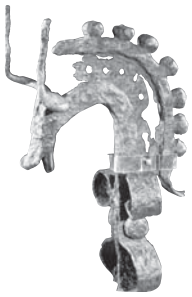

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The Construction of Prehistoric Britain

Joshua Pollard

Introduction

The papers in this volume cover ca. 35,000 years of prehistory within the British Isles, from the first appearance of anatomically modern humans at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic to the early centuries of the first millennium A.D. when Britain and Ireland were brought within the orbit of Roman and early post-Roman Europe, and so "history" of sorts. The volume is not intended as a comprehensive overview of British prehistory, nor is it organised along the lines of a linear or period-based narrative (such accounts are available, notably Hunter and Ralston 1999; Bradley 2007). Rather, it provides a theoretically informed review of current research set within a thematic format. These themes include: the interpretation of major points of social, ideological and economic transition (during the Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic–Neolithic and the Middle Bronze Age); landscape and inhabitation; domestic and ceremonial architecture; foodways; productive technology; exchange; identity; and mortuary practice.

While intended as a stand-alone work, the volume was conceived alongside that on *Prehistoric Europe*, edited by Andrew Jones for this series. A broad attempt was made to match themes, while at the same time acknowledging how differences in theoretical position (see Hodder 1991), fieldwork traditions and the character of the record between Britain, Ireland and Continental Europe have shaped the ways in which prehistory has been studied and written in these different regions.

The geographic scope of this volume covers the modern countries of England, Scotland and Wales, with reference to Ireland (both the Northern counties that form part of the United Kingdom and the Republic) (figs. 1.1 and 1.2). This does not constitute a large area: at 244,820 sq. km the United Kingdom is slightly smaller than the state of Michigan, for example. A volume on prehistoric Britain might appear myopic by comparison with others in this series which have dealt with archaeology on a continental or equivalent scale (e.g., Africa: Stahl 2005; Oceania:

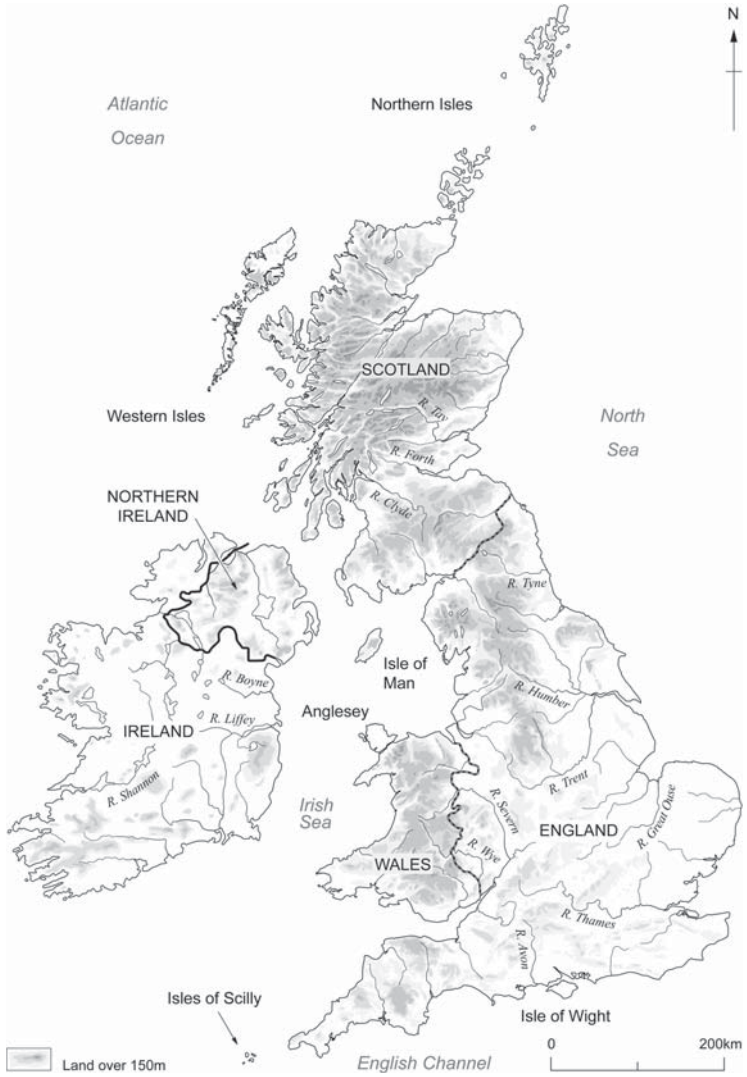

Figure 1.1 Map of Britain and Ireland, showing major topography, countries, major island groups, seas and principal rivers. Drawing by Anne Leaver.

Lilley 2006). Nonetheless, there are good reasons for the inclusion of this volume within the *Global Archaeology* series, not least the quantity of archaeological information available, the strength of research traditions and the quality of that work, which make aspects of British prehistory of more than regional or national interest. In comparison with many areas of the world, there exists a level of detail of knowledge relating to the prehistoric sequence that is often difficult to match; a consequence of a long and sometimes intense history of investigation which goes back

Figure 1.2 Map of Britain and Ireland, showing principal regions mentioned in the text. Drawing by Anne Leaver.

to the antiquarianism of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and the work of key figures such as William Camden, John Aubrey and William Stukeley (Piggott 1989). Over the last half century extensive use has been made of British prehistoric material in the exposition of new theoretical positions, within influential early functionalist (Clark 1952), processual (Clarke 1972; Renfrew 1973a) and post-processual (Hodder 1982; Barrett 1994; Tilley 1994) archaeologies. British post-Palaeolithic prehistory especially has become a testing ground of much Anglo-American theory.

Currently, there are over 90 full-time members of academic staff within United Kingdom universities alone that are actively engaged in research on British prehistory. When those in fixed-time academic posts, research students and archaeological professionals within the commercial sector are included, the number of active researchers within the field numbers several hundred. This is a healthy community and one that ensures reproduction of interest for the immediate future at least. Public interest in prehistory is also high, aided by media exposure and the production of high-selling popular works that play, if sometimes uncomfortably, upon themes of long-standing identity whose "heritage" can be traced back to prehistory (e.g., Pryor 2003; Miles 2005).

Time and Space

Sections of this chapter were prepared while in the Western Isles of Scotland and at Avebury, in Wiltshire, southern England. These are two very different landscapes, set several hundred kilometres apart, and their archaeology can be used to illustrate elements of theme and diversity that are explored in many of the volume's chapters.

The massive complex of megalithic, timber and earthen monuments at Avebury was one of several foci on the chalklands of southern England for community-level ceremonial activity during the fourth and third millennia B.C. The rolling landscape around Avebury is dotted with visible archaeological sites, many of prehistoric date (Pollard and Reynolds 2002). The landscape and its archaeology provide an archetypal image of Wessex, a region without any current political status, but defined to varying degree by Thomas Hardy's literary creation (appearing in his *Far from the Madding Crowd* of 1874), which was in turn inspired by a real Middle Saxon kingdom that extended across much of central southern and south-western England during the sixth to ninth centuries A.D. (Yorke 1995). The "archaeological Wessex" refers in large part to the chalk areas of the counties of Wiltshire, Dorset and Hampshire. A manifestation of archaeological landscape romanticism (Johnson 2007), the Wessex label was first used in O. G. S. Crawford and Alexander Keiller's 1928 *Wessex from the Air* (a publication detailing the results of pioneer aerial survey), and gained common currency during the 1930s, finding a lasting expression in Stuart Piggott's formulation of an Early Bronze Age "Wessex Culture" in 1938 (Piggott 1938). The setting of the great Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monument complexes of Avebury, Stonehenge, Knowlton and Dorchester, extensive later prehistoric agrarian landscapes and the spectacular and "iconic" Iron Age hill forts of Maiden Castle, Hambledon and Hod Hill in Dorset, the Wessex region, has attracted considerable archaeological attention since the seventeenth century. Such sustained research has been engendered by the highly visible and well-preserved nature of the region's archaeology, an early pulse of interest that established its position in works of synthesis, and the area's proximity to researchers and institutions in the urban centres of Oxford, London and Southampton. No doubt the area also carried a special status at certain points in prehistory, as evidenced by the scale

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of monument-building projects and fluctuating long-distance networks of exchange and alliance that, in one of the most audacious instances of lithic movement, facilitated the transport of bluestone megaliths over 250 km from the Preseli Hills of south-west Wales to Salisbury Plain and Stonehenge. Until recently Wessex has dominated accounts of British prehistory, even to the extent of being perceived as a model against which other regions are judged. But, as numerous regional and wider-scale studies show (e.g., Cooney and Grogan 1999; Harding and Johnston 2000; Lynch et al. 2000; Bradley 2007), the prehistory of this region never was "the norm", and the archaeological Wessex is as much that "partly real, partly dream-country" (Hardy 1902:vi) that characterised Hardy's literary landscape.

Facing the North Atlantic Ocean, and incorporating some dramatic mountain topography, the Western Isles can at first sight present the visitor with an image of a hard environment, cultural isolation, and marginality. Such a view is occasionally present within the popular imagination, especially that of the metropolitan centres of the United Kingdom, in which the Western Isles are perceived as remote and socially, politically, and economically peripheral. In the late 1930s the Sussex archaeologist E. C. Curwen (1938) thought the Hebrides to be a cultural backwater in which Iron Age lifestyles persisted. In fact, the image of marginality and cultural fossilisation is erroneous and coloured by a post-medieval economic downturn brought about by changes in tenure and the levy of heavy rents following the collapse of the Scottish chiefdom system (Parker Pearson 2004). The islands' prehistory and early history tells a different story, one of highly successful subsistence (especially along the machair sands of the west coast of South Uist and Harris), occasionally dense and long-lived settlement, and Atlantic connections stretching north to the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, and beyond, and south into the Irish Sea (Armit 1996; Parker Pearson et al. 2004). There exists a rich prehistoric record within the Western Isles that includes the important and well-known complex of Neolithic stone circles at Callanish and the Iron Age broch (a tower-like, stone-built settlement) of Dun Carloway, both on Lewis. The Callanish complex is one of a number of ceremonial centres of late fourth and third millennia B.C. date that occur throughout Britain and Ireland, while Dun Carloway belongs to a distinctive tradition of monumental "Atlantic roundhouses" particular to western and northern Scotland and the Isles. Embodied in these sites is an illustration of our knowledge that there are certain periods in the prehistory of the Western Isles when events appear to reflect wider patterns of practice and change, and other points when a distinctly regional identity came to the fore.

Wherever you stand on the Western Isles the sea is never far away. You are conscious of the importance of the ocean as a means of livelihood, of the maritime connections that it affords and of the way in which coastal lives and the practice of "sea-craft" construct an identity that can transcend particular geographic localities. In a recent publication Barry Cunliffe (2001) has sought to define a *longue durée* perspective on the peoples of the Atlantic façade which places Britain within an "Atlantic zone" that includes Iberia, Brittany and the western North Sea. The flows of ideas and processes of long-distance exchange and alliance that he identifies create a prehistory of expansive networks, one that counters a certain insularity Y2

prevalent in British prehistoric studies over recent decades, itself a reaction against an earlier over-reliance on invasion or migration as a means of explaining cultural change (Clark 1966). As papers in this volume illustrate, writing prehistory is about tacking between scales: delineating "big processes" – early human colonisation, the spread of the Neolithic, the impact of the emergence of state societies in the Mediterranean world during the first millennium B.C. and so forth – yet seeking to interpret these through the local, lived conditions of routine life, through individual and group agency, and the structures and resources that characterised particular places at particular moments in time. As such, there can be as many and varied narratives of British prehistory as there were events, understandings and responses to the projects of living.

The prehistoric sequence: a brief overview

The earliest hominid occupation of Britain dates to ca. 700,000 B.P. and is associated with groups of *Homo heidelbergensis*, as represented by the fossil find from Boxgrove, Sussex (Roberts et al. 1994). Subsequent human presence during the Palaeolithic was periodic, being tied to phases of climatic amelioration. As Paul Pettitt details (see chapter 2), forays by groups of *Homo sapiens* into Britain during the early part of the Upper Palaeolithic may have been of short duration and executed by small groups; but from the very end of the terminal Upper Palaeolithic/Younger Dryas onwards human presence looks to have been continuous. Evidence for Holocene (Mesolithic) hunter-gatherers is much more extensive, with the colonisation of new regions such as Ireland and northern and western Scotland by around the eighth millennium B.C. Steady population rise may be inferred from the incidence of dated sites and material culture (Smith 1992a). The signature of Mesolithic sites varies, from small scatters of lithics reflecting hunting forays or episodes of re-tooling to dense concentrations of material indicative of group aggregation and repeated return over many years – true "persistent places". Perhaps a product of greater diversity in subsistence strategies, but also in lifestyles and identities, shell middens appear during the later Mesolithic on coastal areas of western Britain, as they do in southern Scandinavia and the Atlantic coasts of Brittany and Iberia. This period sees the first evidence for monumental expression in the British Isles, both with shell midden accumulation ("incidental monuments") and the construction of large post settings such as the eighth millennium B.C. examples at Stonehenge and Hambledon Hill in southern England (Allen and Gardiner 2002).

Set against the available data is the knowledge that many important sites lie submerged under the present North Sea, a region that Bryony Coles has referred to as "Doggerland" (Coles 1998). Early Holocene sea-level rise progressively encroached upon the lowland areas of the North Sea basin and English Channel where human activity was likely to have been most intensive during the earlier part of the Mesolithic, the present land masses of Britain and Ireland effectively representing upland regions during this time. Preservation of many of the submerged

sites and land surfaces of this period is known to be good because of anaerobic conditions (Fleming 2004), and future investigation of these has the potential to transform our knowledge of the north-west European Mesolithic. The final separation of Britain from Continental Europe – the severing of the erroneously termed "land bridge" – is estimated at ca. 7500 B.C., though it could have occurred as much as 2,000 years later (Coles 1998:67).

Major changes in the human story of Britain and Ireland took place around 4000 B.C. with the appearance of new material technologies such as ceramics and ground stone tools (although the latter are known from Late Mesolithic contexts in Ireland and Wales), and a shift from a hunter-fisher-gatherer subsistence base to one reliant to varying degrees on domesticated livestock and cereal cultivation. The Neolithic was, however, more than just a shift in economy and material technology, since these practices were inextricably implicated in wider transformations in personhood, social relations and ideology (see Thomas, chapter 3). Components of the British and Irish Neolithic have their origins ultimately in that of central and south-east Europe (Whittle 1996), and indeed the Neolithic of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. However, while components of new lifestyles, and certainly livestock and cereals, have to represent Continental "imports", population movement at the transition need not have been great and indigenous uptake perhaps best explains the distinctive features of the British and Irish Neolithic.

By the second quarter of the fourth millennium B.C. traditions of building megalithic, timber and earthen monuments were well established (see Cummings, chapter 6). Their creation served to mark time and place, honour ancestors and other spiritual agencies, provide contexts in which dispersed groups could come together and so generate and reproduce social networks, while some acted as foci for the deposition of the remains of the dead (see Jones, chapter 8). By the late fourth to third millennia B.C. insular forms of public monument – henges, stone and timber circles and large mounds – were being constructed on a scale previously unseen, many as elements within larger ceremonial centres (e.g., the Boyne valley, west Mainland on Orkney and around Stonehenge). By contrast with monumental architecture, the energies and resources invested in building houses and settlements was in many regions surprisingly slight, perhaps because mobility remained a feature of the lives of most communities. It is only from the second millennium B.C. onwards that "domestic" architecture as such becomes more visible in the archaeological record (see Brück, chapter 11), usually in the form of settlements of roundhouses. Rare in Continental Europe, the roundhouse was a persistent architectural form in Britain and Ireland, its longevity maintained perhaps because of the way in which, in varied contexts, it materialised key cosmological values and facilitated the reproduction of social order.

Alongside an emerging emphasis on the house during the early to mid second millennium B.C. were transformations in land tenure and agricultural practice (see Field, Johnston and Mulville: chapters 9, 12 and 10 respectively) that left their signature in new landscapes of field systems and major land boundaries. For Barrett (1994:147), the creation of agricultural landscapes during this period marks the development of a "place-bound sense of *being*", in which the communal identities Y2

expressed by earlier public monuments gave way to more localised senses of belonging based around the household and settlement. However, by the Middle Iron Age those settlements could themselves be substantial, particularly in the case of the developed hill forts of southern Britain. Like the henge monuments of the later Neolithic, hill forts – whether permanently or intermittently occupied – gave definition to new forms of communal identity within landscapes that were otherwise dominated by small farmstead-scale settlements. Many sites of the first millennium B.C. were defined by earthwork, stone wall or palisade enclosures. The purpose of enclosure was not always defence or containment, it being a multivalent technology that was also employed to provide a largely symbolic barrier, or as a means to define a sense of household or corporate identity (Bowden and McOmish 1987).

The end of prehistory in England, southern Scotland and Wales is marked by Roman political and military takeover during the first century A.D. In Ireland and Highland and Island Scotland the break between prehistory and proto-history occurs in the middle centuries of the first millennium A.D. with the coming of Christianity and assimilation into the politics and networks of Late Antique and early medieval Europe. In fact, if the absence or presence of documentary record is taken to differentiate prehistoric from historic circumstance, then for the Atlantic island of St Kilda, 60 km west of Harris, prehistory effectively ended in the mid sixteenth century (Fleming 1995). Even within those areas brought under Roman rule, the transition was complex and varied. Certain practices continued, such as the use of roundhouses and "Iron Age" farmstead settlements in the militarised zone of northern England and southern Scotland – active cultural defiance, perhaps. Even in the heavily Romanised areas of southern and eastern England this was a time of cultural hybridisation rather than outright replacement by a dominant donor, and the history of change was long and complex. In response to the expanding sphere of influence of Rome, those communities closest to France and the Low Countries were already beginning to restyle themselves from the first century B.C. Coinage, Roman-style cremation burial, Roman and Gaulish luxury imports, new consumption habits, proto-urbanism and perhaps even literacy marked the last decades of prehistory in certain regions of southern England.

If general and long-lived themes are to be identified in British prehistory they would include the curious scarcity of representational art; monumentality of various forms (including in settlement architecture); traditions of votive deposition within rivers, lakes and other natural places; and funerary traditions that with a few exceptions (e.g., during the earlier Neolithic and Early–Middle Bronze Age) left little visible archaeological signature.

Periodisation and the division of research

Throughout this volume the classic period divisions of Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age are employed (table 1.1). A legacy of the "Three Age" system formulated during the nineteenth century, these period labels are by no means unproblematic. Even from an empirical point of view, they have

Table 1.1 A simplified, period-based chronology for prehistoric Britain from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Iron Age*

Upper Palaeolithic	ca. 40,000/35,000–10,000 B.C.
Mesolithic	ca. 10,000–4000 B.C.
Earlier Neolithic	ca. 4000–3000 B.C.
Later Neolithic	ca. 3000–2200 B.C.
Early Bronze Age	ca. 2200–1500 B.C.
Middle Bronze Age	ca. 1500–1200 B.C.
Late Bronze Age	ca. 1200–800 B.C.
Earlier Iron Age	ca. 800–400 B.C.
Later Iron Age	ca. 400 B.C.–A.D. 43/ca. A.D. 500

*The end of the Iron Age in southern Britain is defined by the Roman conquest, but in those regions beyond Roman subjugation (i.e., Scotland and Ireland) it is taken as the middle of the first millennium A.D.

taken on a life that has dislocated them from the technological stages they were supposed to define. Thus, the start of the Iron Age in Britain is normally placed around 800 B.C., yet traces of ironworking – both smelting and forging – are known from ninth- and even tenth-millennia B.C. contexts, as at Hartshill Copse, Berkshire (Collard et al. 2006); and copper axes were in circulation during the later Neolithic (the end of the "Stone Age").

Periodisation should at best be a heuristic device, creating temporal blocks within which to hang the study of practices and processes – a categorisation that makes manageable the study of large and complex data. At worst, it is insidiously linked to models of social "progress" and unilinear evolution (Lucas 2005:50–1). It can also promote "layered thinking" in which homogeneity is arbitrarily defined within periods (e.g., Bronze Age economies) and differences sought between them, generating discrete blocks of time within which practices and styles of material culture are seen as self-contained. This in turn has led to a situation where different theoretical approaches are felt to be appropriate to different periods. The most obvious example is provided by the British Mesolithic and Neolithic. Until recently, the former was studied through functionalist perspectives which foregrounded the subsistence economy, rational foraging, adaptations to fluctuating environments and a universal human condition (e.g., Mithen 1990; Smith 1992b). By contrast, scholars engaged in studying the Neolithic adopted broadly post-processual agendas that stressed social relations and reproduction, agency, symbolism and historical contingency (e.g., Barrett 1994; Thomas 1999). Such was the disparity in theoretical approach to these contiguous periods that Richard Bradley was to write memorably that it almost seemed as though "successful [Neolithic] farmers have social relations with one another, while [Mesolithic] hunter-gatherers have ecological relations with hazelnuts" (Bradley 1984:11). That theoretical division is now being progressively eroded (see Conneller and Warren 2006; McFadyen, chapter 5).

Despite the problems they might induce, period divisions continue to be used, as reflected in the titles of recent, and theoretically-informed, volumes on the

Mesolithic (e.g., Conneller and Warren 2006), Neolithic (e.g., Thomas 1999; Noble 2006), Bronze Age (e.g., Brück 2001) and Iron Age (e.g., Haselgrove and Moore 2007; Haselgrove and Pope 2007). The majority of prehistorians recognise the somewhat arbitrary nature of periodisation and the issues raised above, therefore the retention of these time categories may have more to do with the desire on the part of scholars for intra-disciplinary identity and the creation of communities or "colleges" of researchers. These are maintained and reproduced by fora with annual meetings such as the Pal-Meso Discussion Group, Neolithic Studies Group, Bronze Age Forum and Iron Age Research Student Seminar.

A recent focus on memory, material biography and responses to the physical remains of the past in prehistory (e.g., Marshall and Gosden 1999; Bradley 2002; Jones 2007) has gone some way to countering the legacy of periodisation and acknowledging the multi-temporality of the archaeological record (Lucas 2005:56–59). John Barrett (1999) and Chris Gosden and Gary Lock (1998), for example, have talked about how the construction of the landscapes of Iron Age southern England drew upon the resources of an earlier prehistoric past in which relict monuments such as Early Bronze Age round barrows became mythical features that were appropriated to provide a source of legitimacy for new social orders. Adopting a similar perspective, Niall Sharples (2006) has argued that, within the context of an understanding of deep history of landscape occupancy, the remains of Neolithic chambered tombs on Orkney provided a model of permanence that was necessary to create the conditions in which long-lived Iron Age broch settlements could develop. Of course, being able to recognise how the physical legacy of the past structured the conditions of later inhabitation is the key to any multi-temporal archaeology, and in this respect impetus has come from the results of recent large-scale excavation projects in which the relationships between features and practices of different dates can be understood (Lucas 2005:40–3). A good example is provided by Framework Archaeology's (2006) work at Heathrow Airport's Terminal 5, to the west of London. The work was guided at the outset by a focus on the "archaeology of inhabitation" – understanding how knowledgeable human agents worked within the particular political and social conditions of their time and the physical legacy and resources of the landscape as produced by present and past generations. The extent to which these multi-temporal perspectives can be applied to broad-brush accounts of prehistory as opposed to the interpretation of individual landscapes or features (e.g., the tombs and brochs of Orkney) remains to be established, but their potential to erode the legacy of periodisation is already being felt.

The Practice of Prehistory

British prehistory is a construct of 400 years of research; a process that has always represented an interplay of developing fieldwork traditions and theoretical approaches, influenced by national and regional identities, academic structures, legislation, funding/sponsorship and the changing academic popularity of certain

research themes. There exists a fortunate legacy in the long history of research, the early creation of national and county archaeological societies, a strong tradition of university-based work, amateur involvement (occasionally of an exceptionally high standard: e.g., Green 2000) and, in the post-Second World War period, state intervention in the face of rescue demands.

The objects of study themselves – the physical remains of prehistoric sites, landscapes and material culture – have had their own role in this process, since their insistent presence demanded explanation and positioning within narratives of human occupancy of the British Isles. It was after all the remains of megalithic tombs and stone circles and earthwork monuments such as barrows, hill forts and henges that first attracted antiquarian attention and provided the possibilities for creating first national, then ethnic, narratives of early history separate from those offered by the writings of classical authors (Piggott 1989; Trigger 1989).

It was during the second half of the nineteenth century that prehistory as a subject of enquiry was given definition, chronological framework and theoretical focus. The Scandinavian "Three Age" system was applied to British material in Daniel Wilson's *The Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (1851), a work in which the term "prehistoric" was first coined (Chippindale 1988). Eight years later the authoritative acknowledgement by members of the Geological Society of London of the great age of stone tools found with the bones of extinct mammals in the Somme gravels at Abbeville, France finally provided recognition of "deep antiquity" to human presence in Europe. These and other developments (e.g., the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, also in 1859) marked the critical break from earlier reliance on biblical and classical texts as sources of information on pre-Roman Britain (Trigger 1989:93–94). Cultural evolution and comparative ethnography initially provided an interpretive framework, as in John Lubbock's influential *Prehistoric Times* (1865 and subsequent editions).

If the first legislation for the protection of ancient monuments in Britain (the 1882 Act for the Better Protection of Ancient Monuments) is treated as an index of archaeological significance at the time, then the clear majority of prehistoric over later sites on that list is telling. A bias towards certain types of monument, especially megaliths and hill forts, that were seen as representative of an early British past is also discernible (the first list includes Stonehenge, South Cadbury, Navan, Tara, Pentre Ifan, the Clava cairns and the stone circles of Brodgar and Stenness). Within the realms of national politics and identity, prehistory had come to matter. In the most explicit instance of geopolitical influence, it was national pride stirred by a period of increasing imperial tension that underpinned a willingness by the academic community to accept the authenticity of the infamous Piltdown skull, "discovered" in 1912. It would take over three decades for the forgery of this apparently archaic hominid to be revealed (Weiner 1955). Parity with Continental Europe and discoveries being made there was of concern. As an example, work undertaken between 1892 and 1907 on the Iron Age "lake village" at Glastonbury was heavily influenced by nineteenth-century European research on lake dwellings and an expectation that similar lacustrine settlements had to exist in Britain (Bullied and Gray 1911:1–5).

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The middle decades of the twentieth century witnessed a "modernisation" of prehistory through improved fieldwork and scientific methods, interdisciplinary collaboration, critical synthesis, its inclusion in university curricula and, in 1935, the transformation of the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia into the Prehistoric Society. The Second World War and its aftermath had a notable impact on the practice of archaeology. Within a climate of "new world" social responsibility, the state began to take a more active role in funding rescue excavations; a process that had in fact begun during the war in response to the destruction of archaeological sites during the construction of airfields (Grimes 1960). In the form of agricultural intensification, housing and road-building, and aggregate extraction, the scale of post-war development took its toll on Britain's prehistory, even on those sites offered statutory protection as Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs). A 1964 survey of the archaeology of Wiltshire, for instance, showed that 250 of 640 SAMs existing 10 years previously had been badly damaged or destroyed, largely through agricultural activity (Barker 1974:29). Many of those sites were Bronze Age round barrows. However, successful lobbying by the archaeological community brought about a rapid increase in central government funding for rescue archaeology during the early 1970s and led to the establishment of county Sites and Monuments Records, and the creation of county or regional units and county archaeological officers.

Ironically, it was the building of motorways in the 1960s and 1970s, especially rescue work on the M4 and M5 motorways, that alerted archaeologists to the density of prehistoric and later archaeology across the countryside (Fowler 1974); while work in advance of aggregate extraction on the gravels of lowland England and Scotland has seen a productive encounter with areas previously subject to little investigation, resulting in the discovery of different kinds of prehistoric landscape and different histories of activity to those represented in upland regions (Bradley 1992). The pessimistic prophecies of the early 1970s that, with ongoing development and destruction, there might only be "a few dozen sites left by A.D. 2000" (Rahtz 1974:1) have been firmly replaced by an understanding of the ubiquity of archaeological traces (while, of course, recognising what has gone).

While government funding of archaeology in England especially has significantly decreased since 1990, the requirement for developers to fund pre-construction archaeological investigation as outlined in Planning Policy Guideline 16 (PPG16) has led to a dramatic increase in the scale of excavation. This is seen most dramatically in gravel-rich and economically "super-charged" regions such as the Thames Valley and East Midlands where it has been possible for the first time to undertake excavation work on a true landscape scale. With publication, the results of this are slowly being felt, and projects such as those in the Middle Thames at Eton and Yarnton (Allen et al. 2004) and in the Great Ouse Valley/Fen-edge (Dawson 2000) are set to have a profound impact on future accounts of British prehistory. Without the same level of resource, university-led research excavations cannot compete with the scale of developer-funded work undertaken by commercial archaeological units. This might at first seem to exacerbate the gulf between what Richard Bradley has termed the "two cultures" – academic archaeologists on the one hand and

professional field archaeologists on the other – but with growing links between the two, and a greater commitment to research rather than simply data recovery by contracting units, the opposite is true (Bradley 2006).

Current and Future Directions

A combination of willing engagement with archaeological theory and the momentum provided by active traditions of fieldwork have made British prehistory a vibrant and dynamic area of research. Over the last two decades British prehistorians have been at the forefront of interpretive developments in Anglo-American archaeology, creating a distinctive social archaeology that has drawn upon a variety of theoretical positions. Underpinning many of these are concerns with agency and a recognition of the active role played by material culture in structuring social relations and change. There currently exists a strong interest in exploring dimensions of social memory, material agency, materiality, cognition, the body and personhood; in critically reworking dualist paradigms such as the nature–culture distinction; and in exploring the dimensions of landscape encounter through phenomenological studies. Far from operating in abstraction, such an engagement with theory has been used to create challenging and exciting accounts of social life, as essays in this volume show.

To predict the future would be a foolhardy exercise, especially since wider social and political events and processes, new discoveries and analytical techniques can all impact on the directions that research might take. This acknowledged, certain currents of change are discernible. One is apparent in recent studies that have highlighted the scale of evidence for interpersonal violence during the Neolithic (Schulting and Wysocki 2005) and later periods (Mercer 2006). These illuminate the very real tensions that accompanied the transactions of life during prehistory, and stand in contrast to the rather comfortable images of prehistoric social life generated by many recent narratives of inhabitation and routine.

The second current takes the guise of a quiet scientific revolution represented by the impact of refined radiocarbon chronologies, and biochemical and geochemical analyses. The results of this work have been many and varied, and often unexpected. Thus, lipid analysis of pottery vessels has shown conclusively that dairying was a major component of farming practices in the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age of southern Britain (Copley et al. 2003; 2005); stable isotope analysis of human skeletal material has delineated changing consumption practices, including a dramatic shift away from marine resources at the onset of the Neolithic (see Schulting, chapter 4); and strontium and oxygen isotope signatures have provided evidence of regional and much longer distance lifetime movements of individuals (Montgomery et al. 2000). With reference to the latter, isotope analyses of mid- to late-third-millennium B.C. Beaker burials from the Stonehenge region have shown that certain individuals remained relatively sedentary during their lives, while others originated from areas with radiogenic geology such as Wales or Brittany, and another – the "Amesbury Archer" – came perhaps from central Europe (Fitzpatrick

2003; Evans et al. 2006). Knowing the possible extent of long-distance, lifetime movement during this important period, which is coeval with the widespread adoption of metallurgy, raises interesting issues about the transmission of geographical knowledge, the reception of "outsiders" and the introduction of new practices.

The first true "radiocarbon revolution" could be said to have come with calibration (Renfrew 1973b). This finally put paid to models of hyper-diffusion for phenomena such as megalithic tombs, demonstrating indigenous development within several areas from the Mediterranean to western Britain. Another is being heralded with the application of large-scale dating programmes on Neolithic long barrows, long cairns and causewayed enclosures in southern England, in which Bayesian statistical modelling is employed to interpret radiocarbon dates (Whittle and Bayliss 2007; Whittle et al. 2007). The results are much finer-grained chronologies, and so more refined histories, than we have been used to in British prehistoric studies: half centuries or generations suddenly become definable, and so too lived timescales rather than coarse periodisation.

Applied to individual contexts, even the remains of specific individuals, all of these techniques provide a level of resolution and detail on prehistoric lives that was previously unobtainable. Their development and application is timely, inasmuch as it coincides with current interpretive interests in agency, memory and personhood; with the specifics of routine and lived experience rather than abstracted process. Here science and archaeological theory come together to provide a sense of what life was like at certain times for certain people living within social and symbolic conditions that may be beyond immediate ethnographic analogy. The challenge of British prehistory is to further develop our knowledge of those different worlds.

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