

One way or another, it seems that you can't keep Stonehenge out of the news!

Drought Has Revealed Spain's Long-Submerged 'Stonehenge'



Due to the low water level of the Valdecañas Reservoir, the Doldal de Guadalperal is fully visible. Photo by Pleonr / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA.

Droughts, and the way that they strip the land of plant cover and drain lakes and reservoirs are often a boon for archaeologists. The water level of the Valdecañas Reservoir in the province of Cáceres has dropped so low that it is providing an extraordinary glimpse into the past.

“All my life, people had told me about the dolmen,” says Angel Castaño, a resident of Peraleda de la Mata, a village just a couple miles from the reservoir. “I had seen parts of it peeking out from the water before, but this is the first time I’ve seen it in full.”

The dolmen he’s talking about is known as the Dolmen of Guadalperal, the remains of a 7,000-year old megalithic monument consisting of around 100 standing stones—some up to six feet tall—arranged around an oval open space. Traces of aquatic plant life in the sand show that the site is dry and accessible only temporarily.

Archaeologists believe the dolmen was erected on the banks of the Tagus River in the fifth millennium BC, as a completely enclosed space, like a stone house with a massive cap stone on top. And though it had been known, perhaps even damaged, by the Romans, it had faded beyond memory until German archaeologist Hugo Obermaier led an excavation of the site in the mid-1920s, but his work wasn't published until 1960.

A dam and reservoir flooded the Dolmen of Guadalperal and most of the remains of a Roman city called Augustóbriga in 1963.

One of the standout attributes of the Dolmen of Guadalperal is a large stone, or menhir, that marked the entrance. A human figure is engraved on its front, along with a long squiggly line on another face. Scientists believe it is a representation of a snake, but others think it may be an ancient map of the now-flooded portions of the Tagus River.

While the Dolmen of Guadalperal has widely been compared to Stonehenge—and rightly so—the Spanish example was once an entirely enclosed space. And it could also be around 2,000 years older.

When it was intact people would have entered through a dark, narrow hallway adorned with engravings and other decorations, probably carrying a torch. This would lead to an access portal into the more spacious main chamber, which had a diameter of around 16 feet, where the dead would be laid to rest. It's also likely that the monument was oriented around the summer solstice, allowing, for just a few moments a year, the sun to shine on the community's ancestors.