset with the addition of a Christian cross on the nasal bar. It's discovery predates its much more famous cousin the Sutton Hoo helmet by 90 years, and provides clear evidence that the landscape of Arbor Low had retained a cultural importance long after its prehistoric heyday that found favour amongst the Anglo-Saxons. That such a helmet could only have belonged to a high-status individual is obvious, and courtesy of the cross on the nasal bar, that this individual was laid to rest following the Christian conversion of

Mercia, is clear. That the Pagan beacon of Arbour Low lay just a twenty minute stroll away, any association with which the emerging Christian authority of Mercia was deliberately and systematically now choosing to rally against, is surely just too much of a coincidence to ignore.

Without such a remarkably local window into the period, in which old habits were being active supplanted by those of the new religion, there would still likely be cause enough to consider the downing of the Arbor Low stones in connection with Mercia's transition to Christianity, but with the nature of the burial at Benty Grange Farm, the whole subject drives towards a perviously obscured sense of cause and effect. The high ranking warrior chief buried at Benty Grange would have represented the local face of the Mercian King, who in light of the cultural dating connected to the helmet, is entirely likely to have been personally connected to Wulhere at the very moment he was undertaking his campaign of Christian re-branding. That such a proud and remarkable site of Pagan history should be allowed to go untouched, literally within eye-line of the burial site of such a figure, is improbable to say the least.

We are dealing with a difficult and often contradictory period of history that has become typified by the term *dark ages* in light of the relative lack of contemporary written accounts pertaining to the era. There is no way, and nor will there ever be, of knowing the exact detail of what went on during the peiord at a local level. That said, the downing of the stones at Arbor Low was a deliberate act and one that, in full consideration of the historical timeline

from which such megalithic iconoclasm would have been a natural consequence, marries somewhat naturally with the period in which Mercia was in the throws of religious re-invention. Pulling down the stones would not serve to symbolise the end of the pagan association in that corner of the kingdom and send a clear and powerful message to King Wulphere that his man in the North was very much on side with the new religion, but would go a long way to ensuring local understanding of the change had a clear, literal and physical element. That the stones were not then destroyed, but left at the site, is also in keeping with this theory and could even be seen as the single biggest signal that this was indeed the time at which they were toppled.

There may have been little question outwardly that the change to Christianity in Mercia needed to be demonstrated in hard, blunt cold action, but internally, in the minds of those tasked with the act itself, this is the one point in British history at which the individual would have a genuine, personal concern that irrespective of political bargain, there may actually be a chance that they're getting it all wrong; that they were backing the wrong horse. In which case, the old God's would be whole lot easier to appease if the stones could be easily resurrected should the need arise, their ancient power, or at least the local perception of it, very much still intact.

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