



Seahenge: a quest for life and death in Bronze Age Britain

Francis Pryor

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A lively and authoritative investigation into the lives of our ancestors, based on the revolution in the field of Bronze Age archaeology which has been taking place in Norfolk and the Fenlands over the last twenty years, and in which the author has played a central role.

One of the most haunting and enigmatic archaeological discoveries of recent times was the uncovering in 1998 at low tide of the so-called Seahenge off the north coast of Norfolk. This circle of wooden planks set vertically in the sand, with a large inverted tree-trunk in the middle, likened to a ghostly 'hand reaching up from the underworld', has now been dated back to around 2020 BC. The timbers are currently (and controversially) in the author's safekeeping at Flag Fen.

Francis Pryor and his wife (an expert in ancient wood-working and analysis) have been at the centre of Bronze Age fieldwork for nearly 30 years, piecing together the way of life of Bronze Age people, their settlement of the landscape, their religion and rituals. The famous wetland sites of the East Anglian Fens have preserved ten times the information of their dryland counterparts like Stonehenge and Avebury, in the form of pollen, leaves, wood, hair, skin and fibre found 'pickled' in mud and peat.

Seahenge demonstrates how much Western civilisation owes to the prehistoric societies that existed in Europe in the last four millennia BC.

Seahenge: a quest for life and death in Bronze Age Britain Details

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From Reader Review Seahenge: a quest for life and death in Bronze Age Britain for online ebook

Jackie says

For a non-fiction book by an archeologist, this book was amazingly readable. I do admit that towards the end my attention was easily diverted, but stay with it I did. For anyone who thinks Stonehenge is a unique place, it is so amazing to read about so many more Neolithic sites in Great Britain.

Dawn says

Loved reading this little tome. It was like having a conversation with Francis Pryor about things I care about quite passionately . His open and honest approach to archaeology and prehistory means that he can consider out-of-the-box ideas, which means that he can pose some interesting and very thought=poking analysis that makes much more sense to me than the traditional historical analysis that I learned in school! I remember the first time I went to a prehistory site, with my history teacher in grammar school. I am not sure where we went, but I lived in Grantham at the time and this was a day long field trip which included a visit to the Roman villa near Leicester. The villa was amazing, but it was that ancient hill fort that caught my imagination. Ever since, I have read and visited various prehistory locations throughout Great Britain, Stonehenge, Avebury, and most recently, Old Winchester Hill. As I learned more, I discovered how far away that field trip was in terms of what we have come to understand about how our ancestors lived, moved and worships in ancient Briton.

I came to this book via the Ruth Galloway mystery series. The first one I read referenced Mr. Pryor's Seahenge for further reading. I was hooked. This is an unfolding story from a misty past. Old finds reframed with new information. Thinking about found objects within context and what we know about human nature and habits. After all, a 21st person is probably not so much different than our prehistory ancestors. Our "toys" are different. Our need for ritual and meaning is the same. When you factor all these disciplines in with what we have learned from ariel photography, it puts flesh on the bones from long ago. A fascinating read!

John Carter McKnight says

Pryor is a highly entertaining writer, equally adept at telling pub-tales of his discoveries and creating a deep context for them within contemporary archaeology and within an image of Neolithic Britain.

The only small downside to Pryor's breezy style is his willingness to digress into tangential opinions, some a bit distasteful. But overall this firsthand account of one of the most interesting recent discoveries in British archaeology is absolutely fascinating, both for its process and for its addition to our understanding of Neolithic society.

More than some other works in the field, Pryor focuses on the people whose lives were associated with the great wood and stone monuments, what we can discern of ritual, social structure, worldview, and the process of cultural change over time. Pryor thoroughly discusses fieldwork methods and findings, but it is in his

work on the culture of Neolithic technology's users that this book really shines.

Lara says

Really interesting in parts, but I found the title and description on the back somewhat deceptive--there's a brief prologue about Seahenge, and then Pryor goes back in time to give background on his work in the surrounding area and doesn't get back to talking about Seahenge itself until the last 100 or so pages. There's some good stuff throughout the other 200 pages--descriptions of the excavation process in the fens, how Pryor thinks the henges in this area were used, what everyday life might have been like--but he never managed to bring any of it truly alive for me like he seems to have done for a lot of other folks. I felt like I was just left wanting more somehow. Enjoyable, but not *great*.

Jennifer says

A fascinating story, well told. Oh why didn't I become an archaeologist?? ?.
Very recommended.

Christina Gane says

Very interesting themes and a moving ending. My copy is the 2002 version and i would like to read the later version to see if it includes Blick Mead and whether his musings about the Avenue at Stonhenge are updated

Abbey says

This book was my introduction to prehistory and I actually couldn't put it down (not until my eyelids shut of their own accord about three in the morning, anyway). It was easy to understand but gave a satisfying and fascinating wealth of detail. And it was so exciting when I interpreted the clues the same as Pryor did! I am now hooked on prehistory and especially henges. So thank you Francis Pryor!

Jim Stephenson says

A fascinating and very accessible account of Bronze Age ritual sites, and how boggy areas and wetlands fit into the landscape of prehistoric Great Britain.

Cassandra Kay Silva says

What an interesting view of archeological discovery and enterprise in the bronze age. One thing that I really took home with this book was the differences in time period of the neolithic throughout the old world in

different locations. As soon as I determined the time period in Britain I found myself asking if this was the same time period throughout Mesopotamia and other areas of the world and made a sound correlation between Britain and other locations at this time period in terms of development and lifestyle. I think the author makes both the archeological aspect and the old world aspect interesting and of course the focus of the Seahenge discovery keeps things well formed and enjoyable. I especially enjoyed the final description of the dig towards the end of the book. Expect to learn a lot of interesting things about the people of this time period. Did you know that you women wore mini skirts and bore mid drifts though the older women were much more demure? And we thought we were being so original! You also get an insight into the homes and tools of the time period as well as the means of travel and some ideas of rituals as best known at this point.

Amanda says

This book was really incredible. Pryor is a great writer, he manages to tell a fascinating story with enough explanation of archaeology so that you fully understand why certain conclusions are reached, but he is never over-technical, and he also does not talk down to the reader. Reading this book is not at all like listening to a stuffy lecture, he's more like those rare teachers who can hold an audience enthralled, who teach from experience and by storytelling instead of from the textbook.

Nikki says

Archaeology is not some exact science, with answers to give to every question if we only look hard enough. It's partly our own fault: we're overpopulating the Earth, and in the meantime we're destroying great swathes of the archaeological record. We only have fragments of the past, some larger than others -- Seahenge being one of the latter, far ahead of potsherds but perhaps more mysterious -- and while archaeology has some light to shed, I find it best to accept up front that no one can offer a complete answer, and that if anyone claims to be certain, they're speaking beyond the evidence in almost every case.

Francis Pryor's book handles this pretty well, in my books, though I have no doubt there's people out there who wish he'd stop equivocating. Much of this book involves setting this in context, linking modern and ancient lives and landscapes, and then using what evidence that offers to spin theories -- theories that could be upset by the next find out of the ground, in some obscure peaty corner or air-tight chamber stumbled upon by chance.

Bearing all that in mind, I found this book fascinating. I have no personal expertise to say yay or nay to any of this -- my own research interests lie in a later period, with the dawning of literature, which is in conversation with archaeology more than you'd think -- so I took Pryor's words more or less at face value. Some of his ideas seemed too sketchy, too much based on a gut reaction, but even so his description of the excavations, his impressions of them, the way they came together to synthesise an understanding of the ancient landscape... it's all fascinating, and I would happily read more.

If you're looking to learn *specifically* and *solely* about the place we've dubbed Seahenge (which was not actually *built* on the beach, and wasn't in such close proximity to the sea) then only a couple of chapters of this book are of direct interest. But why you would want to look at something like this in isolation when it's clearly part of a larger story and can only be understood in those terms, I don't know.

One thing you may feel is that Francis Pryor has too much to say about himself and his team, particularly his wife. I enjoyed it, given that his thought processes were influenced by everything around him. A bare-bones description of the sites and the endless work of extraction and preservation would seem terribly boring to me.

Tom Gray says

Not an easy read because of lots of details that need grounding in more accessible charts and maps. Still, a fascinating read on British paleoarchaeology, including the famous henges

Anne says

Now I'm going to read a different archaeologist on Stonehenge. My quest to understand a society without written language continues.

Linda says

I thought I'd just cherry pick a chapter of this because it was about a neolithic archeology dig and I am doing research for my novel. But as I got to reading, the author was imparting so much information that one bread crumb lead to the next and I just couldn't put it down. I actually gave up on flagging pages and just got out my notebook and started taking notes. There is a wealth of information here, including the inner workings of a career in archeology and what you might expect on a dig, but also a ton of info on neolithic and Bronze Age culture and everyday life, as seen by the archeological record.

I'll probably grab this once more just to make sure I didn't miss anything, and check out the author's other works, as he seems to be highly regarded in the field.

David Gardner says

As always, a superb, insightful analysis from Pryor.
