

The Borlase-Stukeley Correspondence

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AMONG THE WILLIAM BORLASE MSS. at the Morrab Library, Penzance, is some unpublished correspondence of considerable antiquarian interest between Borlase and William Stukeley. This dates from 1749, when Stukeley was aged sixty-two and well established, through his books on Stonehenge (1740) and Avebury (1743), as the leading antiquary of his time. Borlase was aged fifty-three and had spent the years since he became Rector of Ludgvan in 1722 assiduously collecting material on the Antiquities and Natural History of Cornwall, but had published nothing and was hardly known outside Cornwall except to a small circle of correspondents.

The contact between Stukeley and Borlase was made by Emanuel Mendez da Costa (1717-91), a young London mineralogist whom Borlase was helping in his researches, and who visited Ludgvan in July 1749, bringing a request from Stukeley to Borlase for information on the classical geography of Cornwall and on certain megalithic sites. At this time Stukeley was working on the MS. of Richard of Westminster (or Cirencester), published by him in 1757, a document then believed to contain a great deal of new information on Roman Britain, but much later exposed as an impudent forgery imposed upon Stukeley by its "discoverer", a young Dane named Charles Julius Bertram (see S. Piggott, *William Stukeley* (1950), 154-63).

Borlase was probably rather flattered at receiving a request for assistance from one so eminent as Stukeley, and when da Costa returned to London he bore a letter from Borlase to Stukeley (Borlase MSS., *Letterbook II*, 46, not dated). This letter commented on the westcountry places named in the Richard of Westminster MS., doubted the influence of the Greek and Phoenician languages on Cornish place-names ("etymology you know gives great latitude for imagination and conjecture"), and enclosed drawings of the Hurlers (St. Cleer), Boscawen-un (St. Buryan), and the Men-an-tol (Madron). Stukeley's reply is given in full below (*ibidem*, *Original Letters IV*, 250):-

London, October 17, 1749

"Reverend and Good Sir,

My friend d'Acosta gave me the pleasure of delivering your letter to me, accompanied with the accurate drawing of the Hurlers, Biscaw Wn, and Min an Toll, for all which I am exceedingly indebted to you, and especially since you are a co-operator with me in the same argument. All my studys in antiquity have ever had a regard to religion, nor do I think any other studys are worth cultivating, but what have some aspect that way. I am thoroughly persuaded our Druids were of the patriarchal religion, and came from Abraham. I believe Abraham's grandson Apher helped to plant our island, and gave name to it. My reasons, in some measure, I have given in my books of Stonehenge and Abury. I could say much more on that head, but unless a man that writes can be a bookseller too, he must be a loser by publishing, which has discouraged me from trading with booksellers, who are sure to get all the profit.

Still, that we may make some further advances in the study, I must beg your further assistance to answer our purposes. Your measure by paces being inaccurate, I wish you would send me the exact diameter of the three circles of the Hurlers in English feet, and the intermediate intervals; likewise the bearing of the line that connects them, as exact as you can, by a compass; also a description of their situation, in regard to the ground, to any spring-head. Where came the stones from? Are there not tumulus's near them?

Of Biscaw Wn I want to know its true diameter in feet, and the bearing of the line between the kist vaen and the central obelisc or kebla, and a description of its situation. What spring-head near it? What tumulus's?

All these Druidical works were made by the old Hebrew cubit, and they were set by a compass which had a variation as now, but the founders were probably ignorant of that property, though they knew the vertical property of the magnet.

Now I am come again to spend the remainder of my days in London, we may have an agreeable and an useful correspondence together, which I shall be glad of.

The Druids always celebrated their public sacrifices exactly at the four great quarters of the year, the solstices and equinoxes, and that they might be exact therein, they set up observatorys by great stones, and I believe your Min an Toll to be one of that sort. Therefore I desire you would critically observe the bearing of the line of those three stones, and measure exactly the diameter of the circular aperture, and what point in the horizon it regards, as to the sun rising.

There is another monument in Cornwall called the Nine Maids; I should be glad to have an account of it, and a drawing by your accurate hand.

I should be glad to be satisfyd about that crumlech at Biscaw Wn, whether it did not consist of three stones thus?

(here follows a sketch of three upright stones, the central one flanked by one at an angle on each side)

This was a kebla, as well as the central obelisc. Did not the central obelisc originally stand upright? I apprehend somebody digging by it to find treasure disturbed it.

I thank you for your geographic remarks regarding Richard of Westminster, which is a most invaluable monument of the Roman face of Brittain. He gives us a new itinerary, and a most excellent map. I retrieved it from abroad, being the author's original writing, and might otherwise have been quite lost, but it gives us a far better notion of Britannia Romana than all the books we have put together.

I have lost my great patron, the Duke of Montagu, who called me to town again, which was the means of preserving Richard Westminster. Had the Duke lived I should soon have printed it. Now I must wait for some kind event, but whenever 'tis printed by me I shall present you with a copy. I heartily thank you for your kind letter and drawing, and am,

your faithful servant and brother,

William Stukeley.

Queens Square, 17th October, 1749."

Borlase replied to this cordial letter on 10th November 1749 (*Letterbook II*, 51), referring tactfully to Stukeley's theories about Apher ("I doubt not but you have very good reasons for your conjecture"), giving further details of the Hurlers, the Men-an-tol and the Nine Maidens (Madron), and including the following agreeably modest account of his own studies:—

“It being my fortune to live at a great distance from places of publick resort and my profession confining me to a small round, I found myself obliged to amuse myself with such remarkables as were within my reach, or utterly to abandon that share of curiosity which I had imbibed during the time of my education, and was grown too strong for me when I settled to be easily got rid of. My turn was to antiquity, and I found in a short time that though we had few remains about us of any striking beauty or magnificence, yet that we had a great variety of monuments here which were of the most remote antiquity. Upon examining frequently these monuments and authors concerning them I thought something might be added to the accounts I met with from a faithful measurement and observation of the structure, shape, situation and some other peculiarities of these monuments, although at the distance I have always lived from libraries my conceptions must needs be rude and new to those who have every book at their command.”

With this letter the correspondence came to an unexpected and unexplained end, despite the efforts of da Costa to induce the parties to resume it. Undoubtedly a great feast of Druidic lore would have been evolved and discussed had the correspondence continued, but perhaps it would have been unreasonable to expect the two Archdruids of 18th-century antiquity to reconcile their doctrines and rites. Borlase’s druidic fantasies tended to be less fanciful and more firmly linked with his field-work than those of Stukeley, and in the Preface to his *Antiquities of Cornwall*, first published in 1754, he defended his own conjectures with what may be intended as a comparison with those of Stukeley:—

“I may seem too conjectural to those who will make no allowances for the deficiencies of history, nor be satisfied with anything but evident truths; but, where there is no certainty to be obtained, probabilities must suffice; and conjectures are no faults, but when they are either advanced as real truths, or too copiously pursued, or peremptorily insisted upon as decisive.”

After publication of his book comparison with Stukeley was inevitable, and Borlase received the warm support of his friend Jeremiah Milles (1714-84), Precentor of Exeter, later Dean of Exeter and President of the Society of Antiquaries. On 23rd March 1754 Milles wrote to Borlase as follows (*Original Letters III*, 57a):—

“Dr. Stukeley shakes his sententious head at you for thinking that the Druids were ever guilty of idolatry. He will not allow them to have deviated one step from the old Patriarchal Religion, and is clear that they had a knowledge of the Messiah—you will not think your character hurt by such a disagreement”.

A month later Milles returned to the same topic (*ibid.* III, 57b, 25th April 1754):—

“You need not be in any pain on account of your differing from Dr. Stukeley about any point of Druid history. What you assert is founded on authority, but he makes a system out of his own head, and never cares whether he has any authority to support it. There is no imagination so wild that he will not lay down with all solemnity of truth, and treat it as if it were demonstrably certain.”

We conclude with Borlase’s own much more generous estimate of Stukeley, in a letter to da Costa on 19th March 1759, ten years after their brief correspondence (Gatley MSS., R.I.C., Truro):—

“I am glad Dr. Stukely continues still to entertain the world. He is very capable, with his luxuriant imagination, of striking new lights; sparks will not satisfy him, he is for the broad day of truth in the most minute particulars.”