Plants and animals originally domesticated in the Near East arrived in Europe between 7000 and 4000 BC. Was the new technology introduced by migrants, or was it an “inside job”? How were the new species adapted to European conditions? What were the immediate and long-term consequences of the transition from hunting and gathering to farming? These central questions in the prehistory of Europe are discussed here by leading specialists, drawing on the latest scholarship in fields as diverse as genetics and Indo-European linguistics. Detailed studies document the differences between European regions, and fresh generalisations are also proposed and debated.

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Europe’s First Farmers

edited by

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Europe’s first farmers: an introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Southeastern Europe in the transition to agriculture in Europe: bridge, buffer, or mosaic</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Transition to agriculture in eastern Europe</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cardial pottery and the agricultural transition in Mediterranean Europe</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mesolithic and Neolithic interaction in southern France and northern Italy: new data and current hypotheses</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>From the Mesolithic to the Neolithic in the Iberian peninsula</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The origins of agriculture in south-central Europe</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How agriculture came to north-central Europe</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Getting back to basics: transitions to farming in Ireland and Britain</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The introduction of farming in northern Europe</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T. DOUGLAS PRICE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Lessons in the transition to agriculture</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T. DOUGLAS PRICE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bibliography  
Index
Illustrations

2.1 Europe and the Near East showing the dominant concept of the “agricultural colonization” of Europe from the Near East. 20
2.2 Southeast Europe: Early Neolithic cultures and sites. 24
2.3 Southeast Europe: Mesolithic sites and claimed Aceramic Neolithic sites against a background of Early Neolithic sites. 28
2.4 The Danube Gorges and important archaeological sites. 34
2.5 Chronological interpretations of the Danube Gorges sites and the Lepenski Vir stratigraphy. 36
2.6 Southeast Europe: two models for Mesolithic–Neolithic interaction, 6500–5500 bc (7500–6500 BC). 38–9
2.7 The Middle Danube basin: two models for Mesolithic–Neolithic interaction, 5500–4800 bc (6500–5700 BC). 40–1
2.8 The Middle Danube basin: two models for Mesolithic–Neolithic interaction, 4800–4400 bc (5700–5300 BC). 42–3
2.9 Southeast Europe: later Neolithic settlements, 4400–4000 bc (5300–4800 BC). 52
3.1 Major frontier zones, earliest Neolithic cultures, and the spread of farming in Europe. 63
3.2 Forager–farmer contacts expected during the earlier (“cooperative”) part of the availability phase. 66
3.3 Competitive relations between foragers and farmers, expected to increase toward the end of the availability phase. 67
3.4 Frontier zones, concentrations of Mesolithic settlement and the earliest Neolithic cultures in southeastern Europe. 71
3.5 The earliest Neolithic cultures in Moldavia and the Pontic region. 73
3.6 Radiocarbon calibrations obtained from Nikolskoye, Yasinovatka, Derievka I and Osipovka. 78
3.7 Chronological positioning of the radiocarbon-dated cemeteries of Nikolskoye, Yasinovatka, Derievka I and II, and Osipovka, and the settlement site of Derievka in relation to Telegin’s 1987 proposed chronological scheme for the Mariupol cemeteries. 80

3.8 Cultural chronology and the duration of agricultural transition in different regions of eastern Europe when viewed in terms of the availability model. 82

3.9 The transition to farming along the southern rim of the Baltic in terms of the three-stage availability model. 84

3.10 Forager–farmer interactions in the east Baltic. 86

4.1 The western Mediterranean showing sites discussed in the text. 95

4.2 Early Neolithic ceramic sequence from Grotte Gazel in southern France. 97

4.3 Maps of the Aude valley showing the transport vectors for Early Neolithic pottery originating from the Montagne Noir, the Têt valley and the Hérault valley. 108–9

4.4 An Early Neolithic vessel from Furninha, central Portugal, showing slightly uneven form and surface. 113

4.5 An Early Neolithic vessel from Grotte Gazel showing post-production drilled holes. 114

5.1 The location of the study area in the Mediterranean basin. 118

5.2 Location of Blade and Trapeze late Mesolithic sites and earliest Neolithic sites showing their distinct distributions. 121

5.3 Castelnovian blades, core, geometric microliths, and microburins from La Font-des-Pigeons rockshelter, Châteauneuf-les-Martigues, Bouches-du-Rhône, France. 124

5.4 Principal pottery styles from the Early Impressed Ware Neolithic in southern France. 132

5.5 Cardial blades and geometric microliths from Le Baratin, Courthézon, Vaucluse, France. 138

6.1 Location of sites mentioned in the text. 146

6.2 Calibrated radiocarbon chronology of early Neolithic and late Mesolithic sites known along the western façade of Atlantic Iberia. 154

6.3 Geographic and cultural distribution of archaeological sites in southern Portugal. 156

6.4 Cardial vessels from Valencia and from cave sites in the limestone massifs of Portuguese Estremadura with stylistically similar decorative patterns. 158

6.5 “Late Cardial” ceramic vessels from Buraca Grande, Caldeirão, and Almonda. 159
List of illustrations ix

6.6 Isotopic composition of human bone collagen from Portuguese Mesolithic, Neolithic and Copper Age sites. 162
6.7 The genetic history of the Iberian peninsula. 168
6.8 Results of the cluster analysis of seven Portuguese prehistoric skeletal collections. 175
6.9 Dental evidence for the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in Portugal. 176–7
6.10 Lower limb morphological evidence for the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in Portugal. 178–9
7.1 Traditional south German chronology. 184
7.2 Distribution of Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites. 185
7.3 Distribution of earliest Linearbandkeramik in central Europe. 187
7.4 Sources of exotic shell in the Late Mesolithic of southern Germany. 190
7.5 Distribution of La Hoguette ceramics. 192
7.6 Revised south German chronology. 194
8.1 Central Europe showing extent of early agricultural settlement. 198
8.2 Chronological chart showing major cultural units involved in the establishment of agricultural communities in north-central Europe and their distribution in major drainage systems. 199
8.3 Examples of Linear Pottery fine-ware ceramics with typical decoration. 201
8.4 Schematic representation of a Linear Pottery settlement showing the progressive occupation and rebuilding of three house locations. 204
9.1 Location of sites referred to in text. 226
9.2 Irish later Mesolithic and early Neolithic artifacts. 231
9.3 Range of ¹⁴C dates from the latest phases of the Mesolithic and the early Neolithic in Ireland. 241
9.4 Number of later Mesolithic and early Neolithic ¹⁴C dates per century after calibration and, where appropriate, adjusted for a 200-year-old wood factor. 242
9.5 Distribution of Mesolithic core axes and Neolithic polished flint axes from northeast Ireland. 244–5
9.6 Distribution of microliths in southwest and southeast England. 248
9.7 Schematic representation of resources and artifacts used in the later Mesolithic and early Neolithic of Ireland and Britain. 254
10.1 Location of sites and research areas mentioned in the text. 262
x List of illustrations

10.2 The chronology of the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic in Scandinavia. 265
10.3 The distribution of flint and quartzite groups in the Mesolithic of Sweden. 267
10.4 Radiocarbon dates by region for a select group of the earliest TRB sites in Scandinavia. 272
10.5 The Early Neolithic house at Mossby. 275
10.6 The ground plan of the Early Neolithic earthen long barrow at Storgård IV. 278
10.7 A small, complete type O Funnel Beaker, unornamented, with several seed impressions, at least one of cereal. 279
10.8 Ground plan of the site of Bjørnsholm, showing the relationship between the Mesolithic and Neolithic middens, the Early Neolithic settlements, and the earthen long barrow. 281
10.9 The distribution of Early Neolithic sites in east-central Jutland, showing the location of megalithic tombs, settlements, exploitation sites, and causewayed camps. 283
10.10 Spheres of interaction in Early Neolithic Scandinavia. 289
10.11 Axe types in the Danish Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic. 291
Tables

3.1 Uncalibrated radiocarbon dates, calibrated ranges, context and sample numbers from the Mariupol-type cemeteries of Nikolskoye, Yasinovatka, Derievka I and Osipovka. 76

4.1 Numbers and types of transported ceramic vessels at Aude valley Early Neolithic sites in southern France. 107

6.1 Chronology of the late Mesolithic in Portugal. 151

6.2 Chronology of the early Neolithic in Portugal. 153
Preface

This book is ultimately the product of both enthusiasm and frustration. The enthusiasm comes from the enormous amount of new information about the prehistoric transition to agriculture around the globe and particularly in Europe. There has been a remarkable increase in our knowledge of the Mesolithic and the Neolithic there in the last twenty years and dramatic changes in previous views. The frustration comes from the tenacity of more traditional perspectives among archaeologists who continue to see a continent gradually covered from southeast to northwest by waves of immigrants originating in the Near East. This outdated view continues in vogue; several popular and important theories are firmly based on it. The implications of this concept of continuous colonization for the spread of culture, language, and genes are obvious and strong: newcomers bring new things; change comes from outside. This perspective has significant implications for our perspectives on transformation and interaction. New information that has accumulated in recent years, however, has raised serious questions about how the transition to agriculture took place and, in a larger frame, about the very origins of agriculture and why human society changes at all.

The overture for this publication was a scholarly symposium, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1995, at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology. This symposium provided an opportunity for the authors of this volume to convene to discuss the ideas and information presented by their colleagues and to collate those facts and views with their own. The participants in the symposium, and the authors of the chapters in this volume, were selected as individuals who were active in field research dealing with the Mesolithic and Neolithic in Europe, and who at the same time were involved in developing revised perspectives for understanding the transition. This combination of hard-won data and new ideas is essential, in my view, for developing a realistic and viable understanding of our human past.
The symposium provided a means for integrating the individual papers in the volume and linking the major themes that we address. The symposium went well, large numbers of people attended, excellent papers were read, voices and tempers were raised in debate, and interest peaked. It also seems that the enthusiasm from the symposium traveled home with the contributors, who then spent a great deal of effort enhancing and elaborating their papers to deal with questions, comments, and concerns that were raised during the symposium. As a result, the chapters are lengthy and deliberate in treating the themes that define the substance of this volume.

Other aspects of the volume should also be noted. We have tried to be consistent throughout in the use of calibrated radiocarbon dates in order to have a coherent discussion of the spread of agriculture in actual calendar years. We have also provided both chronological charts and maps of site locations and the distribution of archaeological cultures as summaries of information and reference for the reader.

The human past is a thoroughly fascinating subject. I am convinced that archaeology has both a great deal to offer, and a great deal to learn, in the development of our understanding of the evolution of ourselves and our society. The transition to agriculture is without question one of the major events in that evolution, shifting human focus from the wild to the tame, from nature to the constructed, from the landscape to the community, from the horizontal to the hierarchical. In addition, as I believe the information in this volume will convince you, our ancestors played a decisive role in bringing about that transition as demands from social, economic, and ideological realms of ourselves and our societies grew.

These have been many pleasures in organizing and putting together this book. One of the primary pleasures has been the association with the various contributors whose intellect, alacrity, knowledge, and good nature have made this a relatively easy task. Please accept my sincere thanks and admiration for a job well done. Another pleasure has been the connection and correspondence with other scholars concerned with the transition to agriculture who have generously supplied information, offprints, and other materials to enhance the information presented in the various chapters of this book. A third pleasure has been the association with the publisher, and particularly with the Senior Commissioning Editor for the Social Sciences, Jessica Kuper, who made an effort to put this book in fine form. Thanks also to Frances Brown whose care in copy-editing has made this a cleaner and more accurate book. My appreciation also goes to the two anonymous reviewers who, while perhaps overly opinionated, helped to make this a better book. A final thank you must go to another great pleasure, my colleague, critic, partner, friend, and love, Anne Birgitte Gebauer.

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