



One

The point about Silbury Hill is that she has no point. She has been described as ‘standing in the Kennet meadows like a grassed-over coal tip’. A sudden doubter, I spent an hour on the web searching for images of abandoned spoil tips. None of them resembled Silbury. They were either disguised by conifers or looked messy, the result of what W.B. Yeats called, in his poem ‘Meru’, man’s ‘ravaging, ravening and uprooting’.

Spoil heaps, even when colonised by tough and thorny stuff, look like spoil heaps: there is no thought in them, only convenience, and they are ugly. They have a point, they are practical, as any mound of waste is practical. Silbury Hill looks as much like a grassed-over coal tip as the Roman forum looks like an abandoned building site.

Silbury is the more beautiful for being almost ugly. I have known her since the age of thirteen.

If anything, she resembles what archaeologists call a ‘tell’, from the Hebrew and Arabic for hillock: a mound created from centuries of disintegrating mud-brick houses and the detritus of urban life, accreting generation after generation in the dry lands of the Middle East. The tell under Baalbeck’s Temple of Jupiter in Lebanon contains 9,000 years of

continuous settlement. Except that Silbury's accretions are deliberate and ungraspable, the expression of an urge or a need that we cannot decipher.

Not very forthcoming, as my mother used to say about someone shy or diffident.

She may not be forthcoming, but she is very large and imposing: the largest man-made hill in Europe, and only beaten elsewhere by the Tomb of Alyattes near Sardis in Turkey (260 feet high, with a circumference of three-quarters of a mile), built in the seventh century BC and nestling among nearly 100 other burial mounds – the royal necropolis of Lydia. Silbury is not a burial mound. Constructing something of this size out of soil and stony rubble without it collapsing is in itself an achievement. In this case, we have a mound that has lasted virtually intact for thousands of years.

Furthermore, she was constructed without earth-movers or diggers, without power tools, without iron tools, without rulers and surveying instruments and hard hats, with only antler picks and ox shoulder blades and wickerwork baskets, plus human muscle. At around 130 feet high, she is equivalent to a thirteen-storey building. If the *Titanic* sailed just behind her in your dreams, you would only see the smoke from the funnels. If the Statue of Liberty could be placed likewise, only the bronze flame of the torch would poke above the flattish summit.

Her base covers five acres of Wiltshire turf, the equivalent of three football pitches. Five acres that have not seen sunlight or stars for some 4,300 years and will never see sunlight again until, possibly, the ice of the next Ice Age to extend as far as southern England scratches her away like a pimple.

In her day she must have been almost unimaginably

colossal, since nothing else man-made came anywhere near. She was probably as white, when completed, as the dome of the Taj Mahal – not with marble, but with ungrassed chalk. To visitors seeing her for the first time, she would have seemed otherworldly, miraculous, impossibly smooth and symmetrical: like a vast upturned bowl. It is probable that the scooped-out ditch left around her by the construction was naturally flooded, like a moat, giving her a mirroring surround.



Oddly – almost incredibly given our surfeited imagination, our seen-it-all consciousness, our overloaded Dubai-busy cortex – her heap of grassy chalk still seems otherworldly. She rears up quite abruptly as you drive westward on the A4 (or ‘the Bath Road’) from Marlborough, slightly sunken beyond the spur that the road has followed for at least 2,000 years, and always surprising.

Yet without someone standing at her base or (now forbidden) on top of her to give us a comparison, her scale grows blurred. From the viewing area by the little car park under the trees, or from the nearby footpath to the north-west that leads to the Avebury stone circle, or from the Kennet stream the other side of the Bath Road, she seems almost too small, almost a grassy knoll. A giant knoll, but still a knoll.



Walk the path towards Waden Hill, then climb until you can look across and down at her; not too far, or the crest of the hill begins to swallow her up. And what happens?

She grows into something gigantic.

Is it just me, or does she seem to be expanding, swelling, like a speeded-up pregnancy?

And I'm not even persuaded by the Great Goddess theory, or no more than by all the other theories. Deep in the 1970s, I read Michael Dames's book *The Silbury Treasure*, purchased in Watkins Books, the ambrosial esoteric bookshop in London's Cecil Court. I was seduced. The author gives the impression that he has unlocked something, doing it so well and evocatively that even if you doubt his explanation, you want him to be right. His diagrams, evoking parallel images of ancient 'Venus' figurines, of a great all-seeing eyeball or a pregnant belly, make it seem blatantly obvious that Silbury is a massive sculpture of Mother Earth nearly at her term, a gigantic harvest hill gouged and heaped from the low-lying terrain as an honouring of the soil's natural fertility. As I had always seen Silbury as 'her', the seduction was swift.

The bulk of Dames's theory rests on the fragile wings of a certain species of flying ant, discovered in the turf base during the most famous of the several archaeological probings (Professor Richard Atkinson's in 1968), and suggesting that the project began in early August at harvest-time, when such ants briefly grow wings. Except that the flying ants were not found: or at least, no report or physical evidence of their remains has been produced.

A shame. We may live, as Lorca put it, 'mired in numbers and laws,/In mindless games, in fruitless labours', but something about Silbury's painstaking, back-breaking labour

feels full of fruitfulness, even though we have no idea what that was. For Charles Knight, writing in the highly utilitarian 1840s, when Avebury and Stonehenge were ‘Druidic temples’, she had to be a kind of Albert Memorial:

The great earthworks of a modern railway are the results of labour, assisted by science and stimulated by capital, employing itself for profit; but Silbury Hill in all likelihood was a gigantic effort of what has been called hero-worship, a labour for no direct or immediate utility, but to preserve the memory of some ruler, or lawgiver, or warrior, or priest.

The accompanying etching in *Old England* shows a thoroughly utilitarian haywain creaking along the rutted Bath Road in front of the Hill. The haywain itself now belongs to another world, of course: ‘Old England’ indeed.



Silbury’s stillness is like the exaggerated stillness after much noise. Her lost noise, and our present din. We flicker and zip around her, like a speeded-up film that squashes years into minutes, and she stays quietly the same, giving nothing away.

Not that we haven't tried to change her: after weeks of heavy rain, a large hole appeared on her summit at the beginning of our own millennium, the vestige of a vertical shaft dug by miners supervised by Edward Drax in 1776 – the first of three major insults to her body over the next 200 years: in the mid-nineteenth century Dean Merewether dug in from the side and Richard Atkinson followed suit in the 1960s, filmed by the BBC. Each was a bid to reveal her mystery, to give bone to the local legend of King Sil lying in his gold at her core, still mounted. Given the cumulative effect of these tunnels and voids, she was considered in danger of collapse. I thought: if Silbury collapses, so will I. Psychologically, anyway. This is probably unhealthy. To be so dependent for your sanity on a great prehistoric lump of chalky earth!

The hill did not collapse: by May 2008, the hole and tunnels had been filled in with 500,000 pounds of crushed and liquified chalk, sealing her for good, and Silbury now looks better than ever, partly because no one is allowed to climb her, let alone to dig into her. The scars of many puffing visitors are pretty well healed: there is no longer a chalk-white, foot-battered walk-up. Our contemplation of her is not spoilt by little figures in blotches of bright rainwear or solecisms of summery shorts labouring up the slopes, their kids squealing distantly, their dogs doing that idiotic barking thing, the final summit and the sky measuring them off into tiny iron filings moved about by some giant magnet pressing beneath. She is no longer a tripper's plaything, scattered with sweet wrappers and cellophane, a free place to roll down if you don't mind the sheep shit. She is sacred again. She is not to be approached.