PRIMITIVE AND PREHISTORIC ARCHITECTURE

EARLY BEGINNINGS - It is impossible to trace the early stages of the process by which true architecture grew out of the first rude attempts of man at building. The oldest existing monuments of architecture—those of Chaldaea and Egypt—belong to an advanced civilization. The rude and elementary structures built by savage and barbarous peoples, like the Hottentots or the tribes of Central Africa, are not in themselves works of architecture, nor is any instance known of the evolution of a civilized art from such beginnings. So far as the monuments testify, no savage people ever raised itself to civilization, and no primitive method of building was ever developed into genuine architecture, except by contact with some existing civilization of which it appropriated the spirit, the processes, and the forms. How the earliest architecture came into existence is as yet an unsolved problem.

PRIMITIVE ARCHITECTURE - is therefore a subject for the archeologists rather than the historian of art, and needs here only the briefest mention. If we may judge of the condition of the primitive races of antiquity by that of the savage and barbarous peoples of our own time, they required only the simplest kinds of buildings, though the purposes which they served were the same as those of later times in civilized communities. A hut or house for shelter, a shrine of some sort for worship, a stockade for defense, a cairn or mound over the grave of the chief or hero, were provided out of the simplest materials, and these often of a perishable nature. Poles supplied the framework; wattles, skins, or mud the walls; thatching or stamped earth the roof. Only the simplest tools were needed for such elementary construction. There was ingenuity and patient labor in work of this kind; but there was no planning, no fitting together into a complex organism of varied materials shaped with art and handled with science. Above all, there was no progression toward higher ideals of fitness and beauty. Rudimentary art displayed itself mainly in objects of worship or in carvings on canoes and weapons, executed as talismans to ward off misfortune or to charm the unseen powers; but even this art was sterile and never grew of itself into civilized and progressive art. Yet there must have been at some point in the remote past an exception to this rule. Somewhere and somehow the people of Egypt must have developed from crude beginnings the architectural knowledge and resource which meet us in the oldest monuments, though every vestige of that early age has apparently perished. But although nothing has come down to us of the actual work of the builders who wrought in the primitive ages of mankind, there exist throughout Europe and Asia almost countless monuments of a primitive character belonging to relatively recent times, but executed before the advent of historic civilization to the regions where they are found. A general resemblance among them suggests a common heritage of traditions from the hoariest antiquity, and throws light on the probable character of the transition from barbaric to civilized architecture.

PREHISTORIC MONUMENTS - These monuments vary widely as well as in excellence; some of them belong to Roman or even Christian times; others to a much remoter period. They are divided into two principal classes, the megalithic structures and lake dwellings. The latter class may be dismissed with the briefest mention. It comprises a considerable number of very primitive houses or huts built on wooden piles in the lakes of Switzerland and several other countries in both hemispheres, and forming in some cases villages of no mean size. Such villages, built over the water for protection from attack, are mentioned by the writers of antiquity and portrayed on Assyrian relief. The objects found in them reveal an incipient but almost stationary civilization, extending back from three thousand to five thousand years or more, and lasting through the ages of stone and bronze down into historic times.

The megalithic remains of Europe and Asia are far more important. They are very widely distributed, and consist in most cases of great blocks of stone arranged in rows, circles, or avenues, sometimes with huge lintels resting
upon them. Upright stones without lintels are called **menhir**; standing in pairs with lintels they are known as **dolmens**; the circles are called **cromlechs**. Some of the stones are of gigantic size, some roughly hewn into shape; others left as when quarried. Their age and purpose have been much discussed without reaching positive results. It is probable that, like the lake dwellings, they cover a long range of time, reaching from the dawn of recorded history some thousands of years back into the unknown past, and that they were erected by races which have disappeared before the migrations to which Europe owes her present populations. That most of them were in some way connected with the worship of these prehistoric peoples is generally admitted; but whether as temples, tombs, or memorials of historical or mythical events cannot, in all cases, be positively asserted. They were not dwellings or palaces, and very few were even enclosed buildings. They are imposing by the size and number of their immense stones, but show no sign of advanced art, or of conscious striving after beauty of design. The small number of “carved stones,” bearing singular ornamental patterns, symbolic or mystical rather than decorative in intention, really tends to prove this statement rather than to controvert it. It is not impossible that the dolmens were generally intended to be covered by mounds of earth. This would group them with the tumuli referred to below, and point to a sepulchral purpose in their erection. Some antiquaries, Ferguson among them, contend that many of the European circles and avenues were intended as battle-monuments or trophies. There are also walls of great antiquity in various parts of Europe, intended for fortification; the most important of these in Greece and Italy will be referred to in later chapters. They belong to a more advanced art, some of them even deserving to be classed among works of archaic architecture.

The **tumulus**, or burial mounds, which form so large a part of the prehistoric remains of both continents, are interesting to the architect only as revealing the prototypes of the pyramids of Egypt and the subterranean tombs of Mycenae and other early Greek centers. The piling of huge **cairns/carns** or commemorative heaps of stone is known from the Scriptures and other ancient writings to have been a custom of the greatest antiquity. The pyramids and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus are the most imposing and elaborate outgrowths of this practice, of which the prehistoric tumuli are the simpler manifestations.

These crude and elementary products of undeveloped civilizations have no place, however, in any list of genuine architectural works. They belong rather to the domain of archaeology and ethnology, and have received this brief mention only as revealing the beginnings of the builder’s art, and the wide gap that separates them from that genuine architecture which forms the subject of the following chapters.

**MONUMENTS:** The most celebrated in England are at Avebury, an avenue, large and small circles, barrows, and the great tumuli of Bartlow and Silbury “Hills;” at Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain, great megalithic circles and many barrows; “Sarsen stones” at Ashdown; tumuli, dolmens, chambers, and circles in Derbyshire. In Ireland, many cairns and circles. In Scotland, circles and barrows in the Orkney Islands. In France, Carnac and Lokmariaker in Brittany are especially rich in dolmens, circles, and avenues. In Scandinavia, Germany, and Italy, in India and in Africa, are many similar remains.

**History of Architecture by A. D. F. HAMLIN**

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MENHIR
A prehistoric monument consisting of an upright megalith, usually standing alone but sometimes aligned with others.

CAIRN, CARN
A heap of stones piled up as a monument, tombstone, or landmark.

TUMULUS, BARROW
An artificial mound or earth or stone, esp. over an ancient grave.
Caere Tumulus

DOLMEN
A prehistoric monument consisting of two or more large upright stones supporting a horizontal stone slab, found esp. in Britain and France and usually regarded as a tomb.

CROMLECH
A circular arrangement of megaliths enclosing a dolmen or burial mound.
The Stonehenge
(If the stones could speak)
Source: National Geographic Magazine, 2008

- Located at the southern part of Salisbury Plain, about 8 miles north of Salisbury, 2 miles west of Avebury.
- The focal point of the densest concentration of Neolithic and Bronze Age.
- Undergone in 4 periods of building and use.
- Used from c.3000 BC until after 1100 BC.
STONEHENGE I

- c.3000 BC
- About 91 m across
- Ditch and bank: work began c.2800 BC
- Probably a place of Neolithic astronomical observations, worship, and burials for about 7 centuries.
- Aubrey Holes
**STONEHENGE II**
- Introduction of a new axis, a more east than previous one.
- Addition of the **Avenue** (510 m).
- Addition of the **Bluestones**
  - 1.8 m apart
  - Came from Preseli Mountains, 135 miles from Stonehenge

**Beaker People**
- The probable builders of Stonehenge II.
- Early Bronze Age (c.2000-1500 BC) people buried around Stonehenge because of the pottery beakers found in graves.

**STONEHENGE III-a**
- 2000 BC
- Composed of 30 upright stones in uniform height capped by a horizontal ring of stone lintels.
Slaughter Stone

- Invented name of bloody Druidical sacrifices.
- One of the pair of Sarsen stones (5.5 m high) standing close together in the entrance of the earthwork, so as to frame between them the sun rising over the horizon at midsummer for an observer at the center.

STONEHENGE III-b

- **Y & Z Holes**
  - 59 holes in all
  - 59 days in 2 lunar months
- **Bluestone Horseshoe**
  - 19 bluestones
  - 19 cycles of the moon, crucial for the prediction of eclipses

STONEHENGE III-C

- Some bluestones in III-B were re-used in III-C, some were shaped, and some were jointed together.
- **Bluestone Circle**
  - 60 stones
- **Bluestone Horseshoe**
  - 19 stones
  - The final arrangement of the bluestones

STONEHENGE IV

- c.1100 BC
- The avenue was extended from the end of the first straight stretch built in period II to the river Avon near west Avebury.