

Burials held at Stonehenge for hundreds of years: research

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England's famous Stonehenge monument was used as a burial site from its inception around 3000 BC until well after the massive stones were erected there around 2500 BC, scientists said Thursday.

Archaeologists previously believed that people had been buried at Stonehenge only between 2700 and 2600 BC, before the large stones, known as sarsens, were put in place.

The new dates, estimated using the latest in carbon dating research, provide strong clues that the original purpose of the ancient monument was as a cemetery, and that it was used as a burial site for more than 500 years.

"It's now clear that burials were a major component of Stonehenge in all its main stages," said Mike Parker Pearson, archaeology professor at the University of Sheffield in England, who worked with National Geographic Magazine on the study.

"Stonehenge was a place of burial from its beginning to its zenith in the mid-third millennium BC," the archaeologist said.

"The cremation burial dating to Stonehenge's sarsen stones phase is likely just one of many from this later period of the monument's use, and demonstrates that it was still very much a 'domain of the dead'," Parker Pearson said.

The research marks the first time any of the cremation burial sites from Stonehenge have been radiocarbon dated.

The artifacts dated by Parker Pearson's team were excavated from the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the 1950s and have been kept at the nearby Salisbury Museum.

Stonehenge is one of the world's best preserved prehistoric monuments. In around 2,600 BC, 80 giant standing stones were arranged on Salisbury Plain, where there was already a 400-year-old stone circle.

Around two centuries later, even bigger stones were brought to the plain.

Today, only 40 percent of the originals remain. But around 850,000 visitors per year come to marvel at the 17 stones which are still intact.

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