

Roman Stonehenge and the English Renaissance

In the year 1534, in order to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and legitimize one to Anne Boleyn, King Henry VIII of England broke with the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England, declaring himself the ecclesiastical head. The result was over a century of political, religious, and intellectual tumult following his death in 1547. When his son, the nominally protestant King Edward VI died in 1553, it was Henry's Catholic daughter Mary, nicknamed "Bloody," who took the throne, and earned her epithet in a ruthless attempt to purge the Protestant presence from England through arrests, torture, and execution. She was succeeded by her more tolerant, Protestant half-sister Elizabeth I, who brought about a period of peace perpetuated by her own successor, the Scottish King James I, a master in the delicate act of balancing the factitious English godly community, as well as the divided Parliamentarians. Yet by 1649, the political landscape of England had again devolved, with a civil war between Parliament and James' son, King Charles I, leading to a period of renewed bloodshed and division that would not finally settle until the arrival of William and Mary of Orange in 1688.

The result of these decades of turmoil and division was a great influx of religious, political, and intellectual diversity into the English school of thought. With the onset of years of political division and, eventually, civil war, the overarching political and religious authority weakened, taking with it the censorship of previous years, and leaving behind a print and intellectual culture less burdened by the restrictions of government authority. Radical religious groups began to emerge among the English people. New

ways of thinking appeared, and in the tumult of Henry VIII's successors, knowledge and information became disseminated and available to an unprecedented degree.

In this environment lived Inigo Jones. Well traveled, and a devoted student of the arts, Jones was the Architect General for King James I in the early seventeenth century, at the height of English factitiousness. His great surviving literary work, *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, vulgarly called Stoneheng, on Salisbury Plain*, was commissioned by James in the year 1620 both as an analysis of the structure, and as a critical attempt to determine who built it, and for what purpose. Through Jones's writing, one is able to catch a glimpse of England in the seventeenth century. Jones' work developed an understanding of 17th Century England as intellectually fissiparous and diverse by conveying to what great extent knowledge was disseminated, rationalized an analysis of seventeenth century English intellectualism as situated squarely within the philosophy of Renaissance Humanism, and contradicted the impression of seventeenth century England as a chaotic hotbed of radical, mob-mongering literature and scholasticism.

While King James commissioned the analysis of Stonehenge in 1620, Jones's work on the subject was not published until after both he and his monarch had passed. The writing that remains today is, in fact, merely a collection of Jones's notes on the antiquity, compiled by John Webb and published by John Flesher in London, 1655. In his work, Jones first addressed competing theories concerning the builders of Stonehenge. He dismissed the suggestion that it was constructed as a temple by the ancient Druids, on the grounds that "...their *Temples*' and sacred structures, they consisted not in variety of formes, costlinesse of materials, or perfection of humane *Arts*, but were of *Natures* own

framing...” (*Stoneheng*, 5). Jones rejected the proposal that it was built by the Britons for a similar reason: namely that they maintained no knowledge of the art of building with stone.

Having repudiated all existing theories concerning the builders of Stonehenge, Jones did not immediately present his own thoughts. Instead, he conducted a sweeping analysis of the structure itself. He described to the reader the layout of the stones, the arrangement of the entryways and the trench. He noted the appearance of patterns within the arrangement, of hexagons that can be drawn between the principal monoliths within each layer. And with his detailed descriptions, Jones paired illustrations. Included within the text itself are vivid diagrams of Stonehenge. The structure of the antiquity is laid out clearly, from multiple angles, complete with Jones’s labels for the different sections, and annotations concerning the patterns he observed.

It is only after he discounted alternative thoughts on the structure’s builders, and presented the reader with a clear picture of Stonehenge itself, that Jones put forth his own theory. “*Stoneheng* in my judgment was a work, built by the *Romans*, and they the sole *Founders* thereof.” (*Stoneheng*, 66). Jones insisted that Stonehenge could only be the work of the Romans because only they, he said, had the knowledge and the skill in architecture to create such a structure. He asserted that nowhere but in the former provinces of Rome had he seen marvels that rival Stonehenge in the enormity of its construction. “Among the *Ægyptian Antiquities*, or those *Eastern Nations* from whom the *Græcians* deduced their learning, I find not any such composure ever used: or with the *Greeks* themselves...” Jones wrote. (*Stoneheng*, 65).

Throughout his book, Jones made frequent and repeated references to authors from both his own age, and from antiquity. His denial of the claim that the Druids built Stonehenge was grounded in the works of classical authors such as Caesar, Tacitus, Pliny, Strabo, and even those as little known today as Pomponius Mela, as well as more contemporary writers like Humphrey Lloyd, who all tell of how the Druids, far from building magnificent shrines of stone, worshipped instead within Nature itself. “*The Druids chose of purpose (saith Pliny) such groves for their divine Service as stood only upon Okes; nay they solemnized no Sacrifice, nor performed any sacred Ceremonies without the branches, and leaves thereof.*” (*Stoneheng*, 5). Furthermore, his refusal to accept that it was instead the Britons who built the structure was drawn from the works of Herodian, Dion of Xiphiline, and Sir Walter Raleigh, who vindicated the suggestion that the British were a barbarous people devoid of the ability to produce a work such as Stonehenge; “As for their manner of living, the *Britans* were then a savage and barbarous people, knowing no use at all of garments. *Vestis usum non cognoscunt* (saith *Herodian*.) Now, if they destitute of the knowledge even to clothe themselves, much less knowledge had they to erect stately structures...” (*Stoneheng*, 7).

Even his own claim, that the Romans in fact constructed Stonehenge, was shored up by the writings of Camden, Leyland, Pausanias, and others who spoke of similarly built structures known to be of Roman origins. Jones did not just know of these writers, he was intimately familiar with them and many others, and was able to cite their thoughts extensively. This suggests access to and dissemination of a quantity and a *variety* of knowledge and information unlike anything anyone in England had experienced before. It communicates the many and varied forms of enlightened thought, and the several

contrasting viewpoints presented by Jones within his book alone illustrate for an observer the diverse nature of English intellectualism in the seventeenth century.

This culture of literary promulgation exposed the seventeenth century English to all manner of philosophies and ideologies. For the first time, the Renaissance beliefs of France, Italy, and the rest of mainland Europe found an audience among the English people. For the first time, the English were able to encounter and adopt the doctrines and dogmas of earlier European thinkers, and to produce thinkers of their own. Men like Francis Bacon consulted the humanists of old, and tackled the tough questions about God and the cosmos. Fascination and interest in antiquity experienced a revival. Unquestioning faith gave way to skepticism and critical analysis, and the intellectual climate of seventeenth century England became encircled by the ideology and doctrine of the Renaissance humanists. Inigo Jones' book *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, vulgarly called Stoneheng, on Salisbury Plain* contributes to this interpretation of seventeenth century English intellectualism through its own revived interest in classical antiquity, as well as its characteristically humanist use of fact, reason, and observation to both support its own claims and discount the opposition.

Inigo Jones was a devoted student of classical antiquity. He traveled through much of Europe to study the architectural works of the ancients, and is knowledgeable of the written record. "I passed into forrain parts to converse with the great Masters thereof in *Italy*; where I applied myself to search out the ruines of those ancient *Buildings*..." (*Stoneheng*, 1). Upon returning to England, his desired to study architecture so that he might come to understand those great works of antiquity that adorned his own country. "...I applied my minde more particularly to the study of *Architecture*. Among the ancient

monuments whereof, found here, I deemed no one more worthy the searching after, than this of *Stoneheng*.” (*Stoneheng*, 1). Throughout his book, Jones demonstrated his knowledge of ancient writers, and cited a great number of them, including Caesar, Tacitus, Pliny, and Strabo, as mentioned. The text is full of quotes set in italic type to differentiate them from the rest, and followed by the phrases “saith Tacitus.” (*Stoneheng* 6) or “as Strabo” (*Stoneheng* 8). Jones himself gives us a glimpse into the obsessions of contemporary English intellectuals. His own fascination with the ancients and his committed study of such conveys and image of England in the midst of a classical revival. It supports an impression of English intellectuals as focused on their own history, on the time of antiquity. In other words, as humanist.

Furthermore, Jones based all his arguments in observation and the interpretation of fact. He was utterly rational, discarding opposing arguments only when he was able to show that they were unsupported by the facts and the history. For instance, he rejects the theory that Stonehenge was built by the Druids because it does not fit with the historical observation that they worshipped and operated not only in woods, but also in a different part of the island “For, their ancient seat was in the *Isle of Mona*...” (*Stoneheng*, 6). Later, he employs reason to conclude that it could not have been the Britons, since they were not known to have any knowledge of stonework. As well, he proposes even his own theory, that the Romans were the builders, on a foundation of reason and observation. He notes similarities between the arrangement of Stonehenge and several temple models known to have been employed by the Romans: “But to come to their sacred works, which in regard of this *Antiquity* are (it’s true) of most concernment, I find the *Romans* used (as *Vitruvius* witnesseth) such manner of *Temples*...he delivers, there were amongst others

two forms of round *Temples*, commonly in use amongst them, the one called *Monopteros*, the other *Peripteros*...the other made open, and instead of a wall encompassed with a row of pillars only, having no enclosed *Cell* within it at all..." (*Stoneheng*, 77-78). Jones even went on to provide diagrams of the *Monopteros* placed right alongside the schematic of Stonehenge itself, to better convey to the reader the ground on which his conclusion was based (*Stoneheng*, 83, 85). Inigo Jones conducted a careful analysis. He was rational, and interpreted only factual record and observation in a manner reminiscent of none so much as Lorenzo Valla. Jones represented an intellectual step away from faith-based reason, towards a more rational, enlightened manner of thought. He approached his study of Stonehenge with the delicacy and critical scrutiny of a humanist, and his methodical, reasoned approach coupled with his fascination and interest in the age of antiquity supports an understanding of seventeenth century English intellectualism as distanced from earlier, faith-based ideology, and squared securely within the sphere of Renaissance Humanism.

As diverse and fissiparous as the intellectual landscape of seventeenth century England was, the political climate was worse. Henry VIII's schism with the Roman Catholic Church left decades of upheaval in its wake, destroying the cohesion of doctrine that held Catholic institutions together and opening the door to religious and political radicalism once held in check by a unified central authority. The result was a surge of outspoken radical thinkers, who debated political and religious doctrine loudly and to no end, declaring their own way the only way, and those who contradicted them heretics and blasphemers. The print culture of England became one of pamphleteers. Publications were made rapidly, and produced en masse, to reach the greatest number of people in the

shortest time and at the lowest cost. Treatises were aimed to please the mob, to garner renown for the author among the people as a thinker or a preacher. It was a print culture of fast motion, rapid writing, and relative chaos.

Inigo Jones did not fit in this mold. His text was no pamphlet, rushed quickly from the shop and handed out on street corners while the ink was still damp. A book of impressive size, more than one hundred pages long, it was a work of a refined and elite nature. Elegantly constructed and well bound, the book was a luxury item. It was fitted with nearly twenty-five illustrations and diagrams; schematics and architectural plans of Stonehenge and similar temples were placed side by side with artistic impressions of the wonder, and there was even an illustration of the author himself (*Stoneheng*, 1). The text was set in many different types, with the appearance of italics and even the old Gothic script. It was not a text meant for popular consumption, but a work written by a member of the intellectual elite, for the intellectual elite. The very physical nature of Jones's text contradicted the environment of rapid-fire, cheap print culture that surrounded it, and demonstrated that, though censorship was vanishing and central authority weakening, the upper level of English intellectualism retained stability and grace.

Inigo Jones lived, studied, and wrote in a period of English upheaval and turmoil. The nature of his country and environment was apparent in his book, *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, vulgarly called Stoneheng, on Salisbury Plain*. In it, Jones contradicted an understanding of English print and scholastic culture as rapid, cheap, and chaotic, and instead supported an impression of stability retained, despite political tumult, among the elite intellectuals. As well, Jones' text upheld an interpretation of England in the seventeenth century as intellectually diverse, varied, and fissiparous through his

frequent citation of a great number of classical and contemporary authors who at times contradict both each other, and Jones himself. Finally, Jones's own repeated reference to and admiration for the period of antiquity, as well as his critical, factual, and reason-based approach to his task rationalized a perception of English intellectualism as grounded in the philosophy of the Renaissance humanists. All together, Jones's book conveyed an understanding of seventeenth century England as transitioning, despite political and religious division and turmoil, into an era of Renaissance thought, and one of enlightened and progressive intellectualism.

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