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Journal article

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This is the author's accepted version of the article published as: Simon Richard Wilson; William Stukeley and the Exploration of Paradise. *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1 March 2025; 14 (1): 58–77.  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.5325/preternature.14.1.0058>

## William Stukeley and the Exploration of Paradise

This article will draw on the works of Henry Corbin to argue that William Stukeley (1687-1765), perhaps the greatest of all eighteenth-century antiquarians and arguably the founding father of field archaeology, came to view the megalithic landscapes of England as an imaginal world or *mundus imaginalis*, an Edenic place which he attempted to recover in his writings and to evoke in the imagination of his readers. Corbin may help us understand that for Stukeley every journey through the English landscape would also be a journey through a visionary geography where God Himself is ever-present. This article is, equally, a journey through Stukeley's major works, his gardens and even his church. It hopes to show that Stukeley came to believe that the ancient megalithic traces of a transformed and enchanted landscape were being expunged from the countryside by changes in land use which themselves were symptoms of a new, and newly materialist, relationship to the land. This led him to view the individual imagination as the means of accessing, exploring and transmitting the vision of a transfigured country. His travels through England now became primarily journeys of and in the imagination.

The article also briefly examines Stukeley's influence on other antiquarians, on the poet and artist William Blake and also on the general English public, particularly in terms of how the relation between vision and landscape was (and, indeed, continues to be) conceived of and experienced.

### Entering the Imaginal World

Several recent pieces have sought to characterize Stukeley's landscape practice, writings and art. Rick Peterson, for example, argues that Stukeley practiced a kind of proto-phenomenology, which, following Heidegger, he characterizes as "a process of recovering a

more integrated, embedded encounter with specific things” than one available to the “distanced, rational view of the world typified by modern science” (2003: 399). Katharine Boehm agrees that Stukeley’s works reflect “on the limitations of empiricism in elucidating the past” (2017: 258), arguing that instead they return again and again to the mediated nature of history. Stukeley, however, was essentially neither a proto-phenomenologist nor concerned to constantly re-emphasize the role of the observer in the rediscovery of the past. Rather, as Mark Gillings has shown, he combined empirical methods with the older tradition of chorography, with its emphasis on “perambulation around, and immersion in, a given landscape with the express goal of evoking the essence and character of place through careful description and verbal painting” (2011: 59). As Gillings adds, chorography was also informed by “the strong visual sense” which characterizes Stukeley’s work (59).

Stukeley, however, goes further than these chorographic concerns. As I shall argue, he aims to evoke in the imagination of his readers not just the essence of a given place, but a transfigured, spiritualized landscape, and, moreover, to transform their vision so that they too can perceive, explore and participate in this imaginal world, which is essentially England as Paradise.

The word “imaginal” here is used as Henry Corbin (1903-1979) used it in his profound meditations on the visionary realms described by Islamic mystics. The imaginal world, or the *mundus imaginalis*, he explains, refers to “a very precise order of reality which corresponds to a precise mode of perception” (1972: 1). He prefers the unusual term imaginal to the more conventional word imaginary because, as he writes, “the term imaginary is equated with the unreal” (1972: 1).

This imaginal world of the seers is an intermediary, betwixt-and-between realm where matter is spiritualized and spirit materialized (Corbin 1972: 6). It is encountered through a type of perception which is more refined than that associated with the usual material or

physical senses but less transcendent than utterly spiritual vision. One needs, in fact, the imagination, which for Corbin is indeed a mode of perception (1972: 5).

So for Corbin what we see or perceive depends on the faculty of perception we are using. If we are using the usual bodily senses, we see the physical world. If we are using the super-sensory senses of the imagination we see an ontologically different world: “*New senses perceive directly* the order of reality corresponding to them” (1994: 81 [italics in original]). That new world then, in turn, influences the senses, so that the more we use the imagination, the more we see the *mundus imaginalis*. The world thus corresponds to the way we perceive it, and our perceptions respond to the world, in a kind of endless co-operation or co-creation, until we are in a different, but related world, what he calls “a visionary geography” (1989: 21). This is the celestial earth, where the realm of heaven and the realm of our habitual material world are reconciled (Corbin 1989). Essentially we see and live in Paradise: Paradise here and now, not some time in the past or the future. So, to be in heaven on earth all we need to do is change the way we see the world. What we in fact need to do is see the world aright.

In *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Corbin goes on to describe how this imaginal revelation was projected upon actual physical landscapes (1989: 22-36), so that the sacred “can be recognized in the landscape with which [the soul] surrounds itself and in which it shapes its habitat” (1989: 30). Sacred landscapes and human interventions in them – temples, tombs, even whole towns – overlapped with and became imaginal places. They became Paradise.

Here Corbin opens the possibility that a physical landscape which has been rendered sacred in this way may become a place where the imagination of others is set in motion, transforming for them, too, the terrain into paradise. Thus an environment which has been powerfully re-imagined, as it were, may affect ontological change in the psyche and

imagination of others. Paradise, interior and exterior, may unfurl, enveloping ever more men and women.

This transmission of vision is William Stukeley's project. He describes a land which has become imaginal. To see this realm it is not merely necessary to visit certain landscapes and their ancient human interventions but, more importantly, one needs to perceive them correctly. His works aim to kindle that imaginal vision in the reader.

### Accessing Stukeley's Imaginal World

For Stukeley, Britain, and especially south-west England was a place where, for those with eyes to see, the divine, the eternal and the infinite were manifested in specific places in particular landscapes which were accessible and could be visited. Both his writings and his art are attempts to draw out – to evoke in the etymological sense of call out or summon forth – in his readership the required mode of perception, which can transport us to this visionary geography. Stukeley implies that this movement (which in truth is not literal movement) entails our participation in divine creativity.

For Stukeley accessing the imaginal world began with close observation and measurement of the ancient monuments of England and their surrounding landscapes. He toured the ancient sites of Britain from 1710 to 1725, conducting painstaking and precise fieldwork (for a map of these tours, see Robson and Bower 2016: 137). He “used a theodolite and the latest surveying techniques to draw up an exact geometrical representation of the layout and the orientation of the monuments, calculating the original number of the stones and the mathematical relationship of their arrangement, as well as establishing what he believed to be the basic unit of measurement, the Hebrew cubit” (Sweet 2004: 128-129). In the words of archaeologist Christopher Chippindale, his field study at Stonehenge “was better than any to be done... for the next century and a half” (2012: 81). Indeed, archaeology owes to Stukeley much of the language which, for example, still defines Stonehenge or

Avebury and their surroundings: “The names for the features at Avebury – Cove, Obelisk, Sanctuary, Kennet Avenue – all come from Stukeley, as do the words ‘trilithon’, describing two uprights supporting a lintel at Stonehenge, and ‘cursus’, so-called because its shape suggested a track for races” (Hayman 1997: 60).

Stukeley’s first major publication was *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724). An account of his travels throughout Britain, it was “conceived as a patriotic riposte to the fascination of the Grand Tour” (Sweet 2004: 166; see Stukeley 1724: 3). As such, it was part of a general tendency – “a patriotic agenda” (Sweet 2004: 36) - within antiquarian circles, whose aim was to prove that British history offered just as much to be proud of as that of Rome or Greece. Indeed, Stukeley hoped that the work would directly inspire Britons to undertake their own journeys to the ancient sites of their island (1724: Preface; c.f. Sweet 2004: 36). The *Itinerarium*, however, remains very much within the framework set by the idea of the Grand Tour: an opportunity to train good taste and collect knowledge (or objects) of the Classical past. Focusing on relatively brief and at times impressionistic accounts of the Roman and post-Roman monuments of the land, its writing lacks the visionary sense of place of the later works which engage so imaginatively with Stonehenge and Avebury.

Only years later did he write up his research into the ancient monuments of Stonehenge and Avebury in his two major works: *Stonehenge, A Temple Restor’d to the British Druids* (1740) and *Abury, A Temple of the British Druids, with Some Others, Described* (1743). These much more ambitious works transcend the questions of connoisseurship and acquisition which define the ideology of the Grand Tour. They represent a huge achievement of both the verbal and visual imagination, and present an imaginal landscape, in a way the *Itinerarium Curiosum* does not. In his descriptions of sacred landscapes and his many engravings, he evokes a visionary geography where one could encounter eternity, a non-temporality in which all of time was intricately folded because God

Himself was present. Travel to these paradisaical places was no longer solely a question of literal movement through a particular landscape: readers were invited to fundamentally change their mode of perception if they were truly to visit and inhabit this land of divine revelation. They were encouraged, that is, to shift from bodily perception to the super-sensory vision which Corbin calls imagination. The material world and a particular landscape would remain, but spiritualized, transfigured by the presence of divinity. Accessing and exploring the paradisaical landscapes he evokes thus becomes just as much a movement of the Corbinian imagination as physical movement through space.

It was for some time believed that the writings in which he evoked this new form of perception and relationship to the land represented a disappointing falling away from the empirical and proto-archaeological precision of his earlier fieldwork. Stuart Piggott, his first biographer, for example, wrote that Stukeley, when he came to write up his findings, suffered “a sad falling-off from his work of earlier years,” embedding his views “in the elaborate fantasies of Druids, ancient mythology and patriarchal religion which he had so unfortunately evolved over the intervening years” (1985: 75, 89). More recently, however, David Boyd Haycock has established that the essentials of Stukeley’s interpretations of Avebury or Stonehenge as symbols of the one primordial deity changed little between the initial fieldwork and the publication of his thoughts (2002).

Accessing and evoking the *mundus imaginalis* in and through the English landscape required that Stukeley undertake profound and precise observation of particular sites, and engage with the specifics of positioning, size, form and the like. The quality of attention he paid to the places themselves, as he measured, surveyed and contemplated them, provided him with the mode of perception necessary to reveal their spiritual import: spiritualized senses which reconciled material place with transcendent realities, so that one became the expression of the other.

Stukeley's vision revealed that the monuments of Britain bore witness to the presence in the land of the first and universal religion, the *prisca theologia*, pristine and uncorrupted. The idea of an ur-religion, the one, divinely revealed religion from which all later religions descended, and of which "Christianity was the one true modern manifestation" (Haycock 2002: 146), was a relatively common lens through which the development of religions was seen at the time (see Haycock 2002: 146-59). Stukeley claims that, for him, it was his fieldwork which brought with it the ability to perceive this truth: "When I first began these studies about the Druid antiquities, I plainly discern'd the religion profess'd in these places was the first, simple, patriarchal religion." And he goes on: "[T]here was but one religion at first, pure and simple" (2021: 3).

It may have been true that he quickly discerned the presence of the *prisca theologia* in these sites, but it took some time for its precise nature to emerge. His 1724 fieldnotes made at Avebury, for example, as they somewhat chaotically leap from subject to subject, demonstrate that in fact he could not immediately make sense of the monument or its positioning in the landscape (Gillings *et al* 2008: 378-385). He was however struck by its numinous quality: as he wrote "methinks theres something in the air which the great men have breathed before us that contrived a work of such excessive granduer" (Gillings *et al* 2008: 378 [sic throughout]). His early manuscripts also show that he quickly came to view Avebury and other stone circles as symbols of the putative single deity believed in by all primordial peoples (Hutton 2009: 94). This was not, however, the Christian God: Hutton describes him as around this time a deist or even a "pagan Neoplatonist" (2009: 93, 94). The Druid faith, as he saw it, was the supreme expression of that primordial tradition, to which he quickly added that of Ancient Egypt as from 1724 he became fascinated by Egyptian history (Hutton 2009: 92-95). Avebury in his notes became an expression of shared Druid and Egyptian symbolism (Hutton 2009: 95).



It was as a result of his sudden and dramatic conversion to Christianity in 1729 that he realized that this *prisca theologia* in its highest expression was represented not by ancient Egyptian traditions, or any other Pagan religions, but by a form of Christianity. This, he now argued, was brought to Britain by Phoenicians in its original uncorrupted state. As he wrote in 1740: “[T]hese famous philosophic priests [i.e. the Druids] came hither, as a *Phoenician* colony, in the very earliest times, even as soon as *Tyre* was founded: during the life of the patriarch *Abraham*, or very soon after. Therefore they brought along with them the patriarchal religion, which was so extremely like Christianity, that in effect, it differ’d from it only in this; they believed in a Messiah who was to come into the world, as we believe in him that is come” (1740: 1-2). Although not originally British, this one universal religion, having been brought to this island when still pristine, was preserved here in its purest form.

Just as with the case of the *prisca theologia*, Stukeley’s beliefs regarding Druids were influenced by many scholars who had come before him. The clergyman and antiquarian Henry Rowlands (1655-1723), for example, had already argued that it was the Druids who had brought the patriarchal religion with them to Britain (Jones 1998: 141-142; Almond 2000: 380-81; Haycock 2002: 160-164; Sweet 2004: 127-128; Hutton 2009: 76-78). Likewise, in the previous century Aylett Sammes (1623?-1679?) had claimed that the Druids were originally Phoenicians (Hutton 2009: 69, 98), while John Aubrey (1626-1697) had proclaimed that it was the Druids who had built the great megalithic monuments of the British Isles (Hutton 2009: 66-68). Stukeley’s aim, however, and his great achievement, was to seize the British imagination, to bring to life in it these ideas, so that the country might realize its true nature as a spiritualized, deified land: “*My intent is... to promote, as much as I am able, the knowledge and ancient practice of ancient and true Religion; to revive in the minds of the learned the spirit of Christianity, nearly as old as the Creation, which is now languishing among us; to restore the first and great idea of the Deity, who has carry’d on the*

*same regular and golden chain of Religion from the beginning to this day...*” (1740: Preface [italics in original]).

Stukeley talks of bringing the one universal religion back to life in the minds of his readers, but of course he is only able to do so because it has never abandoned the land. As Philip Almond puts it, “the English landscape... bore the imprint of Christian doctrine” (2000: 389). It is there in Stonehenge, for instance, but especially in the extraordinary neolithic landscape in and around Avebury, utterly unignorable and unmistakable. The very form of the megalithic complex he read as a symbol of God, “literally a picture of God drawn on the ground” (Jones 1998: 148). More specifically it was an imprint of the procession of God the Son from God the Father (Stukeley 2021: 101). He perceived the stone circle as a symbol of the Father, while the two avenues formed in his imagination a serpent, a symbol, he believed, of the Son. The whole, together, bodied forth the superabundant creativity and what he called “fecundity” of God (2021: 101), both in the way the Word, the second divine person, is generated, and in the Son’s nature as what Stukeley calls “the *mind*, the *creator*, and the *wisdom of the father*” (2021: 101). He did not believe that the Druids had simply invented this hieroglyph of divine creativity, or that they had arrived at the knowledge it conveys via reasoning. “My opinion,” he writes, “is, that it was communicated to mankind, originally, by God himself” (2021: 162). The Avebury landscape may be a work of the human imagination, then, but this is human imagination flooded by literally divine creativity.

This vision of the *mundus imaginalis* had been vouchsafed to Stukeley by his meticulous observations of Avebury and perfected by his conversion to Christianity. His project then became the evocation of this powerfully imaginal landscape in the imagination of readers so that they too would share in his vision and be saturated with divine creativity. They would become, as it were, divinized humans contemplating a paradisiacal (or imaginal) landscape. This is how he describes his ambition in his book on Avebury: “The subject of

antiquities must be drawn out with such strong lines of verisimilitude, and represented in so lively colours, that the reader in effect sees them, as in their first ages: And either brings them down to modern times, or raises himself, in the scale of time, as if he lived when they were made” (2021: 10).

The point of his published writings, then, is to re-present the visionary geography of Avebury or Stonehenge, and thereby fire the imagination so that it actually participates in the divine presence they manifest. These are works of revelation, the revelation of God Himself in the harmony, beauty and elegance of the ancient British (and indeed, in the quotation below, Irish) landscape. Stukeley was strongly influenced by Pythagorean and Neoplatonic notions of an ordered cosmos as a sign of divinity (see Hutton 2009: 89) Describing the whole Avebury complex, he uses phrases such as “justness of plan,” “symmetry,” “niceness,” (meaning ‘precision’) and “agreeable” (2021: 100). Gazing on a whole county, he writes: “When we contemplate the elegance of this country of *Wiltshire*, and the great works of antiquity therein, we may be persuaded, that the two Atlantic islands, and the islands of the blessed, which *Plato* and other ancient writers mention, were those in reality of *Britain* and *Ireland*” (2021: 36).

It is the beauty and harmony – the elegance – which persuades him, as they bespeak the presence of God. In their effect on the imagination they bring out the paradisiacal aspect of the British Isles, reconciling them with the utopian Isles of the Blessed from Greek mythology, so that the physical islands and the visionary Isles unite in the vision of anyone walking amongst Stonehenge and Avebury. Thus, we have an imaginal landscape which is paradise here and now.

Being the place of the presence of God, this paradise is also beyond time and place. Or it is all times and all places at once, present in the imagination and the forms of the neolithic monuments. Time and place fold over and over in Stukeley’s writings. Gazing on

Avebury or Silbury Hill or Windmill Hill, he evoked the druids, the Saxons, Merlin, Arthur, or the Aeneid, or Rome, Thrace of Macedonia, Egypt or the Holy Land. In Eliot's words from *Little Gidding*, for Stukeley "History is now and England" (1969: 197); equally, however, England is history and now, everywhere and here.

Stukeley's drawings often display a similar kind of folding in his portrayal of landscape and monument <Figure 1>. We see this in his engraving of the view from Rundway (now Roundway) Hill, with its folds and enfoldings, and its portrayal of the traces of different periods: it includes what Stukeley calls ancient British monuments – Silbury Hill, the barrows - a Roman road and two putative Roman camps, as well as Wansdyke, which he says is Belgic (2021: 59). Indeed, the eighteenth century is there, too, in the shape of the two observers. These figures are contemporaries for Stukeley and representatives of a quaint past for the twenty-first-century gaze. They have been folded in, and are both present and past. Indeed, although the engraving is ostensibly of a view from Rundway Hill, the perspective is of course depicted from an impossible vantage point some way above it, a place which is no place, a time which is every time, making way for future gazes, folding them all into the imaginal land.

That the stylization in such published images is a deliberate effect becomes evident when one compares them with some of the original drawings he made during his early fieldwork. A prospect of the Longstones close to Avebury, made in 1723, for example, is relatively realistic, its "treatment of the perspective and relief very convincing, especially in contrast to some of the engraved prospects in *Abury*" (Gillings *et al* 2008: 366). The engravings, as they appear in his publications, serve the same purpose as his written accounts: to draw out the visionary imagination of his readers and so transform their mode of perception that to visit Avebury is to move in and through a visionary geography.

A new Fall: The Destruction of Paradise

Stukeley's Britain, then, is not the land most of us inhabit. It is transformed into paradise by the presence of the *prisca theologia*, the uncorrupted universal religion. It is a country in which matter is spiritualized and spirit materialized. There, all still there, if seen in accordance with Stukeley's vision.

Stukeley, as mentioned above, believed that this universal ur-religion was perceptible because the British landscape was marked by its presence, indeed by the very presence of God. It had thus never abandoned the island, being bodied forth in its ancient "Druidical" monuments. In an intricate play of creation and co-creation, Stukeley hopes to so inspire our imaginative mode of perception so that, when visiting the ancient Druidical sites, we can then access the visionary geography to which they gesture, which will then further saturate our being with the presence of the divine imagination. Exploring this visionary geography, then, requires the co-operation of an imaginative mode of perception with the ancient traces of God's creativity in the land, reconciling (as for Corbin) heaven and earth.

This grand vision, nevertheless, requires the presence of the divine hieroglyphs in the land. We have to see aright: but we have to see aright particular places in the landscape, the sites whose physical presence Stukeley had studied so closely. He was, however, far from sanguine about the divine traces surviving. His writings are driven by an urgency that they might just about to be lost; that they may actually be erased for good by the depredations of industrialization. The consequence of that would be the loss of access to a visionary landscape.

Stukeley was visiting Avebury at a time when stones were being "deliberately and systematically destroyed" (Gillings and Pollard 2004: 142). He watched in horror as the great stones of Avebury suffered terrible assaults: "Just before I visited this place, to endeavor at preserving the memory of it, the inhabitants were fallen into the custom of demolishing the stones, chiefly out of covetousness of the little *area* of ground, each stood on. First they dug

great pits in the earth, and buried them... After this they found out the knack of burning them; which has made most miserable havock [sic] of this famous temple” (2021: 38).

The stones were toppled into pits, covered in huge quantities of straw, which was then set ablaze. When the fire was judged to have done its work, cold water was poured on them and they were then shattered with sledgehammers (2021: 38). It was as if, instead of representing Paradise on earth, Avebury was being transformed into hell on earth: in his fieldnotes Stukeley likens the stone breakers to devils at work in the infernal regions (Gillings *et al* 2008: 380). This infernal blazing work was driven by greed, Stukeley tells us, and by the desire to possess.<sup>1</sup>

The issue was not just that God’s signature was being expunged by covetousness from the landscape, but that changing technologies and patterns of land use were breaking the links with the past, too, otherwise preserved, in his view, by the traditions of rural life. In *Stonehenge* he describes and draws an avenue to the stone circle in order to “preserve the memory of it hereafter, when the traces of this mighty work are obliterated with the plough, which it is to be fear’d, will be its fate. That instrument gaining ground too much, upon the ancient and innocent pastorital [sic] life; hereabouts, and everywhere else in *England*: and by destructive inclosures beggars and depopulates the country” (1740: 35).

Stukeley chooses words which emphasize that he regards this destruction as a blasphemy and a sacrilege. The phrase “mighty work” which describes the avenue is redolent of the many Biblical “mighty works” of God (see, for instance, Psalms 150:2; Matthew 11: 20; Luke 19: 37). Just as significant, however, was the effect of more extensive plowing on rural life, which it broke up in a way analogous to the ease with which it broke up the soil.<sup>2</sup> It gained arable ground by encouraging enclosure, ending the “ancient and innocent” right of allowing livestock to graze on common land. It is as if, for Stukeley, the “traditional” patterns of country life bore witness to the presence of the divine in the land just as much as the

shapes of the neolithic monuments. The increasing mechanization and rationalization of agriculture, driven by the sin of greed, represented a second Fall, one which destroyed a life which he significantly called “innocent,” and resulted in the inhabitants being expelled from the Edenic land. The breaking up of the stones, the soil, and the time-honored ways of life emptied the land of people, but, more importantly, of meaning, too. Rather than a place alive with the presence of God, it became just a resource to be owned and exploited. It became merely matter, and the merely material cannot be the place of the imaginal.

In this light, then, Stukeley’s project is to preserve a type of imaginative vision whose divine origin may be vanishing from the land. If the hieroglyphs of God are expunged from the landscape, it may, indeed, only be possible to visit his visionary geography primarily through acts of the imagination. What was an act of co-creation shared between perceiver and divine site becomes an act of isolated human creation (albeit inspired by Stukeley’s divine vision). We may still move through imaginal England, but it is no longer linked to specific places. Indeed, this exploration will also be possible without even leaving the house, or, perhaps, garden, simply, as it were, by using the imagination.

#### Stukeley’s Gardens: Paradise Restored in Miniature

Stukeley, watching the plowing and breaking up of his imaginal Eden, attempted to preserve it not only by evoking its presence in the mind of his readers but also by embodying it in the life he shared with others. He identified himself as a Druid, and, in the words of Ronald Hutton, “may possibly have been the first person in Britain since the end of the ancient world to have [this desire to be a Druid]” (2009: 128). He started to greet friends as Druids, too, and in his later years elevated several female friends to the status of Druidess and even Archdruidess (Hutton 2009: 128-129). Although he did this informally, and there is no question of him initiating them into a formal society or order, he was nevertheless creating an atmosphere, as it were, in which the *mundus imaginalis* could still be accessed, even if its

anchoring traces in the land were being obliterated. It was, however, an intimate, privatized space, access to which was only available to friends and family.

To this imagined Druidic community he added attempts to actually re-create on a modest scale a visionary landscape in the privacy of his garden. In June 1726, on moving to Grantham in Lincolnshire, he began transforming his new garden into a Temple of Druids (Reeve 2012/13: 9ff.). He planted concentric circles of shrubs, thereby not only imitating his beloved stone circles but going further back than them into the primordial past, to what he believed to be their origin in rings of Druidic trees (Reeve 2012/13: 12-14). His garden became an oasis of the imaginal, a sacred enclosure protected from the greed and technology-driven destructiveness of the world beyond, and thus a place where the imagination of others could be raised to such heights that the primordial vision may stand revealed around them.

When, to the surprise of his friends (Hutton 2009: 88), he had himself ordained into the Church of England in 1729, Stukeley was appointed to the living of Stamford, also in Lincolnshire. There he continued his project of devising very localized visionary landscapes. Stukeley seems to have had two major gardens in Stamford (Smith 2013). In the first he recreated the concentric circles of Grantham, picked out once more by shrubs (Smith 2013: 362-363), and constructed Merlin's Cave (Reeve 2012/13: 13; Smith 2013: 364-365). The second, much larger garden contained several features, most importantly the inevitable Druidic rings (Smith 2023: 383) and a Gothic Temple of Flora (Reeve 2012/13: 14-18; Smith 2013: 389-393). The latter, like the circles of shrubs, was a reference to his belief that architectural styles were originally arboreal, with the Gothic arch being an imitation of the Druidic glade (Sweet 2004: 254; Reeve 2012/13: 17). His Temples thus took their place in the great chain of continuity stretching back to the earliest times of the proto-Christian universal religion. The gardens were *prisca theologia* in horticulture: he was reversing the Fall, and Paradise was being regained in Stamford



Being a priest in the Anglican Church was just another aspect of being a Druid for Stukeley, and being a Druid was just another aspect of being an Anglican priest. Not only was Christianity the true flowering of the ancient primordial religion, but this religion was “*no where upon earth done, in my judgment, better than in the Church of England*” (1740: Preface [italics in original]). In Stamford his priestly Anglican/Druidic vocation was carried out in the thirteenth-century Gothic church of All Saints, whose architecture was also a direct connection to the early groves of wisdom. Writing in *Account of Lesnes Abbey*, he averred that “The present Westminster Abby [sic], and generally our cathedrals, the Temple church, and the like, present us with a true notion of these verdant cathedrals of antiquity; which our Druids brought from the east into our own island, and practiced before the Romans came hither” (Sweet 2004: 254). Despite the Gothic style not originating in England, Stukeley finds that in essence it represents the reappearance of ancient Druidic groves. Understood in this way, and in a strange reversal of history, it could be said to have roots predating Romanesque churches and even Classical temples.

Wandering his gardens offered Stukeley and his friends access to the *mundus imaginalis*, which was as much a visionary lifescape as a visionary landscape. Beyond this private space, all church-goers, too, at least when actually within a Gothic church such as All Saints, were exploring England as paradise, a space where God was still present and where vision could be transformed. Outside these precincts, however, the English landscape was a fallen one, cut off from God by destruction of His signatures and reduced to mere matter by a type of perception which saw it simply as a series of objects to be possessed and exploited.

#### The Influence of the Stukeleyan Imaginal on other Antiquarians and the Wider Public

Stukeley’s writings had a huge and immediate influence on many other antiquarians, inspiring them to develop and explore their own visionary landscapes. William Borlase (1696-1772), for example, had been exploring the ancient landscapes of Cornwall since the

1720s, and had come to develop a similar landscape practice to Stukeley's (Gillings 2011). Likewise, the driving force behind his perambulations was the belief that the ancient landscapes of Cornwall were constructed or modified by the Druids (Gillings 2011). But it was encountering Stukeley and his work that confirmed his intuitions and led him to write his own work, *Antiquities, Historical and Monumental, of the County of Cornwall* (1754) (Hutton 2009: 107-108), which in turn "made the reputation of Cornwall as a great centre of prehistoric remains" (Hutton 2009: 108). Thus the place that Cornwall still has in the imagination of many, as an ancient place of Celtic power, is at least in part due to the power of Stukeley's vision and its influence on Borlase.<sup>3</sup> When they explore the ancient peninsula, then, to that extent they are walking through his visionary geography.

Perhaps even more significant than Borlase was John Wood (1704-1754) (see Mowl and Earnshaw 1988; and Hutton 2009: 102-107). Like Borlase, he, too, had already been developing his own theories regarding the history of the ancient monuments of Britain when he encountered Stukeley's writings, which fired him to carry out his own measurements of, for example, Stonehenge, motivated by the ambition to prove his own Druidic vision correct. He came to argue that the great megalithic structures of south-west England were built by the legendary founder of Bath, King Bladud, who, he claimed, had visited Pythagoras in Greece, and brought back his teachings. Bladud became the founder of Druidry and his great constructions repositories of universal spiritual truths, models of heaven on earth. Stonehenge, in particular, was a model of the entire harmonious cosmos, and of its divine origin in the One (see Wood 1747).

Wood, however, went considerably further than Stukeley in recreating this sacred, visionary geography. Where Stukeley built gardens, Wood built Bath. He designed the extraordinary Circus in that city, a great circle of Georgian architecture, pierced by three roads, to embody the proportions and symbolism of both Stonehenge and the megalithic

complex at Stanton Drew (see Mowl and Earnshaw 1988: 186-206; Hutton 2009: 107; Chippindale 2012: 92-93). It was a place where one's being and one's vision would be transformed by the presence of God. Walking that great circle, visitors to Bath, whether they know it or not, are exploring the *mundus imaginalis*, heaven on earth. While this experience was entirely devised by Wood, his thought, and thus his architecture, would not have taken the shape they did without his fierce competitive drive to prove the truth of his own theories over those of Stukeley.

Meanwhile, Stukeley's view of the Druids and their great significance in British and world history was accepted in the popular mind. It was a sign of his success that his "conviction that Stonehenge, Avebury, and other stone circles were Druidic was to win the day" (Almond 2000: 390). Perhaps even more remarkably, soon after his death, modern Druid societies began to appear (Hutton 2009: 130ff). Their members were, in different ways (some early groups were, for example, largely friendly societies), living out Stukeley's imaginal (which he himself had lived out). The whole establishment of the Druids in the English historical imagination is due to Stukeley, who "persuaded the English both that Druids were ancestors worth fully embracing and that they had been the builders of England's most spectacular prehistoric monuments, including Stonehenge" (Hutton 2009: 421-422). When modern Druids meet at Stonehenge or other circles to celebrate their rituals, they are keeping the Stukeleyan *mundus imaginalis* alive (cf. Chippindale 2012: 86). The fact that they are proclaimed Pagans, rather than Anglican inheritors of the universal religion, merely demonstrates how generous his vision was. There is perhaps a case to be made that contemporary Paganism of various stripes owes much to Stukeley's conception of a universal religion found in the landscape of Britain. The roots of many Pagan movements, for example, "lie in the notion of an enchanted universe common to all ancient and indigenous religions" (Magliocco 2012: 151). Connection to this cosmos, however, has been interrupted and

obscured in the West, primarily by Christianity. Reviving the enchantment depends partly on reconnecting with the pre-Christian traditions and with nature and the land. The outlines of Stukeley's project are clearly visible here. Modern Paganism is perhaps Stukeleyan Anglicanism which has forgotten its origins, but which continues to seek new vision amongst the old stones.

### The Influence of the Stukeleyan Imaginal on William Blake

As we have seen, however, Stukeley's writings were marked by a concern that, beyond his immediate circle of friends, the enclosures of his gardens, or the Gothic buildings of the Church of England, the traces of this visionary geography may be vanishing. Uncoupled from specific places, the imaginal, thus, may only be accessible through a private act of the imagination, albeit one inspired by Stukeley's books. As a consequence, beyond some antiquarians and their evocations of specific places, his influence was particularly strong on poets. He was crucial to the establishment of Druids and the Druidical past as a source of poetic inspiration for a loose movement of poets who between them largely embody the early or proto-Romanticism which was beginning to emerge in Britain (Hutton 2009: 113-121). Stukeley's visionary and paradisaical Britain became a realm to be accessed and explored in poems such as Thomas Gray's *The Bard* (1757) just as much as – if not more than – in the countryside, as if his words and images had become unconnected from any specific place.

Stukeley's imaginal was to have its most profound effect on William Blake (1757-1827). Blake had become familiar with Stukeley's work at an early age, through James Basire, the engraver to whom he was apprenticed from 1772 to 1779 (Heringman 2019: 245). Stukeley's vision of Avebury must have made a particularly strong impression on him, as later, in plate 100 of his prophetic work *Jerusalem*, he portrays Stukeley's serpentine avenues, but replaces the Avebury circle from which they branch to right and left with what is unmistakably Stonehenge (Blake 2000: 397).

More generally, Blake followed Stukeley in writing and in making images with the aim of transfiguring England into a kind of Eden. As he wrote in *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, “The Nature of my Work is Visionary or imaginative; it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients calld the Golden Age” (1979b: 410 [sic throughout]).

Like Stukeley, he saw Britain as the place where the original revelation had once been present, and where it could still be experienced. As he proclaimed in *Jerusalem*: “Jerusalem was & is the Emanation of the Giant Albion. It is true and cannot be controverted. Ye are united, O ye Inhabitants of Earth, in One Religion, The Religion of Jesus: the most Ancient, the Eternal: & the Everlasting Gospel... ‘All things Begin and End in Albion's Ancient Druid Rocky Shore” (1979a: 320-321).

The presence of Stukeley is palpable in this passage: he could almost have written it, were not for the high prophetic tone. However, as the quotation also implies, Blake went beyond Stukeley to assert that the universal religion “had in some sense begun in Britain” (Hutton 2009: 194). Britain really was the place of the original revelation, not just the place to which it had been brought and where it was still most present and pristine.

Blake followed Stukeley in seeing the Druids as the professors of this primordial revelation. In his view, however, some time after its appearance, this became corrupted, and fell. Where Stukeley saw a kind of new Fall being consummated in eighteenth-century England by greed and new technology, Blake seemed to believe that the original, the Edenic Fall which as it were contains all future Falls, had occurred there in primordial times (Hutton 2009: 194). The British Druids had been the inspired prophets of the primordial revelation, which he conceived of as kind of influx of life-giving imagination, but later they tamed this vision through dogma, ritual and abstract thinking, administered by a powerful and controlling Druidic priesthood (Fisher 1959). It was under this fallen aspect that they primarily appear in his poetry. Their stone circles, so important to Stukeley, were for Blake

built to assert their power, and became places of oppression (Fisher 1959). The very materials and impressive geometry of these sites further marked them out as killers of the divine revelation: “Rock always symbolised the hardness and opacity which [Blake] regarded as the antithesis of true vision, while the simple geometric shapes of circle and trilithon aptly symbolised that reduction to simple order and mathematical design which resulted from the exact thinking of the rationalists” (Beer 1969: 21). Seeing these circles aright meant not the restoration of Paradise but a vision of evil. Thus Blake, in plate 92 of *Jerusalem*, writes of “Druids [rearing] their Rocky Circles to make permanent Remembrance/Of Sin” (Blake 2000: 389).

Blake’s project in this sense was diametrically opposed to Stukeley’s. Stukeley had watched with horror as the stone hieroglyphs of God were being destroyed, and tried to re-erect them, as it were, in the imagination of the English. For Blake their irrefragable and dominating appearance blocked vision, entrapped imagination: they had to be swept aside, at least symbolically, if England was to have a future. Thus Blake would remove, at least from the eye of imagination, the structures which for Stukeley were the very mark of God’s creativity in the landscape. He would continue the destructive work of the farmers at Avebury which Stukeley had so decried.

What is clear, however, is that the primordial revelation, the Druids and “their” stone circles would probably not have the place they do in Blake’s symbolic system without Stukeley. Even Stukeley’s turn from the land to the individual imagination is mirrored by the way Blake puts his hopes for the future spiritual resurrection of Britain - and indeed the whole world – in the awakening of the giant Albion, effectively removing visionary power from the landscape and placing it instead in the interior life of a human (albeit a giant one).

### Conclusion

Stukeley, then, while perhaps still believing that the imaginative mode of perception needed to access the *mundus imaginalis* could be achieved through the mutual inspiration of observer and divinely structured place, nevertheless, in his despair at the destruction of such locations, turns to a more privatized effort of the imagination, transmitted to the individual readers of his books or shared amongst friends within the parameters of a garden. While ecclesiastical architecture may communicate this vision to a larger audience, there is a sense that the restoration of Paradise depends on us and no longer on our encounter with a divinized landscape. This is carried forward by his impact on poets. He may have influenced fellow antiquarians and their encounter with place, but the proto-Romantic poets who picked up on Stukeley's work stress the importance of the heroic imagination of the individual as a means of accessing the in-between world of the imaginal. One consequence of this is that in the works of William Blake Stukeley's revisioning of England becomes completely detached from Avebury or Stonehenge and invested in the mind and body of the giant Albion.

Stukeley's imaginal has also undergone an unforeseen transformation in the views and practices of many modern Pagans, amongst whom his visionary geography, divested of its Christianity, seems, at least in part, to live on. These contemporary seekers may access enlightenment by visiting the megalithic monuments of Britain, perhaps using Julian Cope's large-format *The Modern Antiquarian* (1998) as a guide, with its hope that "gnostic" encounters with the stone remnants of the past may revive the ancient connections with nature still inscribed in the landscape and thus sweep away the evils of Christian dogma (1998: 8). That the Stukeleyan imaginal lives on in this new and perhaps surprising context is testament to its power and its generosity of spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Stukeley blamed farmers for this destruction, by no means all the people he actually named were in fact farmers (Gillings *et al* 2008: 341). In fact, as he records in his fieldnotes, a lawyer, a parson and members of the landed gentry were also active in this stone breaking (Gillings *et al* 2008: 341, 381). As for the actual reasons for the increased destruction of the stones around this time, they seem to be manifold (see Gillings *et al* 2008: 340-355), but for the purposes of this article it is Stukeley's interpretation which is significant.

<sup>2</sup> This work was also facilitated by advances in plow technology, including the introduction of the Rotherham plow in 1730, which only required two horses and a man rather than the four oxen, one ploughman and one ox driver hitherto necessary.

<sup>3</sup> Borlase, however, did not share Stukeley's view of the spiritual significance of Druidry, regarding it as barbaric and pagan: see Hutton 2009: 109.