RURAL PURSUITS – CROP CIRCLES AND PREHISTORY



On the subject of rural relationships [Link] [Link], Tim Dilworth, freelancing for National Geographic TV, contacted me last week about crop circles around Stonehenge – and we are definitely in the season for this kind of thing …



Here are some extracts from our conversation.

TD There are a couple of points I'd really like to get into the film. First, the almost magical quality of wheat and that crop circles can be seen as an echo of ancient rites. Second, that people today really believe there's something magical about this place (Wiltshire) and they point to all the prehistoric sites to say that even the ancients felt the same way. Whether or not it's true, they believe it.

MS I think your instincts here are spot on – an echo maybe – certainly there is a recurrent theme of the aura of prehistoric monuments and senses of place.

A crucial contemporary attitude too is that of the perceived loss of an intimate relationship with the countryside (this is big news in the UK at the moment) – old

ideas of the separation of city and country.

TD Is there a good (layman's) overview of the Wiltshire's history and religions?

MS English Heritage has a series of attractive guides – you have probably come across them – they include a series by the publishers Batsford. The one by Mike Parker Pearson on the Bronze Age is excellent.

A more academic (but good) read on prehistoric relationships with the land is Richard Bradley's book on prehistoric monuments [Link]

Christopher Chippindale's "Stonehenge Complete" is in a new edition – this is one of the best perhaps for you – it deals with how people have thought of the monuments and the land since they were built.

Then there is Barbara Bender on the meaning of Stonehenge – and she deals with New Age views very well – academic but chatty – "Stonehenge: Making Space"

TD Is there evidence that pre-Christians used bonfires as part of their worship or rituals? Or that bonfires carried on even into modern times? (I'm looking for an excuse to have a huge bonfire).

MS On prehistoric religion it is better to think less in terms of religious rites and institutions separate from everyday life, and more in terms of ways of life – ritual and belief, cosmology coterminous with everyday life. And everyday life back then was very strange.

TD What were some of their other planting and harvest-time rituals – any that involved practices we would find unusual today?

MS The calendar was clearly marked and understood – there is plenty of evidence for astronomical alignment and observation, knowledge too. There were two other cosmological ordering principles:
Land, place and the building of monuments – prehistoric northern Europe was ordered around a built environment – it may not look like an urban environment, but it was equally saturated in meanings, stories, histories, significances.
Relationships with the dead and with other species – very peculiar goings on in chambered and earthen monuments, fiddling with bones and much much more.

TD When and why were the barrows created?

MS There are different kinds and they date from the time of the first farmers through to the iron age in the early first millennium BC.

TD When and why were the original white horses created and what is their significance?

MS See all this as expression of the significance of location – place matters to these people.

TD Same with the stone formations?

MS Same with Silbury Hill.

TD How would I find out what iron age Britains wore?

MS There is a lot of information about bronze age and iron age dress in northern Europe – we have complete cloth outfits and much metal armor and the like. The English Heritage/Batsford series deals with it. See also bog bodies – many web sites.

TD And as a real leap into the New Age, what are leylines and is there anything to them?

MS Yes and no.

Prehistoric people in northern Europe were very sensitive to place – this is what we pick up on in their great stone and earthen sculptures. And not just the sites themselves, but the relationships between places. So archaeologists have become very sensitive to how sites and monuments connect together in a region like Wessex or Wiltshire, how they form what I just called a built environment.

So yes – there are prehistoric alignments. And they were/are charged with cultural meaning/significance/power.

But this is not what most people understand by ley lines. These are alignments of sites across many historic periods, and they don’t sustain scrutiny. It is a statistical commonplace that there will be several alignments in any random scatter

of points. And supposing that the lines are tapping into some lost/unknown/secret knowledge of earth powers is amusing but a little silly.

You are tuning into a network of histories, beliefs, projections that include Druidism, neo-paganism, and the Celtic revival.

One of my favorite ruminations on all this is the movie Wicker Man [Link to a blog entry of mine] [Another link] I am convinced this is one of the sources for California's Burning Man festival (just ended this weekend in Black Rock City) [Link to Patrick Roddie's superb Burning Man photography – somatic materialities!]



Stukeley's Wicker Man

A supposed rite of pagan human and animal sacrifice to ensure the fertility of the harvest.

The evidence for the Wicker Man is minimal, but for an antiquarian, William Stukeley in the 17th century, and some very brief mentions in Roman author(s) writing about the Druids. The Celtic connection with all this goes back again to the 17th and particularly 18th centuries and the reinvention of Celtic identity in

Scotland, Wales, Ireland and France …

All this is actually nicely dealt with in the movie!

And bonfires are nevertheless well attested rites going way back – plenty of archaeological remains of roast dinners at the entrance to chambered monuments.