STONE SONG: SACRED TIME, SACRED SPACE A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

Linda Stryker
Arizona State University West
(stryker@asu.edu)

Stone Song is the product of a personal journey. I had for a few year hiked canyons of South Eastern Utah to photograph Anasazi ruins and petroglyphs. In 2000, I traveled to England and Ireland so I could photograph additional sacred and ancient sites and experience “being there.” In some ways I felt a stranger in a strange land, yet magnetically drawn, emotionally drawn to these places, which symbolize the strong urge all peoples have and have had toward finding one’s place in the universe and understanding that place and making it secure. I could feel very strongly the presence of people who once lived and died at these places—even to the point of hearing laughter here . . . , a shout there. I was amazed and humbled by experiencing the buildings and structural representations of that effort and by learning of the knowledge and powers of shamans and their uses of psychological effects in their work in healing and other vocations.

How were these sites used? What was the experience at the sites for the original peoples?
It is a spiritual quest for me: plugging into the vastness of the universe, going into the wildernesses on earth, into the raw wilderness of the inner psyche, trying to find a strength inside to overcome internal fears, and to feel a part of the great lineage of seekers.

WHAT IS ‘SACRED’? WHAT ARE ‘SACRED SITES’?

Sacred places are universally found—in every culture, in every time. These are “special places”—places of spirit, places of energy—much like our present-day churches, temples, tabernacles, mosques, where we go to mark passages in life, to unite with the lineage of our clan, to swear oaths and vows, to be healed, to be taught, to experience something of the transcendent. But originally, these are often natural places—found, and then marked. The rishis, shamans, healers, priests, etc, would there guide us in our progress, urging us to attain our highest Selves. I believe that four things give rise to myths and religions:

1) observing the sky,
where we see circles and cycles, and an implied specialness;
agricultural success relied on knowing the seasons, proper timing of rituals
2) witnessing death,
3) our own physiology,
4) the quest for a feeling of belonging in a mysterious universe.

Sacred places everywhere are modeled on a core set of natural places (mountains, caves, rock outcrops, springs, etc.) and embellished with culturally distinct symbols. These places are considered liminal, tucked between the mundane and spirit world; they are entry points into another consciousness. (Crumley, 1999)

Lucy Lippard writes in her book Overlay, that stone markers are reminders that mankind has marked the earth with his presence, contributed to the landscape. But these are clearly different from nature—the mark of powerful man. And the thought that these have remained there for millennia, silently observing all that has transpired, and may still be standing long after humans die out. (Lippard, 1999)

These sites become the place of religious beliefs and practices, built with ritual purposes in mind (facing of entries, co-alignment with solstices, cardinal points, symbols, drawings, peckings, etc). Some sites were built for living and raising families, some edifices were for storing food, meetings (kivas), cooking, but some auspicious sites were used for healing, rites of passage (birth, puberty, marriage, death), initiations to inner teachings, and sacrifices to appease/honor gods or to right situations on Earth.

THE SITES
(slide show of black-and-white prints and color transparencies)

1. Carved Stone at Tumulus, Newgrange
   County Meath, Ireland
   three images

   This huge mound is a passage-tomb aligned to the winter solstice dawn, when a shaft of light enters a long corridor to the dark interior. It has several large stones outside, carved with enigmatic swirling symbols. Newgrange is over 5500 years old, older by 500 years than the pyramids of Giza. The corbelled ceiling has remained intact and leak proof throughout the centuries. The interior is richly decorated with stone carvings.
2a. Proleek Dolmen
   County Louth, Ireland
Proleek is dated to about 4000 BCE. There are some 150 dolmen in Ireland, and another such number in Britain. These are thought to be the Megalithic tombs of local chieftains. Some are huge, all are impressive in the achievement of building them. If you toss a coin to the top of the capstone and the coins stays, you will have good luck; if the coin falls off, you will have bad luck, so the legend goes. Proleek now sports the indignity of yellow graffiti.

2b. Browne’s Hill Dolmen
   County Carlow, Ireland
Browne’s Hill dates from about 2000 BCE. Its capstone weighs about 100 tons.

3. Castlerigg Stone Circle
   Keswick, Cumbria, England
Castlerigg is one of the earliest circles, raised about 3200 BCE. It has a grand setting in the mountains, but Keats said of it, “a dismal cirque of Druid stones upon a forlorn moor.” It did not seem thus as I beheld it. Among the site’s functions, Castlerigg may have been connected with the Neolithic stone axe industry, as ancient axes have been found associated with the circle. Of course, there are darker interpretations of these findings.

4. Long Meg and Her Daughters Stone Circle
   Little Salkeld, Cumberland, England
Long Meg is one of the larger intact circles, though farmers once tried to dynamite some of the stones. In true gothic fashion, thunder and lightening started up and they stopped their nefarious deed. This is an old circle, constructed in about 3200 - 2500 BCE.

5. Duddo Five Stones
   Felkington, Northumberland
A late period, small stone circle, Duddo was built in about 2000-1200 BCE, clearly a shrine for Bronze Age rituals. Charcoal and bone have been found in its center. Impressive gouges in the large stone give the site an eerie feeling.

6. Rievaulx Abbey
   Yorkshire, England
This abbey is the first center of the Cistercians in Britain. Once a thriving and rich monastery, Rievaulx was also calm and tranquil for its inhabitants 800 years ago. Today this is a majestic,
beautiful ruin.

7. Lindisfarne Priory  
   Holy Island, Northumberland, England  
Since 635 CE, Lindisfarne was a center of Christianity and for 200 years a center of culture and education. The original church, built by St. Aidan, is now completely gone. Vikings occupied the island in the eighth century. In the twelfth century, the religious community was re-established, and now we see the ruined Benedictine priory from this latter era. It has been a site of pilgrimage for 1300 years. It can only be reached at low tide, as the roadway is under water at other times.

8. Glastonbury Tor and St. Michael’s Tower  
   Glastonbury, Somerset, England  
Glastonbury and the Tor are strong spiritual draws for pilgrims. Glastonbury has long been the center of legend; the isle of Avalon appears when the Tor and surroundings become flooded. They say that King Arthur was brought to the Glastonbury Abbey, to die after his last battle. The Tor is manmade and was the mystical abode of the dead for the Celts. The pilgrims’ labyrinth can be seen girding the Tor. The site has been neutralized by the Christians with their church dedicated to the archangel Michael, now in ruins, built on the crest of the Tor. The original church was destroyed by earthquake in 1275, and the second fell under the dissolution of the abbeys in 1539. The tower, all that remains, was built in 1360. These were all built on top of Iron-age structures.

9a. St. George and the Dragon (Romsey Cathedral)  
9b. Phoenician slayer of gryphon (xxxx)  
9c. North Syrian slayer of gryphon (xxxx)  

We find specific symbols common to virtually all cultures: circle, spiral, snake. . . . Regarding the snake or serpent symbol, we see the images of St. George and/or St. Michael slaying the Dragon, St. Patrick driving out the snakes in Ireland, and we even see the image repeated in ancient Phoenicia and North Syrian art. The snake figure has meant many things, such as fertility, renewal, wisdom, kundalini energy, shamanistic powers, flight to the Otherworld, etc.

10. Chalice Well  
    Glastonbury, Somerset, England
The intersecting circles design (vesica piscis in mathematics; recall Mastercard?) on the cover of the Chalice Well was added only as recently as the early 1900s. The well is really a natural spring and is known for its healing properties and peaceful setting. The well shaft is at least 800 years old. The water is without pollution and rich in iron and is used for healing even today.

11. Typical Parish Churchyard
   Ambleside, Lake District, England
   The English countryside is dotted with little churches and their family graveyards. Some headstones are ornate, with celtic crosses, and others have more simple crosses. The older headstones are flat and many can be found from the 17th-19th centuries.

12. Headstone
    Ilkley, the Dales, England
    This is a typical 19th century headstone, still readable.

13. Interiors, Wells Cathedral
    Wells, Somerset, England
    Wells Cathedral is a magnificent cathedral church, very much in use today. It has a very ornate exterior and high, vaulted ceilings and arches on the inside. We see three areas of the interior.

THE ANASAZI

Two thousand years ago Anasazi families and clans lived in the Colorado Plateau. Being prehistoric, there is no written language, but we do see the fine homes they built and their pottery and basketry. In addition, thousands of petroglyphs and pictographs have been left for us to ponder. They had a fine sense of aesthetics, which is evident by their choices of powerful and beautiful sites for building. Sites were carefully chosen and structures carefully built with ritual purposes in mind. Living was comfortable, cool in the summer and warm in winter.

Materials were also always very carefully chosen, sometimes being brought by great dint of effort from far away places; religious purpose in mind and having projects for the populace to be occupied with. Must please the gods and build correctly or the gods would be displeased and the clan would suffer the consequences. Much attention devoted to the dead (burials, trappings, etc.), also fear of the dead; honored high born or powerful dead; this has often been interpreted as ancestor worship. Some mass graves have been found, which are presumably the result of warfare of perhaps annual sacrifices. Some sites would be meeting places and initiation temples. All of this is true of the Celtic world as well as the Anasazi.
14. Anasazi Cosmos
Four Corners, USA

17. “We were here! We built this!”
Four Corners, USA

15. Anasazi Ritual Site with Snake Figure
Four Corners, USA

18. Anasazi Stone Sky
Four Corners, USA

16. Anasazi Striped Homes
Four Corners, USA

19. Anasazi Dreams
Four Corners, USA

20. Anasazi Stone Smoke
Four Corners, USA

We have seen an amalgamation of art, religion, tradition, astronomy, cosmology, mythology, geometry . . . in these sacred sites, across cultures. Next summer I will be going to Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, and Brittany to experience and photograph more sites.

The personal journey continues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
