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THE PREHISTORY OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND

This book presents a new interpretation of the prehistory of Britain and Ireland and is the first in many years to consider both regions together. Richard Bradley begins the account when Britain became separated from the Continent and ends with the integration of the two islands into a wider European network shortly before the Roman Conquest. Using both textual and material documentation, he also distils the results of recent fieldwork, much of it funded by commercial developers, which has greatly expanded the quantity and variety of excavated evidence. Bradley also compares the archaeology of both islands and discusses the varied ways in which their inhabitants lived their lives. Intended as an interpretation rather than a manual, this book is primarily concerned with settlements, landscapes, monuments, and the evidence for regional variation. All of these topics are discussed in relation to contemporary approaches to prehistory. Treating Britain and Ireland on equal terms, Bradley also aims to avoid emphasizing a few well-researched areas, an approach that characterized previous accounts of this subject.

Richard Bradley is a professor of archaeology at the University of Reading. A Fellow of the British Academy and recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Lund, he is the author of *Ritual and Domestic Life in Prehistoric Europe*, *The Past in Prehistoric Societies: An Archaeology of Natural Places*, *The Significance of Monuments*, and *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe*.

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For Tim Phillips and Dave Yates, without whom this book could not have been written.

“At a very early period, probably soon after the general dispersal of mankind, and division of the earth among the Noachidae (an event which took place . . . about 2100 years before the Christian area) the descendants of Gomer, the grandson of Noah, passed the Thracian Bosphorus, and gradually spread over the various countries of Europe, still proceeding onwards towards the west, until some of their families reached the coast of Germany and Gaul, and from thence crossed the sea into Britain.

These Nomadic wanderers, the Aborigines of Europe, went under the general denomination of Cimmerians or Celts; and as their progress was uninterrupted, except by natural causes, – for they had no hostile armies to encounter, but merely waste and uncultivated countries to traverse, which some remained to colonise, whilst others, as the population increased, ventured forward, – we may reasonably infer, that within the space of four or five centuries from the first migration of the Gomerites out of Asia into Europe, or about sixteen hundred years before the birth of Christ, the British Isles were inhabited.”

Matthew Holbeche Bloxam (c. 1840), *Fragmenta Sepulchralia*

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PREFACE

I had been teaching British and Irish prehistory for a long time when I realised that my courses were out of date. The same was true of the museum displays concerned with the prehistoric period and even of the policies enacted by government agencies. Why was this?

On reflection, the reason has become clear. There has been a massive increase in the amount of archaeological fieldwork that has taken place as part of the planning process, and this happened at a time when universities and museums were playing a smaller role in practical archaeology. It would be all too easy to talk of a schism in the discipline, but it is certainly true that the flow of information has diminished. That is hardly surprising because the growth of developer-funded archaeology has put new pressures on those undertaking the work. There have always been problems with excavators who do not publish their results, but in the commercial climate that now prevails, the production of academic papers is often delayed or abandoned. That is especially unfortunate because the number and scale of field projects is undoubtedly increasing.

I suppose that there have been two ways of reacting to this state of affairs. One is to insist that any fieldwork conducted under these conditions must have its limitations. It must have been carried out hurriedly and without sufficient background research. I have heard this complaint from many academics, and in my view it is unjustified. Whatever the merits of commercial archaeology, the amount of good quality fieldwork is on the increase and more funds are available for more detailed analysis of the results than had been available before. The best field units may well be carrying out better quality research than some of the staff in universities. Work is now being undertaken on an unprecedented scale and often in regions where little had been attempted before. The problem is not one of professional competence but of information, for the results of so much activity have undermined received wisdom about the past.

Another way of thinking about the situation is to recognise that the expansion of developer-funded archaeology has also been liberating for prehistorians. It has not been based on the old orthodoxies but on the requirements of the

planning process, with the result that unfamiliar kinds of material have been recovered and new areas have been investigated that had been neglected before. At last it may be possible to move beyond the small number of regions in which fieldwork had been concentrated for more than fifty years. And in the process it has become clear how very limited accounts of insular prehistory have been. The material recovered over the last two decades provides some of the material for a new synthesis.

This book makes a first attempt to redress the balance, for it is the result of a prolonged period of research that has involved both the fieldworkers who have produced so much new information and the archives in which their reports are held. This has not been an easy task, and it has been possible only because I was able to employ an excellent research assistant, Tim Phillips. He amassed so much material that I sometimes despaired of bringing this book to completion. At the same time, Dave Yates was undertaking a thematic study of Bronze Age field systems, using many of the same sources. Between them they collected such important information that it is only right that they should be the dedicatees of this book. When entire organisations are still debating the right way forward, Tim and Dave have shown what can be achieved by single-mindedness, energy, efficiency, and sheer hard work.

Of course what follows is not just a synthesis of the results of developer-funded fieldwork, for the book also draws on the standard academic literature, on the results of research excavations and those of field surveys, and on studies of museum collections. What is new is that these traditional sources have been combined with less familiar material. I have attempted to distil what I learned from field archaeologists, but I have not quoted directly from small circulation documents that would not be available to the reader.

If this book has a distinctive approach, it is that it focuses on landscapes, monuments, and settlement patterns rather than artefacts and their chronology. That is not because such studies are unimportant. Rather, they have been conducted and published with such flair that they do not need to be duplicated here. The other novel feature – a somewhat surprising one – is that it treats Britain and Ireland on the same terms.

A word about the maps. As this book is intended for an international audience, there seems little point in locating the individual sites in relation to local government boundaries that are constantly changing. Instead each chapter includes a map indicating the specific regions mentioned in the text. Britain and Ireland have been divided into twenty-six areas, and the captions for those maps locate every site according to those divisions. The divisions themselves sometimes correspond to modern geographical units, but, more importantly, they divide the study area into sub-units of approximately the same size. They are intended simply as a guide to site location, for it would have been impossible to locate each place mentioned in the text without overloading the drawings.

Preface

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I have been exceptionally fortunate that so many people have helped this project on its way. The staff of regional archives have been very helpful and many of the field archaeologists whose work has influenced the outcome have been generous with their time, information, and ideas. I am only sorry that they are now so numerous that it is impossible to list them here. I am certain that the finished work is the better for their help and advice.

Yet there are also some acknowledgements that must be made individually. Aaron Watson is responsible for all the figure drawings and the great majority of the photographs; the others have been supplied by Francis Pryor, the Cambridge Archaeological Unit, the Highways Agency, and Oxford Archaeology. Different aspects of this research have been supported by my university in Reading, and by English Heritage and Historic Scotland. The whole project would have been impossible without a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which funded a research assistant for three years and underwrote the preparation of the illustrations.

Finally, some people have been especially helpful in the writing of this work, and they must be mentioned here. Chris Evans, Gill Hey, Carleton Jones, Alan Lupton, and Francis Pryor have allowed me to use their material in the illustrations. I have also been able to cite important material in advance of publication thanks to the kindness of Tim Allen, Alistair Barclay, Stefan Bergh, Kenny Brophy, Alex Brown, Murray Cook, Marion Dowd, Roy Entwistle, Mike Fulford, Paul Garwood, Frances Healy, Gill Hey, Elisa Guerra Doce, Carleton Jones, Hugo Landin-Whymark, David Mullin, Andrew Powell, Francis Pryor, and Helen Roche. Elise Fraser did invaluable work on the bibliography and Chloe Brown on the text. Alison Sheridan read the entire text in draft. She suggested many good ideas and has saved me from many mistakes. Every book is a collaboration between the person named on the cover and those who have helped it in its way, and this is no exception. To all of you – field archaeologists, academics, heritage managers, enthusiasts – I owe a debt of gratitude that this book is intended to repay.

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Frontispiece: The view of Ireland from the coast of southwest Scotland, emphasising the short sea crossing between them.