

**‘Most important prehistoric  
discovery in a century’  
revealed by British Museum  
and Allen Archaeology**

**Press images:**

**<https://bit.ly/3LiWYmt>**

***The world of Stonehenge***

*17 February – 17 July 2022*

*Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery*

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The British Museum and Allen Archaeology today announce the discovery of “the most important piece of prehistoric art to be found in Britain in the last 100 years.”

The object is a 5,000-year-old chalk sculpture and was discovered on a country estate near the village of Burton Agnes in East Yorkshire. The sculpture was first unearthed in a routine excavation by Allen Archaeology as part of the planning process in 2015, and has since gone on to be the subject of extensive research and conservation work. Thanks to this work, its existence can now be revealed as it’s confirmed to be one of the most significant ancient objects ever found on the British Isles.

This remarkable new discovery will now go on public display for the very first time as part of the British Museum’s *The world of Stonehenge* exhibition which opens next week.

The sculpture is decorated with elaborate motifs that reaffirms a British and Irish artistic style that flourished at exactly the same time as Stonehenge was built. It was uncovered alongside the burial of three children. The children are different ages and were buried in close contact in a moving scene. The two youngest were placed in the grave touching or holding hands. The eldest child was laid in the grave holding the two younger children. The sculpture was found just above the head of the eldest child and it includes three hastily added holes, perhaps marking the presence of the three bodies in the grave.

The importance of this new discovery relates to its similarity to a group of objects in the British Museum’s collection. Three barrel-shaped cylinders made of solid chalk – dubbed the Folkton drums due to their shape and the location where they were found

in North Yorkshire – have been in the collection of the British Museum since first being excavated in 1889. They were found with the burial of a single child. They are some of the most famous and enigmatic ancient objects ever unearthed in Britain.

This new discovery is near identical to the Folkton drums and can also be described as a chalk drum. It is only the fourth example of its kind known to have survived. Despite the use of the term 'drum', they are not thought to have had a musical function. Rather they are works of sculptural art, perhaps intended as talismans to protect the children they accompanied.

Relatively little is known about the Folkton drums and their context but this new drum, which was found around 15 miles away, sheds new light on them. The exact age of the Folkton drums was never known, with a consensus guess that they were made around 2500 – 2000BC. Thanks to advances in technology, a radiocarbon date from one of the Burton Agnes child's bones identifies the burial as from 3005–2890BC. This therefore provides the first reliable date for all these drum-like objects, and means the Folkton drums can be identified as nearly 500 years older than previously thought. It also confirms for the first time that these burial drums were made at the same time as the first construction phase of Stonehenge. This is significant because it suggests that at the same time as the monument's bluestones were being moved hundreds of kilometers from west Wales to Salisbury Plain, communities across Britain and Ireland were also sharing artistic styles, and probably beliefs, over remarkable distances.

Unlike the Folkton drums, the Burton Agnes drum was accompanied by a chalk ball and polished bone pin, which lay beneath the head of one of the children. The chalk ball is a type of object that has also recently been found by archaeologists at the site of Bulford, close to Stonehenge. Its symbolism is unclear. It could be a fertility symbol or even a toy held dear by a child. The bone pin is similar to objects placed with burials inside Stonehenge at around the same time period as the Burton Agnes drum was buried (c.3000 BC). With similar items now newly uncovered in Yorkshire, it shows that closely related ideas existed across the British Isles at this time.

The Burton Agnes drum is also one of the most elaborately decorated objects of this period found anywhere in Britain and Ireland. Every inch of the object is decorated with motifs that are found on a range of prehistoric objects, including pottery and stone balls, and architectural surfaces, some incorporated within houses and tombs. This was the artistic style of the people who built Stonehenge and related monuments across Britain and Ireland. It helps to illustrate the joined-up nature of society during

this period, and the vibrant artistic culture of the time. The motifs themselves are abstract but may convey symbolism or religious principles that have yet to be deciphered.

The new drum will go on display in the Stonehenge exhibition alongside all three Folkton drums. It will be displayed at the British Museum on loan from the Burton Agnes Estate. After the exhibition, it will undergo further assessment and analysis in preparation for publication.

**Neil Wilkin, curator of *The world of Stonehenge* at the British Museum, said:**

*“This is a truly remarkable discovery, and is the most important piece of prehistoric art to be found in Britain in the last 100 years. The Folkton drums have long remained a mystery to experts for well over a century, but this new example finally begins to give us some answers. To my mind, the Burton Agnes drum is even more intricately carved and reflects connections between communities in Yorkshire, Stonehenge, Orkney and Ireland. Analysis of its carvings will help to decipher the symbolism and beliefs of the era in which Stonehenge was constructed.*”

*“The discovery of the Burton Agnes grave is highly moving. The emotions the new drum expresses are powerful and timeless, they transcend the time of Stonehenge and reflect a moment of tragedy and despair that remains undimmed after 5,000 years. We are honoured that the British Museum will be the first place the public will be able to see this important object, and that they will see it alongside 430 other ancient items telling the spectacular story of Stonehenge and the vibrant world in which it was built.”*

**Mark Allen, Director of Allen Archaeology, said:** *“It has been a real privilege to have been involved in this amazing discovery, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the landowners for their enthusiasm and interest in the project from the outset. When we heard about the find from the team on site and saw the photos of the drum that were messaged over to us, it was clear we were looking at something extraordinary, although the photos did not do it justice, and we were all stunned to see it up close when it came off site. The detailed relief carving on the drum is quite something to behold and shows great skill by its maker. Research is ongoing on the drum, the burials and the surrounding excavations, and we look forward to publishing more on this in the future.*”

**Alice Beasley, who first uncovered the drum as Project Archaeologist for Allen Archaeology**, said: “*Discovering the chalk drum was a thrilling and humbling experience. Seeing the love and effort put into burying the individuals over 5000 years ago was truly moving.*”

*The world of Stonehenge* (17 February – 17 July 2022) is the UK’s first ever major exhibition on the history – and mystery – of Stonehenge. The show will see hundreds of objects brought together from across Britain and Europe, telling the spellbinding story of one of the world’s most famous landmarks and the people that built it. Other highlights include the ‘Nebra Sky Disc’ which is the oldest surviving representation of the cosmos anywhere in the world and is on loan to the UK for the first time, and around half of the 4,000-year-old Bronze Age timber circle ‘Seahenge’ which reemerged on a remote Norfolk beach in 1998.

Nearly two-thirds of the objects going on display in *The world of Stonehenge* will be loans, with objects coming from 35 lenders across the UK, the Republic of Ireland, France, Italy, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland. Of these, the majority have never been seen in the UK before. The exhibition has been organised with the State Museum of Prehistory, Halle/Saale, Germany.

Tickets for the exhibition are on sale now. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/stonehenge>

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### **Notes to editors**

#### **Allen Archaeology**

Established in 2005, Allen Archaeology Ltd is an independent, professional commercial archaeological contractor and consultancy. From initial project design, through to final mitigation and reporting, it provides the correct solution within agreed timescales and budgets. With offices in Lincoln, Durham, Preston, Birmingham, Cambridge and Southampton, Allen Archaeology provide a full range of archaeological services on a national basis. The key aim, from initial consultation to the fulfilling of archaeological planning conditions, is to provide a cost effective, risk-free and time efficient service for clients.

#### **Publication**

To coincide with the exhibition, a beautifully illustrated catalogue, *The world of Stonehenge*, written by Duncan Garrow and Neil Wilkin, will be published by the British Museum Press in February 2022. British Museum exclusive paperback, £25, ISBN 9780714123486. Hardback, £40, ISBN 9780714123493

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### **Further information**

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at [\*\*https://bit.ly/3LiWYmt\*\*](https://bit.ly/3LiWYmt)