

Mystery of where ancient stones came from solved



Image

source, BBC/Olivia Richwald

Image caption,

Two of the Devil's Arrows stand in a field of crops in Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire

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Reporting from Yorkshire

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A set of giant monoliths known as the "Devil's Arrows" were moved 18km (11 miles) across Yorkshire by Stone Age people, new research has found.

The three columns have been standing in a farmer's field in Boroughbridge for thousands of years, with information signs stating that they came from Plumpton Rocks, now a pleasure garden.

Now academics in York and Australia have used isotopic fingerprinting techniques to determine they were transported from Brimham Rocks, a National Trust attraction.

Dr Jim Leary from the University of York said: "We have now proved Neolithic communities moved several 25-tonne stones, transforming a familiar site into an epic quest to create a sacred landscape."

The three Devil's Arrow stones were erected between 5,000 and 3,500 years ago. The pillars are almost seven metres (23ft) tall.

Early accounts of the stones record varying numbers of them - at least five but possibly more - but just three have survived.

Why they were placed there, and for what purpose, remains a mystery, but for the first time their origins have been identified.

It was previously thought that they had come from Plumpton Rocks near Knaresborough, which is 13km (nine miles) away, and this information was recorded on signs near the site.

It was the mineral mapping work by the university researchers which identified the stone as coming from Brimham - where the giant rock formations were created by a river 100 million years before dinosaurs walked the planet.

The discovery means that the Neolithic people who erected the monuments bypassed more local stone sources during construction.

The study also confirmed a local legend that a long-lost fourth Arrow had been "hiding in plain sight" and had been moved and carved into the Battle Cross monument in nearby Aldborough.



Image

source, BBC/Olivia Richwald

Image caption,

Battle Cross in Aldborough, near Boroughbridge, commemorates the Battle of Boroughbridge in 1322. Academics have now confirmed it is a missing fourth Devil's Arrow

Dr Anthony Clarke, geochemist at Curtin University in Australia, said the work had been going on for about two years.

He used high-resolution isotopic testing of microscopic zircon and apatite minerals to trace their exact geological birthplace.

He said: "It confirms what we already know, that ancient people were really capable of moving rocks over great distances.

"In many ways I think we are still living in the world that Neolithic Britons built for us. We are their descendants.

"They really weren't very different to us. Today we are obsessed with stone and so were they."

The remaining three Devil's Arrows stand on slightly sloping ground aligned towards a possible prehistoric ford on the nearby River Ure.

There are extensive prehistoric remains west of the stones which confirm they formed a southern gateway to a vast, sacred region between the rivers Swale and Ure, home to seven late-Neolithic henges.



Image

source, BBC/Olivia Richwald

Image caption,

An information sign near the set of Devil's Arrows in Boroughbridge claimed they came from Plumpton Rocks

Justin Scully, general manager at Fountains Abbey and Brimham Rocks, said: "The Devil's Arrows have inspired stories and sparked curiosity for generations.

"Local legend tells of the Devil standing on How Hill and hurling giant stone arrows towards Boroughbridge, only for them to fall short and land where they stand today.

"While the folklore remains a much-loved part of their story, it's wonderful to discover that the real journey of these stones is every bit as extraordinary."

Dr Leary added: "Megalithic architecture is among the most visually striking features of the Neolithic landscape across Britain and Ireland, from vast ceremonial complexes like Avebury and Stonehenge, to individual standing stones.

"Sites in southern England and Scotland receive considerable attention, but monuments like the Devil's Arrows have remained comparatively understudied despite their significance."