

Gender, Power and Asymmetry in the Neolithic: the Avebury monuments as a case study

Lionel Sims, Anthropology, University of East London

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Lionel Sims firstly introduced the archaeological landscape of his talk: Avebury, Silbury Hill and West Kennet Avenue. The main focus of his study was the last of these and he presented us with three modern theories of the avenue's *raison d'être*: 1. An ancestral pathway (Pollard), 2. An avenue of ascending power (Thomas) and 3. A communal construction project to be occupied by 'the spirits' (Richards). The first theory was dismissed as not being the best route into the area for hunters with additional evidence of compression marks on the outside of the avenue rather than the inside. The second theory concerning the stones increasing size along the length of the avenue was also dismissed: Sims claims there is no regular increase in height.

There have been studies on gender in prehistory before: *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Gimbutas, 1974), *The Stones of Time* (Brennan, 1994), *Prehistoric Textiles* (Barber, 1991). In *Stonehenge: The Biography of a Landscape* (Darvill, 2007) we are presented with a theory of male and female stones based on form. The stones of the West Kennet Avenue are split into types, A being pillar (male) and B being lozenge (female). Darvill posits that types A and B alternate along the avenue. Two further studies (Smith 1995 and Burl 2002) add to the model of West Kennet Avenue as the centre of a fertility cult with 4 pairs of pillars and lozenges, but Sims refutes this also and presented us with the evidence of his case study.

Sims declared that some stones are neither pillar nor lozenge. He went on to explain the difference between the modern, western idea of fixed gender as opposed to the anthropological idea of gender not being fixed or given. He described the 'Gender of Power' model of Paleolithic Times. This theory is based on the lunar cycle and involved a period of menstrual seclusion by women, their gender being 'non-heterosexual' at this time. In the Neolithic the earlier culture of 'Hunter gatherer' became supplemented by cattle herding: there was still no settled farming. However, this was the great age of the monument builders with their skills of pottery and polished axes. Cattle could now be used as a bargaining tool in the acquisition of a 'wife'. Because of this the matrilineal system of the Paleolithic now broke down and women lost the power to 'withdraw' as previously: 'Bride price' replaced 'Bride service' culture. Male circumcision now existed as a facet of the asymmetric gender of power.

Relating this change in cultures to the stones of West Kennet Avenue, Sims chose to explore the human burials found in the area. Were men buried at pillars and women at lozenges? Of the 6 male burials at least 2 showed evidence of human sacrifice and were found next to lozenge (female) stones. This might support the 'Gender of Power' model, but Sims investigated further and found that these stones are not stereotypical lozenges; one stone (35A) looks like a lozenge from one view and a pillar from another – a case of gender ambiguity?

Searches for an occupation area at West Kennet have yielded little, in spite of one area being termed as such. Sims then switched his attention to the position of stone 30b. Kieller, in his excavations of the 1930s and his work on reconstructing the stone monuments in this area, found that there never was a stone at position 30b. However, a large quantity of flint tools were found buried there. Sims suggests that position 30b could have been the 'dark moon marker', the point of darkness in the lunar cycle, the time of withdrawal by women. Was it also an entrance way and the site of human sacrifice? Archeo-astronomical studies of the stones have also been carried out showing that in the paired stones of the avenue the moon rises and sets over the opposite stone of a pair. Overall, Sims provided us with a wide variety of theories, models and evidence relating to this much studied area.