

CHAPTER 1

THE OFFSHORE ISLANDS

THE VIEW FROM AFAR

The existence of Britain and Ireland posed a problem for the geographers of the Classical world. Their experience was limited to the Mediterranean and they had devised a scheme which saw the cosmos as a circular disc with the sea at its centre. For Hecataeus of Miletus, the land extended northwards into what is now Europe, southwards into Africa, and to the east as far as India, but beyond all these regions there was a river, Oceanus, which encircled the earth and marked the outer limit of the world (Fig. 1.1). Only the dead could reach its farther shore. There were two routes communicating directly between the inner sea and the most distant margin of the land. One was by the Arabian Gulf, whilst the second led through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic (Cunliffe 2001a: 2–6).

Strictly speaking, the two islands studied in this book were beyond the limits of the world and so they could not exist, yet, as often happens, theory came into conflict with practical experience. Long before the expansion of the Roman Empire there were reasons for questioning the traditional cosmology. Although it is no longer believed that Stonehenge was designed by a Mycenaean architect, there seem to have been some connections between Britain and the Aegean during the second millennium BC, although these links are confined to a few portable artefacts and would have been indirect (A. Harding 2000: chapter 13). In the first millennium, contacts between the Mediterranean and these outer islands intensified during what is known as the Atlantic Bronze Age (Ruiz-Gálvez Priego 1998), and, later still, there are ceramic vessels of Greek origin among the finds from the Thames and other English rivers (Harbison and Laing 1974). Since metalwork of local manufacture has been discovered in the same locations, there is no reason to dismiss the exotic items as spoils of the Grand Tour.

The paradoxical status of Britain and Ireland became even more apparent during the mid-first century BC when Julius Caesar twice invaded southern

England, and again after the Roman Conquest which took place a century later. It was a source of political prestige to have travelled to the limits of the land, and still more to have annexed territory on the outermost edges of the world. Perhaps that is why the emperor Agricola was so anxious to subjugate Orkney, the archipelago off the northern tip of Scotland, and even made plans for an invasion of Ireland (Fitzpatrick 1989).

The very existence of Britain and Ireland seemed impossible to conceive, and yet they had actually been known to travellers for some time. Pytheas explored the Atlantic seaways about 320 BC, but his account was not always believed (Cunliffe 2001b). Tacitus says that it was in AD 85 that the Roman fleet circumnavigated the entire coastline of Britain and first established that it was an island (Rivet and Smith 1979: 93). Even then, people were unsure of its location, and a popular view placed Britain somewhere between Spain and Gaul. The Greek geographer Strabo supposed that Ireland was further to the north. Still more distant was Thule, a frozen landmass that had been described by Pytheas. This was probably Iceland. It became identified with the Shetland Islands simply because they seemed to represent the furthest point where human settlement was possible. Again the sheer remoteness of these places was what impressed Roman writers (Cunliffe 2001b).

Many of these confusions were not resolved until Britain and Ireland were mapped by Ptolemy in the middle of the second century AD. This was a scientific project which drew on observations assembled from a variety of existing sources. It was not the result of original exploration, and it formed only a small part of a larger programme of mapping the then-known world. Ptolemy's map revealed the outlines of both the main islands, prominent capes and headlands, the mouths of important rivers, and the positions of certain mountains and forests. It also included a variety of significant places within the interior, but it was never his intention to document the pattern of settlement (Rivet and Smith 1979: chapter 3). Apart from three important features, the map was basically correct. Following earlier practice, Ireland was still positioned too far to the north. Smaller islands were also located inaccurately and were sometimes shown further from the mainland than was actually the case. A more important difficulty was the depiction of part of Scotland which seemed to extend along an east-west axis, where the experience of early sailors showed that it should have run from south to north. Rivet and Smith have suggested that this arose because of confusion between two different locations represented by the same name, Epidium (1979: 111–13). In their view the map can be reorientated to give a better approximation of the coastline (Fig. 1.2).

Such early accounts also provide evidence of the original names of the largest islands. Britain was first known as 'insula Albionum', the island of the Albiones. Later, that was replaced by Pretannia, which soon became Britannia. Ptolemy's

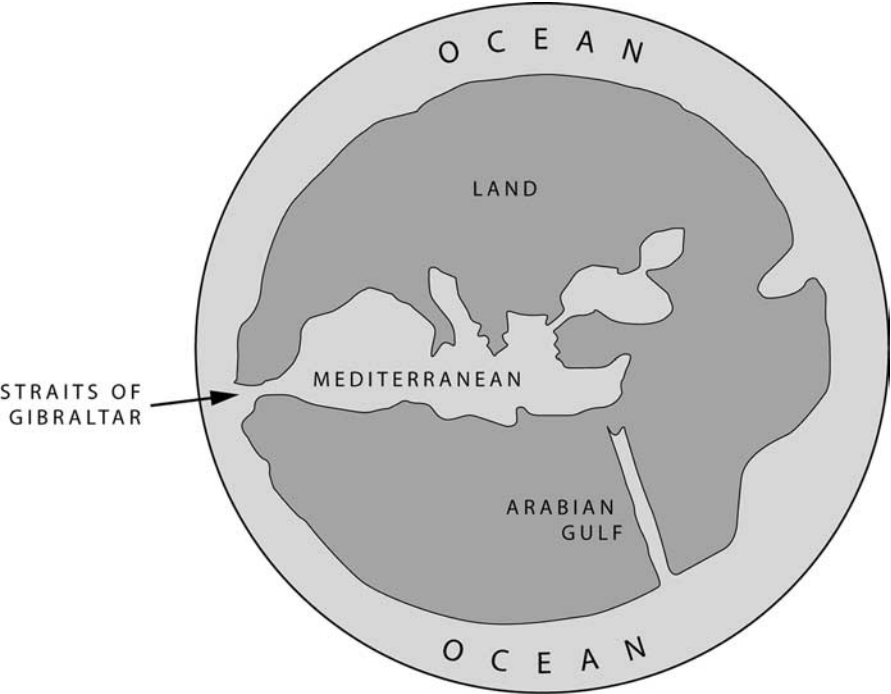


Figure 1.1. The world according to Hecataeus of Miletus.

account distinguishes between Megale Britannia (Great Britain) which refers to the larger island, and Mikra Britannia (Little Britain) which describes Ireland. Elsewhere he refers to them as Alvion and Hivernia, respectively. Ireland was better known by the Greek name Ierne or its Latin equivalent Hibernia (Rivet and Smith 1979: 37–40).

Ptolemy’s map of the islands was conceived as a strictly scientific exercise, but accounts of their inhabitants took a different form. Although these texts are sometimes characterised as ethnography, they were conceived within a literary genre which stressed the important differences between the civilised populations of Greece and Rome and the barbarians with whom they came into contact. Indeed, it seems as if geographical distance from these centres of high culture was one way of assessing the features of different populations. Thus those who traded with the Roman world were held in more esteem than other groups; the British were more backward than the Gauls; and the inhabitants of Ireland were more primitive still (J. Taylor 2000). Such accounts were composed according to well-established conventions. Very little of what they said was based on first-hand observation, and many of their contents disagree with the findings of modern archaeology. If Britain and Ireland existed after all, it was important to emphasise that in cultural and geographical terms they remained extremely remote.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BRITISH AND IRISH PREHISTORY

Ireland and Britain were at the limits of the Roman world, but they were also placed on the outer rim of Europe. Much of lowland Britain was eventually incorporated in the Roman Empire, but Ireland remained outside it altogether, and so for significant periods of time did the area that is occupied by Scotland today. Given their marginal position, what can the prehistory of these small islands contribute to a series concerned with world archaeology?

There are several answers to this question, and these will serve to introduce some of the main themes of this book. The first point follows from what has been said already. The inhabitants of Britain and Ireland do not seem to have experienced the drastic changes that characterised other parts of prehistoric Europe, and they remained largely beyond the influence of societies in the Mediterranean. In a recent paper Patrice Brun (2004) has considered the emergence of social stratification over the period from 2500 BC. He follows the conventional distinction between ‘chiefdoms’, ‘complex chiefdoms’, and ‘early states’ and studies a series of regions extending from the Aegean to Scandinavia and from the Balkans to Spain. All these areas underwent major social changes. It was only ‘England’ that seems to have remained largely unaffected. Here what he calls simple chiefdoms existed continuously from the mid-third millennium BC until the Roman period. Brun acknowledges that there are problems with this kind of scheme, but he also makes an important point. It seems as if the sequence in Britain and Ireland followed a different course from other parts of prehistoric Europe. For that reason their distinctive character deserves to be investigated in detail.

Within that lengthy sequence certain periods and regions have featured in wider discussions of theoretical archaeology. The artefact record has supplied some influential case studies concerned with production and exchange. Ian Hodder (1982a) investigated the distribution of Neolithic axes, and so did Sylvia Chappell (1987) in a study carried out from the United States. The exchange of fine metalwork has also played an important role in archaeological writing. The contents of certain exceptionally rich burials in Wessex are considered in discussions of prehistoric chiefdoms by Colin Renfrew (1973) and Timothy Earle (1991), and during later periods the production and distribution of metalwork provided the basis for Michael Rowlands’s influential study of kinship, alliance, and exchange in ancient society (Rowlands 1980).

The early monuments of Britain and Ireland have also inspired some studies with a wider application. These include Colin Renfrew’s accounts of monument building and social organisation in southern England and in Orkney (Renfrew 1973; 1979) and Ian Hodder’s discussion of the relationship between Neolithic houses and more specialised monuments (1982b: 218–29). Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1982) have investigated Neolithic mortuary



Figure 1.2. A: Ptolemy's map of Britain and Ireland. B: Ptolemy's map as reorientated by Rivet and Smith (1979).

rites in southern Britain, and Tilley himself has published widely quoted interpretations of several prehistoric landscapes in Wales and England (Tilley 1994). The 'royal sites' of Iron Age Ireland have also attracted international attention (Wailes 1982).

These examples are well known, but each of them has been selected to illustrate a particular thesis, and there is a risk of viewing them in isolation. Thus the archaeology of Stonehenge and the surrounding landscape may be very

well known, but it is rarely considered in relation to the other developments that happened during the same period. The same applies to the archaeology of megaliths, whether these are the passage tombs of the Boyne Valley in Ireland, the monuments on the Scottish island of Arran, or their counterparts in Orkney. All too often such examples are divorced from their chronological and regional settings and their distinctive character is lost in the search for general principles. Many of these studies were published as short papers in which it was impossible to develop these ideas in any detail. This book sets such research in a wider context.

Those studies were concerned with theoretical issues and simply drew on Britain and Ireland for examples. There is another way of thinking about their distinctive archaeology. It has four outstanding features which deserve investigation in their own right. The first is the extraordinary abundance of monumental architecture in both these islands. Structures like Newgrange, Maeshowe, Avebury, and Stonehenge are very famous, and the same applies to later prehistoric monuments like Navan Fort or Maiden Castle, but they are all too rarely considered in their local settings. Instead they are treated as instances of a wider phenomenon and investigated in terms of general processes. These may involve such apparently practical issues as prehistoric engineering, territorial organisation, and ancient warfare, or more abstract ideas about the importance of ancestors, cosmology, and ritual. The megaliths of Neolithic Ireland have featured in a Darwinian model of mating behaviour, on the one hand, and in discussions of shamanism, on the other (Aranyosi 1999; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: chapter 8). Sometimes it is the details of these structures that have attracted the most attention. The chambered tombs in the Boyne Valley contain roughly half the megalithic art in Western Europe (G. Eogan 1999), and the layout of Stonehenge and allied monuments has been studied by archaeoastronomers for nearly a hundred years (Ruggles 1999: 136–9).

A second feature of prehistoric Britain and Ireland is their exceptional material wealth. This is partly due to the distribution of natural resources – copper is quite widely available, there is tin in southwest England and gold in Ireland – but it also depends on the distinctive manner in which finished artefacts were deposited (Bradley 1998a). Discoveries of high-quality metalwork do not provide a representative sample of the artefacts that were once available, for their raw material could easily have been recycled. Instead these objects were deposited in graves and in natural locations such as rivers and bogs. That is why they have survived to the present day. Nor were all these objects of local manufacture, for many of them were made from foreign ores and deposited far from their sources. The Thames, for example, is nowhere near any deposits of copper or tin, and yet it includes one of the highest densities of prehistoric weapons anywhere in Europe. Both Britain and Ireland participated in the circulation of metalwork over considerable distances, and they are not alone in

containing an exceptional number of votive deposits. It is the range of contacts illustrated by these finds which makes them so remarkable.

A third element is perhaps the product of an exceptionally long history of landscape archaeology in these islands. In Britain, this began with the work of antiquarians like John Aubrey and William Stukeley (Sweet 2004), and, in Ireland, it intensified with the topographical records collected by the Ordnance Survey a hundred and fifty years ago (Herity and Eogan 1977: 7–9, Waddell 2005: 97–103). Both countries shared a tradition of documenting surface remains, especially those of earthworks. This first drew attention to a feature that still distinguishes their archaeology from that of other regions. It seems as if the landscape was subdivided by fields and boundaries at an earlier date, and sometimes on a larger scale, than any other part of prehistoric Europe. In the later years of the nineteenth century the tradition of topographical survey extended to settlement excavation, and the early twentieth century saw the development of aerial survey. In England, this revealed new features of the prehistoric landscape at a time when similar methods were rarely used in other countries.

The final characteristic of Britain and Ireland is the most obvious of all, for both are islands located some distance from Continental Europe. Each is accompanied by a series of much smaller islands with a distinctive archaeology of their own (Fig. 1.3). A number of them provide important evidence of prehistoric activity, such as Rathlin Island and Lambay Island off the Irish coast, both of which include stone axe quarries, or the Isle of Man midway between Ireland and England, with its distinctive chambered tombs. Just as important are the archipelagos where many monuments and settlements survive. These include the Inner and Outer Hebrides to the west of Scotland, and Orkney and Shetland which are usually referred to as the Northern Isles. The list could be much longer, but in each case the archaeological record has some unusual features.

This raises a wider issue, for it is sometimes supposed that island societies develop a peculiar character of their own. They can build extraordinary field monuments. This argument has been influential in the archaeology of the Mediterranean (Broodbank 2000) and has been applied to Polynesia, too (Kirch 2000). It could certainly account for such remarkable phenomena as the megalithic tombs of Neolithic Orkney or the Iron Age towers of the Hebrides and the Northern Isles, but on a larger scale it might also characterise Britain and Ireland as a whole, for they include unusual forms of architecture which are not known in Continental Europe. Perhaps the most distinctive are the henges and cursus monuments of the Neolithic period.

Two of these observations help to set the limits of this account. In a sense this study cannot commence until both these regions were islands. Before that time the area occupied by England, Wales, and Scotland was continuous with Continental Europe and should not be considered in its own terms. This

investigation begins when their geography assumed more or less its present form, although the territories of present-day Scotland and Ireland may have been uninhabited. This is also an account of their *prehistory*, and, although it is not an entirely satisfactory term, it helps to define where this account should end. It concludes with their discovery by travellers from the Mediterranean and their incorporation in a wider world.

THE SENSE OF ISOLATION

Britain and Ireland did not assume their present forms simultaneously, and this had serious consequences for their ecology and for the hunter gatherers who lived there. Ireland was cut off by the sea at a time when Britain was still attached to the European mainland. That happened well before Ireland had any inhabitants and certainly before a number of animal species could have become established. They include wild cattle, elk, red deer, and roe deer, none of which formed part of the native fauna. Britain, on the other hand, was continuously settled from the end of the Ice Age and had already been colonised by these species before it was separated from the Continent. Because this happened quite late in the development of postglacial vegetation, it also had thirty percent more plant species than its western neighbour (Bell and Walker 2004: 167–8). The time interval is extremely significant. It seems as if Ireland became detached from southwest Scotland by a narrow channel. This had happened by about 12,000 BC as the polar ice cap melted and sea levels rose. The English Channel had formed by 8000 BC, and the fertile plain that linked what is now eastern England to northern France, the Low Countries, and Denmark was gradually reduced in size between about 10,000 and 6000 BC, when Britain was completely cut off from the Continent (Shennan and Andrews 2000; Fig. 1.4). Finds from the bed of the North Sea show just how important this area had been (B. Coles 1998; Flemming, ed. 2004).

The earliest settlement of Ireland seems to have taken place by boat around 8000 BC (Woodman 2004). By this stage the North Sea plain was already threatened by the rising water, but it was before large areas of territory had been lost. The earliest dates from Scotland are of the same order. They begin around 8500 BC and increase in frequency after a thousand years. They are similar to those from west and north Wales (David and Walker 2004). The Isle of Man was separated from Britain and Ireland by about 8000 BC and may also have been colonised by sea. It appears that this took place sometime before 6500 BC (McCartan 2004). Some of the islands off the west coast of Scotland were also used from an early date. Orkney was eventually settled by hunter gatherers, and there are other early sites in the Shetland Islands (Melton and Nicholson 2004). It is uncertain whether the Outer Hebrides were occupied, although the results of pollen analysis do raise that possibility (Edwards 2004).



Figure 1.3. The offshore islands of Britain and Ireland.

Ireland was obviously colonised long after any land bridge had been severed, and there are points in common between the material culture of its first inhabitants and the artefacts found in Britain. That connection seems to have been quite short lived, and from about 6000 BC it seems as if their histories

diverged. Significantly, there is no evidence for the movement of raw materials between these islands. In fact, the Irish Mesolithic developed a distinctive character of its own which it shared to some extent with the Isle of Man. It had a distinctive settlement pattern, too. The occupation sites of the later Mesolithic period concentrate along rivers and the shoreline, and there are indications that fishing was particularly important. That is hardly surprising since wild pigs were the only large animals that could have been hunted (Woodman 2004).

The material culture of Mesolithic Ireland gradually diverged from that found in England, Scotland, and Wales. A similar process seems to have affected relations between Britain and Continental Europe from about 7500 BC, and again new artefact types came into use. Roger Jacobi (1976) has suggested that this resulted from the formation of the English Channel and the loss of a land bridge joining Britain to the mainland. This raises chronological problems, for at that stage some links were still possible, although the rising sea made direct communication increasingly difficult. At all events this was the first time when what happened in Britain assumed a distinctive character of its own.

That introduces another theme of this book. To what extent were developments in prehistoric Britain independent from those in Continental Europe, and how far were they simply a continuation of them? How much evidence is there for the establishment of local identities in different parts of both islands, and, in particular, did events in Ireland and Britain follow a different course from one another? One way of defining local practices is to compare the archaeological records on either side of the Irish Sea.

THE LIE OF THE LAND

Such local traditions first emerged during the lengthy period in which Britain and Ireland were separated, first from one another, and then from Continental Europe. They were also influenced by the physical character of both islands and the pattern of communication within them.

At this point it is essential to say more about their geography. That immediately raises the problem of names (Fig. 1.5). It would be easy to write this account in terms of current political boundaries, which divide the two islands between England, Scotland, and Wales, on the one hand, and Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, on the other. That would be misleading. Although England, Wales, and Scotland occupy almost the same territories as they have since the middle ages, a similar argument does not apply to Ireland. Six of the modern counties form part of the United Kingdom, whilst the remainder comprise a separate nation state. As *Ulaid*, Ulster was one of the ancient kingdoms of Ireland, but it was more extensive than the area that is under British rule and called by that name today. Thus it is best to refer to Ireland as a whole except where the archaeological evidence requires a different procedure. The other geographical unit is the island of Britain which was accepted as a distinct entity from the time of the first explorers. It is no longer accurate to talk of