



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## Stonehenge - Land of the Living and the Dead

**Duration:** 0:05:31

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Female: Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast.

This is the second in our series on the recent Bluestonehenge discovery which is part of the AHRC-funded stone Riverside Project.

One of the insights that has transformed our understanding of Stonehenge and other Neolithic monuments is the realization that the choice of materials used in these monuments was crucial to those who built them. In particular, it's the view of some that Stonehenge was an attempt by its builders to construct something more permanent and enduring than the more common timber structures like Durrington Walls. Such timber structures characterised Salisbury Plain up until the point Stonehenge was built it is now believed that the choice of materials be that wood or stone was profoundly related to attitudes and beliefs surrounding life and death.

Working with Professor Mike Parker Pearson of the University of Sheffield, it was the Madagascan archaeologist Ramiisonina who in 1998 first made the discovery that has done so much to cast light on Stonehenge and the ritual landscape that surrounds it. Mike Parker Pearson takes up the story.

Mike Parker Pearson: The idea of building stone monuments was and still is closely associated with the dead so you build in permanent materials for the ancestors whereas perishable materials, wood, fabrics are things of the living because they are metaphors of transience in the same way that stone is a metaphor of permanence, and its means

more than that, in Ramils home village the stones actually are the ancestors it's a very real sense that they are not simply metaphors and of course they are history, visual and actual that you can reach out, touch, see and so in 1998 we were able to get Ramilisonina over to Britain brought him to Stonehenge and he just looked at me and said what do you mean you don't know what it's for, it's for the ancestors how could it be for anything else and that was the spark that created the hypothesis to look at Stonehenge as the stone circle for the dead in contrast to Durrington with its timber circles which we'd proposed were for the living

Female: For Ramilisonina himself, back in the UK to work with Mike Parker Pearson on the AHRC-funded Riverside Project, the connections between the two cultures are very clear. Furthermore, the comparisons are able to shed light on the intrinsic qualities of wood and stone, and on how the perception of these materials could have had a crucial impact on the building of Stonehenge.

Ramilisonina (translated): In Madagascar, we have many standing stones just like here in Stonehenge. But the size of the stones isn't the same.

What do we use the stones for in Madagascar? Stone is reserved for the dead but wood and vegetation are reserved for the living, so no one has ever been allowed to have houses in stone. But stone is destined for ancestors so it's used for coffins and also standing stones are used to represent people. In our culture, the stone is like a book: we can read it, we can recognise the person, and return to the past time. We can then ask to whom this stone belongs and what the story is. We can therefore read the story on the standing stone itself. That's why the living ones have their houses in wood or vegetation.

I would like to add a small point in relation to wood. Yes in Madagascar we sometimes use wood for coffins and also wood for burial posts. We don't use any wood but the hardest and most

resistant wood. It's always hard and resistant objects that are reserved for the dead.

For example, clothing for the dead is made of very hard objects. Living ones can dress themselves with clothes in wicker, straw or tree bark but we always dress the dead with very hard clothing, in a special material we call 'landi', which means natural silk, which is resistant in the tomb for a very long time.

Female:

For more information on the Bluestonehenge discovery and to view video footage of the excavation please visit the AHRC website and look under podcasts.

Thank you for listening to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast. To find out more, please go to [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

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