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[Pytheas of Massilia and the Lost City of Apollo - Part 2](#)

August 31, 2007 - 12:28 pm



Pytheas of Massilia was a Greek mariner who was alive during the fourth century BC. Before he set sail on his famous voyage into the North Atlantic via the Pillars of Hercules, he would first of all have travelled around the Mediterranean region, while his general point of

reference for what constituted a temple to one of his gods would have been a stone or marble structure with dressed uprights and lintels, as can be seen from the above photograph of the Parthenon.

There is only one known stone structure in Britain comprised of dressed uprights with interconnecting or interlocking lintels and this is Stonehenge, which was certainly standing when Pytheas arrived here. As for its possible connections with Apollo, I've written about this specific subject at great length on this site, as you can find out if you enter a search. In addition to this, Professor Timothy Darville of Bournemouth University recently published a book entitled *Stonehenge: The Biography of a Landscape*, in which he made a connection between Apollo and Stonehenge, while I understand that a forthcoming episode of the BBC's *Timewatch* will be covering what he has to say on this matter.

Be that as it may, simple logic dictates that we should first of all be looking for a stone structure that bears the closest resemblance to the temple architecture that Pytheas was familiar with in the Mediterranean. The prime candidate *has* to be Stonehenge, simply on account of the nature of dressed uprights and lintels, before we consider the other aspects of what Pytheas has to say.

In my first entry on the Lost City of Apollo, I looked closely at two other sites that have been thought of as possible locations for one of the places described by Pytheas, and these were Old Sarum and Callanish. I've dealt with them already, so I won't repeat myself, but it's worth looking at two other possible contenders and eliminating them before we return to Stonehenge and Vespasian's Camp.



The first of these candidates is Avebury, which is certainly an impressive monument, but to the best of our knowledge, it was never comprised of dressed stone, let alone uprights with interlocking lintels. For this reason alone, it is very hard indeed to see how it would have made Pytheas think of a classical temple such as the ones he was familiar with, while there is no trace of a flourishing Iron Age city fit for kings nearby.

Pytheas described the temple of Apollo as “axiologos” or notable, or worthy of mention, or remarkable, and there were of course other stone circles in Britain at the time that we would rightly describe today as “notable” for all manner of personal reasons, but the blunt fact remains that of them all, Stonehenge is by far and away the most worthy of mention, if only on account of its unique and imposing architecture.

Pytheas also said that this temple, besides being spherical, vaulted or round, was “decorated with many offerings”. The word for “decorated” in the original passage is “kekosmemon”, which can be translated as “adorned” or “decorated” with no precise further meaning or nuance, while the word for “offering” is similarly vague. It is “anathema”, a word which has no specific nuance, as it was used to describe any sort of religious offering to a god.

This brings to mind all manner of possibilities, so it is not out of the question that Avebury may once have been adorned in such a fashion, but its huge scale, undressed stone blocks and lack of interconnecting masonry is far less suggestive of a classical temple as envisioned by Pytheas than the carefully fashioned upright columns and interlocking ring of curving lintels at Stonehenge.

On this subject, it is worth quoting Julian Richards and his excellent 1991 book entitled *Stonehenge*. On pages 126 and 127, he writes the following of Stonehenge during its period of active use, and I won't bother adding emphases: “It may simply have been a temple of austere stone, the sheer scale and novelty of its construction enough to render any ornamentation unnecessary. Alternatively, the stones may have formed the framework for additional wooden structures, a platform for elaborate totems, or may themselves have been brightly decorated.”

He goes on to observe, “...Stonehenge may well have been lavishly decorated, perhaps not all the year round, but only at certain special times. Then the whole interior may have been covered with offerings and the stones garlanded with blossom, flowers or berries according to the season...”

Clearly, Julian Richards is writing about the period when Stonehenge was in active use, and not the later Iron Age when the ruins are believed to have been ignored by the local population. Be that as it may, the people who lived near Stonehenge at the time that Pytheas made his visit were clearly perfectly capable of adding decorations such as the ones described above to the stones if they wished, while such transient things would have vanished from the archaeological record. If any faint traces had remained, it is highly unlikely that they would have survived Professor Richard Atkinson's attentions, but I've gone into this sorry matter elsewhere on this site.

Otherwise, there is always the possibility that these offerings also referred to or included carvings on the stones. I know of none at Avebury, but there are plenty at Stonehenge, including the famous "Mycenaean dagger engraving", while there were almost certainly others in plain view at the time that Pytheas came to Britain, before the once-magnificent monument became the vandalized ruin that we see before us today, robbed of almost half its stones.

So, when we consider all these elements of architecture, offerings and a nearby city of kings, then compare Avebury with Stonehenge as a possible location for Pytheas' temple, there is no competition between the two. Otherwise, I've heard that many people believe that Pytheas of Massilia was describing Newgrange when he wrote of the temple of Apollo, so let us carefully consider this possibility.

Newgrange is a megalithic passage tomb and a World Heritage Site in County Meath, Ireland. It is unquestionably a wonder of the ancient world, but as I cannot hope to do it justice here, I would suggest that you visit [this site](#), run by Michael Fox. Michael has devoted his time and energy to producing a superbly informative centre of information extolling the many wonders of this stunning monument, so if you want to know more about Newgrange, then this is certainly the place to go and I'm very grateful to Michael for having allowed me to use images and also for passing on some relevant information about the monument.

To begin with, unfortunately, it seems to me that Newgrange is on completely the wrong island, which would seem to rule it out without the need for any further study. The Roman writer Avienus quoted a Massiliote seaman in the sixth century BC who spoke of "Ireland, two days' sail from Brittany, alongside the islands of the Albiones". This matter is admittedly slightly confusing, but let's go through it and try to make it as clear and as comprehensible as possible.

A Massiliote was an inhabitant of Massilia, or present-day Marseilles in the south of France, and it was also the port with which Pytheas of Massilia is identified. If Avienus was quoting a Massiliote seaman from the sixth century BC who knew of Ireland, Brittany and Albion, or Britain, and Pytheas was alive during the fourth century BC, then it shows beyond question that mariners operating from the same port as Pytheas were fully aware of the distinctions between Britain and Ireland at least two centuries before Pytheas set sail.

On balance, I'd personally say it was unlikely that any confusion about these islands arose during the intervening time, as the mariners' familiarity with the region would have become *more* clear through repeated exploration, not *less* clear. In addition to this, Pytheas referred to Britain both as Albion and also as The Isles of the Prettani, a name that means "painted" or "decorated" ones. The name Prettani eventually transmogrified into Britannia, the Roman name for the island, while the Romans referred to Ireland as Hibernia, a name probably derived from the earlier "Ierne", a name used by Pytheas to describe Ireland and distinguish it from Albion.

Pytheas' original account of his voyage is now lost to us, sadly but he was quoted by later writers such as Diodorus Siculus, who wrote:

"Of those who have written about the ancient myths, Hecateus and certain others say that in the regions beyond the land of the Celts (Gaul) there lies in the ocean an island no smaller than Sicily. This island, the account continues, is situated in the north, and is inhabited by the Hyperboreans, who are called by that name because their home is beyond the point whence the north wind blows..."

Interestingly enough, as far as Pytheas, an ancient Greek mariner was concerned, Diodorus Siculus also wrote "The Hyperboreans also have a language, we are informed, which is peculiar to them, and they are most friendly disposed towards the Greeks..." Be all that as it

may, I'd say that there are more than sufficient details in Pytheas' account of the notable temple to identify it beyond all doubt as Stonehenge. I'll come to these details in due course, but it follows that if the temple was Stonehenge, then the island of Hyperborea, on which the temple and city of Apollo were situated, was Britain.

In the meantime, let us return to our study of Newgrange. Pytheas described the notable temple as "sphaeroeides", which means either spherical, vaulted or round in shape and at first glance, this description might seem to apply to Newgrange. However, Newgrange is described on Michael Fox's site as "kidney-shaped" while the [plans of the monument](#) on his site show that this is true. I don't know if the monument had this appearance when it first constructed, but I'm assuming that when it was restored, the archaeologists remained faithful to the original design rather than choosing a novel shape of their own.

If Pytheas of Massilia had wished to describe the notable temple as being shaped like a kidney, then he could have used the word "nephroeides" meaning like a kidney, or something similar. But he did not - he described it as "sphaeroeides", meaning spherical, circular or vaulted.

Then there is the matter of first impressions, or of how Pytheas perceived this temple when he first saw it. Newgrange was lost for thousands of years after it was built, then it was rediscovered in 1699 when workmen removing material for road building described it as a cave. It is still known as the "Cave of the Sun" today on account of the light from the rising Winter Solstice sun shining through a specially constructed aperture above the entrance, but you can learn more about this amazing element of Newgrange on Michael's site.

Newgrange is roughly circular in shape, when seen from above, but the whole structure is hardly suggestive of a classical temple of Apollo such as those Pytheas would have seen in the Mediterranean. If he *did* visit the site, then I suspect he would have seen this megalithic passage tomb in much the same light as did the workmen in 1699 and the present-day archaeologists and tourists, who have named the place the "Cave of the Sun". Furthermore, the interior passage of Newgrange leads to a cruciform or cross-shaped chamber, so if Pytheas had visited the site and ventured inside, then it seems to me that he would have remarked on these aspects of the site. But he did not.

Pytheas wrote of a temple of Apollo, but Irish mythology viewed places such as Newgrange as being the abode of fairies, while Newgrange itself was thought to be the home of Oenghus, the god of love. Apart from the phenomenon of the sun shining through the specially built aperture on the morning of the Midwinter Solstice, I've not been able to find any specific link between Apollo and Newgrange, although I would of course be happy to hear of any.

So far, the case for Newgrange being Pytheas' temple of Apollo seems unconvincing to say the least, but there is worse to come. This is not to denigrate the monument in any way, of course, but with the best will in the world, I just can't see any convincing reasons for it being thought of as a notable temple of Apollo, spherical in shape.

Not only do we have a description of what the temple looked like, but we also know something of what went on there, because Pytheas wrote that the inhabitants or priests of the city of Apollo "continually play (on the cithara) in the temple and sing hymns of praise to the god, glorifying his deeds..." Elsewhere, Diodorus Siculus wrote of the Hyperboreans, "Apollo is honoured among them above all other gods; and the inhabitants are looked upon as priests of Apollo, after a manner...and honour him exceedingly."

Pytheas does not tell us precisely how many priests sang or played the cithara at any one time, but the suggestion is that there were more rather than less, not least because the whole population of the island were viewed as priests, "after a manner". When you look at the gloomy, restricted confines of the passageway and chamber at Newgrange, it is very difficult to imagine any priest singing hymns to Apollo, a sun god, when they could barely glimpse daylight. The thought of large groups of them playing instruments and singing hymns to the sun from within the murky underground depths is even harder to envisage, if only on practical grounds.

By stark contrast, it is perfectly possible that large groups of priests could have congregated on a regular basis at Stonehenge, as can be seen from the photograph below. If the priests had wanted to gather there at sunrise, then many of them would have been afforded an extremely good view of the sun through the gaps between the uprights, while the view would have become better as the day wore on and as the sun ascended in the sky.

It is true that Newgrange possesses some highly impressive rock carvings, which could possibly be interpreted as offerings. It is also true that the monument forms a mound, which could possibly be understood as a circular or round temple, but the evidence is hardly overwhelming and it becomes even less so when we compare the various elements to Stonehenge.

As it is, Stonehenge is quite simply in a league of its own when it comes to finding a ruin that fits the precise description of Pytheas' notable temple, not least because a fully functioning city was flourishing nearby at the time of Pytheas' visit, but there is yet another element that puts the question beyond all doubt.

I've always tried to bear in mind the advice that Dr Joseph Bell gave to his students, which was to be aware of "the vast importance of little distinctions and the endless significance of trifles". There are merely 49 words in the original passage and while the number itself has no significance, the words themselves are clearly a tantalising clue as to the whereabouts of a temple and a lost city of Apollo.

When I went through this passage with the person who assisted me at the University of Exeter Classics Department, I was surprised by just how straightforward so many of the words were in their meaning, and there was no specific nuance or subtlety concealing some tortuous clue worthy of a place in the pages of the Da Vinci Code. As I wrote in my first entry on this subject, it was the very plainness of the description that pointed towards Stonehenge and Vespasian's Camp, but I still suspected that there was something else hidden in plain sight in the words of Pytheas, and so it has proved.

As we've observed many times, Pytheas said that this temple was "sphaeroeides", a word that can mean either vaulted, spherical or circular, but he also described it as "axiologos". This word can mean notable and remarkable, both of which seem self-evident, but it also means "worthy of mention". Eventually, I asked myself the obvious question, "To *whom* was this temple worthy of mention?"

As Pytheas wrote his account in Greek, the immediate and obvious answer has to be, "It was worthy of mention, first and foremost to other people who could read ancient Greek, while most of these would have *been* ancient Greeks." So, *why* was this temple of Apollo worthy of mention to these people?

There are many reasons - it was the only known monument of its kind. It was a temple of Apollo in a foreign land far away from Greece, but in a land long reputed to have had connections with Greece. It was huge. It had a carving of what looked like a Mycenaean dagger. It had a continuous ring of lintels atop uprights, and so on and so forth. However, Stonehenge possesses another quality that would have been of enormous interest to a Greek observer such as Pytheas.

There is a structural or architectural device known as entasis, where columns are deliberately tapered outwards so as to correct the optical illusion of them growing narrower. Rather than launch into a lengthy explanation of this subject, you can read about it [here](#) and elsewhere, but what is relevant is that the builders of Stonehenge deliberately incorporated this device into the sarsen uprights, something that has been observed and commented upon in every serious study of Stonehenge that I know of.

For example, Julian Richards mentions it on page 58 of his aforementioned book Stonehenge: "Close observation reveals yet more sophistication in the outer sarsen circle, as the edges of the horizontal lintels are smoothed into a gentle curve, a curve which follows the line of the entire circle. Such sophistication, seen also in the gently-tapering upright sarsen pillars, raises Stonehenge far above the simple selection and raising of unhewn stones seen at many other stone circles, many of which should be more correctly referred to as stone rings, within the British Isles."

There are many other references to entasis at Stonehenge and you can see a mention of it on [this page](#), but the point is surely that of all the

supposed contenders for the description of Pytheas' notable temple, Stonehenge is in the *only* one with uprights and lintels, a feature of Greek architecture during Pytheas' time, while it is also the only monument whose structure incorporates the subtle architectural element of entasis on the uprights.

So, Stonehenge was "worthy of mention" to Pytheas' audience for many reasons, while one of these was because the builders of the temple of Apollo he had seen in Hyperborea had deliberately incorporated a sophisticated architectural device into the monument, a device specifically used to enhance the beauty of buildings such as the Parthenon. Pytheas could not have known that this stroke of genius occurred to the builders of Stonehenge almost two thousand years before the Greeks employed it, but this is by the way.

Stonehenge or the notable temple of Apollo to the left of the picture - Vespasian's Camp, or Pytheas' City of Apollo to the right



Stonehenge, or the notable temple of Apollo to the left of the picture - Vespasian's Camp, or Pytheas' City of Apollo to the right (outlined)



A closer shot of Vespasian's Camp or the City of Apollo.



Stonehenge is the only possible building that fits the precise description given to us by Pytheas in every last respect, including an ingenious and highly subtle means of counteracting the effect of perspective that would have been noticed by an observer such as Pytheas. And as the huge Iron Age hill fort of Vespasian's Camp was known to be flourishing at the time Pytheas visited these shores, then [Vespasian's Camp](#) alone can be the location of the Lost City of Apollo.

Still, this is far from being the end of the matter, as Pytheas wrote of supervisors and kings of this temple. I believe that there's firm and compelling evidence to suggest that these supervisors and kings were specific to Stonehenge, so I'll present my case for this when I can.

Words by [Dennis Price](#). Photographs copyright [Pete Glastonbury](#) & Michael Fox 2007. Parthenon image copyright [WallyG](#).

Categories: [Archaeological discoveries 2007](#), [Lost City of Apollo](#), [Pytheas of Massilia](#), [Stonehenge](#)

3 Responses to "Pytheas of Massilia and the Lost City of Apollo - Part 2"

Gerry Fenge wrote on September 10, 2007

Can you help me here? I've been looking through the website for the evidence that links Hyperboreans with Pytheas, and I cannot find it. Where should I look?

The trouble is this - Diodorus writes (in the Loeb translation): "Of those who have written about the ancient myths, Hecateus and certain others say... this island... is inhabited by the Hyperboreans..."

* Hecateus etc were writing about "ancient myths": Pytheas was writing about what he had actually seen

* Hecateus etc call the inhabitants Hyperboreans: Pytheas calls them (so far as we can tell) Pretani (Barry Cunliffe's spelling)

* Hecateus etc write of "an unusually temperate climate (which) produces two harvests each year": Pytheas says of Britain that "its climate is extremely cold"

This last point about climate suggests that the Hyperborean stories date back to early Bronze Age or even late Neolithic times when the climate of Britain was notably warmer than in the Iron Age times of Pytheas.

Clearly I have missed something. What is the link between Pytheas and the Hyperborean culture?

[Dennis](#) wrote on September 15, 2007

Clearly, you have missed nothing at all and I'm not convinced that you thought you had.

I've been having a long think about this. Within the last 3 weeks, I've spoken with two senior, well-meaning and diligent archaeologists who both independently bemoaned how many people wilfully misinterpret the material of others. If I'm putting original ideas concerning Stonehenge into the public domain, I suppose there's no good reason why I should be immune from this practise when others aren't, but that doesn't mean to say I'm going to give it much airspace.

Weather - by its very nature, it changes, while it seems to change more in Britain than in most other places, hence the British pre-occupation with discussing it. There's a lot to explore on the subject of ancient weather reports, but while it's certainly interesting, it's not something I'm planning to look into for now.

As for "the link between Pytheas and the Hyperborean culture", as you carefully phrased it, there's a distinct difference between the island

of Hyperborea itself, which is a fixed, physical thing, and the culture, which is a more abstract concept that was capable of spreading beyond the immediate boundaries of its origin. Be that as it may, I know perfectly well what you're getting at, but I'm not going to repeat the arguments I've presented earlier.

Aubrey Burl is just one of a number of distinguished writers who have looked into this matter and as I've mentioned before, he presented a good argument in the pages of *British Archaeology* for Pytheas' notable temple being Callanish, presumably because he saw a number of compelling reasons for identifying Hyperborea with Britain in the first place.

The fact that Pytheas himself doesn't mention Hyperborea is one blindingly obvious reason why the whole matter has long been a subject of debate, unlike the notion of Rome being in Italy, for example. If you know of another island off the coast of Gaul in the north Atlantic that isn't Britain, but which fits the description of Hyperborea and is also home to a magnificent precinct, temple and city of Apollo, then I'm sure I'm not the only one who'd be very interested to hear of it.

[Stonehenge - Lost City of Apollo ? - Macedonia Forum](#) wrote on November 27, 2007

[...] and at the same time very curious ! Your thoughts. Picasa Web Albums - Tom - Stonehenge Eternal Idol ? Blog Archive ? Pytheas of Massilia and the Lost City of Apollo - Part 2 remote central: Discovery of the Lost City of Apollo at Stonehenge Eternal Idol ? Blog Archive ? [...]

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