Summary Article: monolith

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Single isolated stone or column, usually standing and of great size, used as a form of monument. Some are natural features, such as the Buck Stone in the Forest of Dean, England. Other monoliths may be quarried, resited, finished, or carved; those in Egypt of about 3000 BC take the form of obelisks. They have a wide distribution including Europe, South America, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Apart from their ritual or memorial function, monoliths have been used as sundials and calendars in the civilizations of the Aztecs, Egyptians, and Chaldeans (ancient peoples of southern Babylonia). In landscape archaeology, monoliths are interpreted in a wider context, possibly as boundary markers. The largest cut stone, weighing about 1,500 tonnes, is sited in the ancient Syrian city of Baalbek.

A number of outstanding monoliths are found in South America. Monoliths of considerable size were common to both the pre-Inca and Inca architecture of Peru from the 12th century. One example at the capital Cuzco is 8 m/27 ft long, 4.5 m/15 ft wide and 3.5 m/12 ft thick. Huge columns have also been found among the ruins of Mitla, Mexico. The Aztec ‘sunstone’ (National Museum, Mexico City) is a beautiful and massive circular monolith of carved basalt, 3.5 m/12 ft in diameter, which served as both a sundial and a calendar. Its animal carvings have excited speculation that its chronological system may have some connection with Chinese and Indian astronomy.

Menhir are monoliths of the late Neolithic (New Stone Age) and early Bronze Age found in northwestern Europe. Many prehistoric monoliths are found in the highland zone of the British Isles, most dating from the Bronze Age. Some are the sole remaining stones of megaliths. Welsh examples are dressed and inscribed in ogham (an ancient Celtic or Pict alphabet) or Latin characters. The worship of monolithic stones often persisted in Europe into the Christian period.

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