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2,600 B.C. settlement may link its occupants to Stonehenge

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WASHINGTON — A village of small houses that may have sheltered the builders of the mysterious Stonehenge — or people attending festivals there — has been found by archaeologists studying the stone circle in England.

Eight of the houses, with central hearths, have been excavated, and there may be as many as 25 of them, Mike Parker Pearson said Tuesday at a briefing organized by the National Geographic Society.

The ancient houses are at a site known as Durrington Walls, about two miles from Stonehenge. It is also the location of a wooden version of the stone circle.

The village was carbon dated to about 2600 B.C., about the same time Stonehenge was built. The Great Pyramid in Egypt was built at about the same time, said Parker Pearson of Sheffield University.

Julian Thomas of Manchester University noted that both Stonehenge and Durrington Walls have avenues connecting them to the Avon River, indicating a pattern of movement between the sites.

"Clearly, this is a place that was of enormous importance," he said, referring to the new find.

The researchers speculated that Durrington Walls was a place for the living, and Stonehenge — where cremated remains have been found — was a cemetery and memorial.

The wooden houses at the new site were square and about 14 feet along each side.

They were almost identical to stone houses built at about the same time in the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland, Parker Pearson said.

He said there were indications of bed frames along the side walls and of a dresser or storage unit of some sort on the wall opposite the door.

Stone tools, animal bones, arrowheads and other artifacts were uncovered in the village.

Remains of pigs indicated they were about nine months old when killed, which would mark a midwinter festival.

Stonehenge was oriented to face the midsummer sunrise and midwinter sunset, while the wooden circle at Durrington Walls faced the midwinter sunrise and midsummer sunset.

Two of the houses, found by Thomas, were separate from the others and may have been the dwellings of community leaders or perhaps were special houses used for religious rituals.

Those sites lacked the debris and household trash that was common in the other homes, he noted.

Durrington appears "very much a place of the living," Parker Pearson said.

In contrast, no one ever lived at the stone circle at Stonehenge, which was the largest cemetery in the Britain of its time. Stonehenge is thought to contain 250 cremations.

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