

# **The Living Stones: Contemporary Sensory Engagements with Megalithic Monuments in Cornwall**

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This paper will outline selected findings of my doctoral research into contemporary local engagements with the prehistoric archaeological heritage of West Penwith, Cornwall. Termed "the granite kingdom" (Thomas 1970) on account of its highly visible and distinctive geology, I demonstrate that an awareness of its *culture of stone* is integral to understanding relationships between people, place and the past.

The Land's End peninsula is said to host the densest concentration of megalithic monuments in Western Europe (Michell 1974). Whilst inexplicably neglected within academic syntheses of British prehistory, this is not to presume a similar disregard at the community level. Heritage Studies can shed light on contemporary ways of knowing and experiencing the ancient past. The aim of my work is to examine interactions with sites, to identify processes of meaning-making, and to investigate the construction and negotiation of 'unauthorised' interpretative narratives by 21st century inhabitants. Qualitative interviewing and participant observation have proffered fascinating insights into the nature and role of sensory engagements with this lithic landscape.

I begin by introducing the key later prehistoric sites, acknowledging the suggestion of the purposeful echoing of tor outcrops in megalithic architecture (Tilley 1995, 2001). Continuing with this idea of 'rocks as resources', I explore how present-day narratives of place and the past are underpinned by geological encounters. First, I demonstrate how the locally-perceived identity of West Penwith is sculpted by everyday embodied and imagined engagements with the ubiquitous granite. Focussing on the notion of 'ancientness' reveals an entanglement of archaeological/geological and site/landscape. I highlight the inherent challenges to recognising certain features as prehistoric monumental remains, on account of the material coherence of granite in this environment. My work illustrates the importance of *cultures of stone* to knowing and being in the Land's End, for communities both past and present.