ARCHAEOLOGICAL RATS



There is a small exhibition on at the British Museum of a grave dating from the late third millennium/early second.

The grave of a man dating to around 2,300BC was discovered three miles from Stonehenge by Wessex Archaeology staff in May 2002. His grave was the richest from this period (the early Bronze Age) ever found in Britain and contained the country's first gold objects.

He was found during excavation in advance of a housing development at Amesbury in Wiltshire, and the man was dubbed the “Amesbury Archer” or the “King of Stonehenge” by the media. He has featured on several radio and TV programmes, including the BBC2 Ancestors series.



When I read this website report from Wessex Archaeology, the large non-profit archaeological practice that excavated the burial, I smelled a rat.

This is what they say:

- the burial is the richest of its date
- it is three miles from Stonehenge
- the monument was undergoing major renovation at the time
- the man came from central Europe
- he was skilled in metalworking
- his son, buried nearby, was brought up in central England.

So the story is supposed to run as follows. This burial is of a man who grew up in the Alps and then traveled to the Stonehenge region to settle. Like others, he was associated with trade with central Europe and metalworking, and brought “beaker culture” to Britain. His son, buried nearby, grew up in Britain, so his father may have settled and married locally. The exceptional wealth of the burial indicates that he was possibly Stonehenge’s designer.

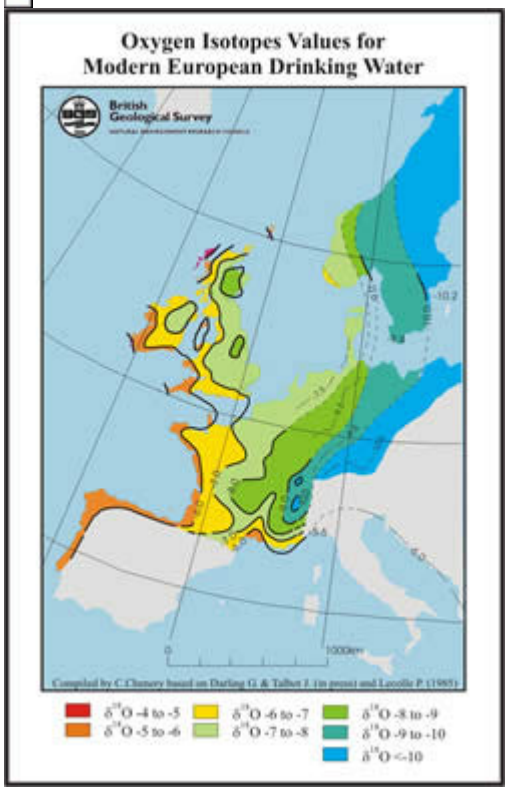
A load of tosh.



A picture of the beaker folk.

The evidence for this story is as follows. This is a classic “beaker” burial, albeit with more grave goods than normal, from the early bronze age. Beakers are a distinctive ceramic form found across much of Europe. They are usually found in graves with archers’ accoutrement and copper daggers. What interested me was the use of oxygen isotope analysis of tooth enamel to try to fix the origin of the man. The balance of different oxygen isotopes in the water you drink when young is

reflected in tooth enamel. The balance in this man's tooth enamel is what you find in regions of Europe colder than Britain. The web site shows a map of oxygen isotopes in modern drinking water.



The isotope balance in the buried man is that associated with the blue region on the map.

Now I know that we are only being presented the bare bones of the case. But the blue region extends from Finland through the Baltic and eastern Europe to the Alps. Why was he not from Finland? And who is to say that modern drinking water is a good guide to that in the second millennium BC? Even my rudimentary knowledge of climatic history reminds me that the Atlantic optimum, when Europe was significantly warmer and wetter than today, peaked in the first millennium BC. Did this not affect the character of water available for drinking? Am I just supposed to accept the word of the British Geologial Survey (there is a nice picture of white coated scientist alongside the map)? Well, I know I should go and read the scientific reports. But the map on the web site was not why I was smelling a rat. Though it was making the stink stronger.

I smelled a rat because the story of this supposed designer of Stonehenge coming over from central Europe with his Beakers and knowledge of metalworking was just so

familiar to me – and familiar because I had followed how it had been totally discredited in the 1970s. Steve Shennan and others demolished the idea that Beakers were some kind of ethnic cultural marker. There were no “beaker folk” coming over to Britain as Wessex Archaeology claim. There was no distinctive cultural or ethnic group carrying with them secret knowledge of metalworking and how to build stone monuments. And as for the richness of the grave, well, yes, it has more stuff in it than normally found, but why does this indicate status and power associated with Stonehenge? Maybe it does, but equally, maybe not. There is nothing in the web site that makes me confident even in a coincidence of date between the burial and Stonehenge. And Stonehenge was in a constant state of remodelling.

Like I said the other day in this blog, here again we have the old nineteenth century stories being repeated, whatever facts are actually found. This is not science at all. This is tired fantasy, and an insult to those who want to know more of the past.