

## CHAPTER 1

## THE OFFSHORE ISLANDS

## THE VIEW FROM FAR AWAY

The existence of Britain and Ireland posed a problem for the geographers of the Classical world (Fig. 1.1). Their experience was limited to the Mediterranean where 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. 1.2). Only the dead could reach its farther shore; for Procopius writing in sixth-century Byzantium Britain was a land of ghosts (West 2007: 390). 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. Not long after 4000 BC axes made in the western Alps were distributed as far as the north of Scotland (Pétrequin et al. 2012). It is no longer believed that Stonehenge was designed by a Mycenaean architect, but there seem to have been some connections between Britain, Northern Europe and the Aegean during the second millennium BC (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005). 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 where they occur in similar contexts to metalwork of local manufacture and must have been deposited during the Iron Age (Bradley and A. Smith 2007).



Figure 1.1 Places, regions, and rivers mentioned in Chapter 1.

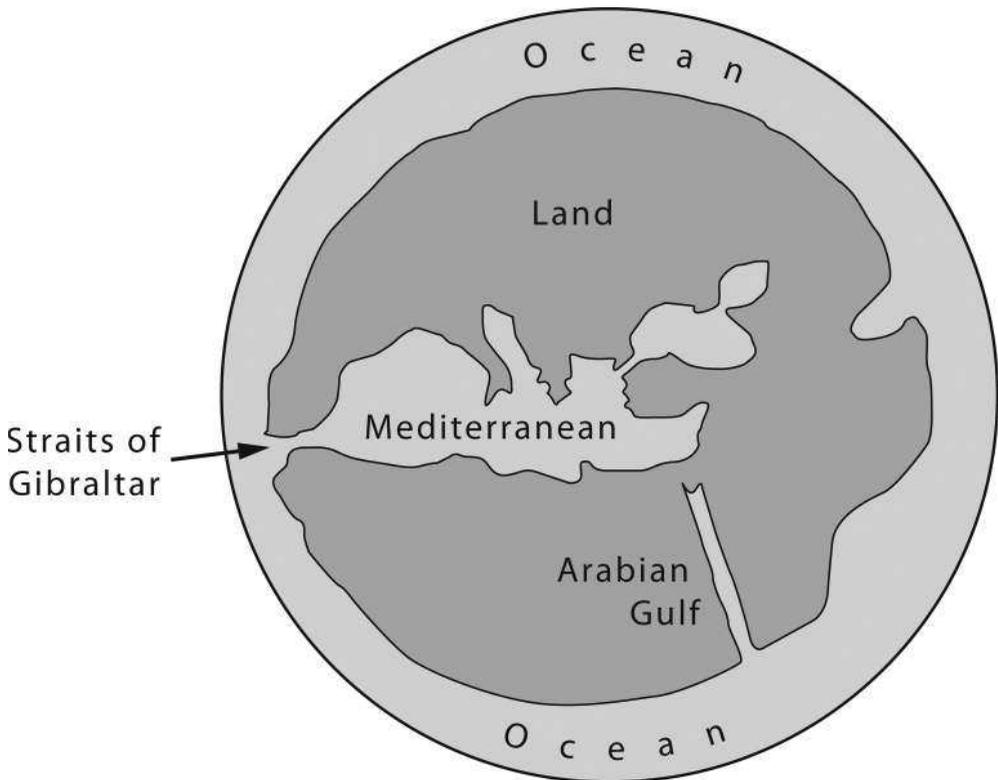


Figure 1.2 The world according to Hecataeus of Miletus.

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 almost a century later. It was a source of political prestige to have annexed territory on the outermost edge of the world. Perhaps that is why the Roman general 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). 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 C. Smith 1979: 93). Even then, people were unsure of its location, and a popular view placed it 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, but it became identified with the Shetland Islands because they seemed to represent the furthest point where human settlement was possible (Cunliffe 2001b).

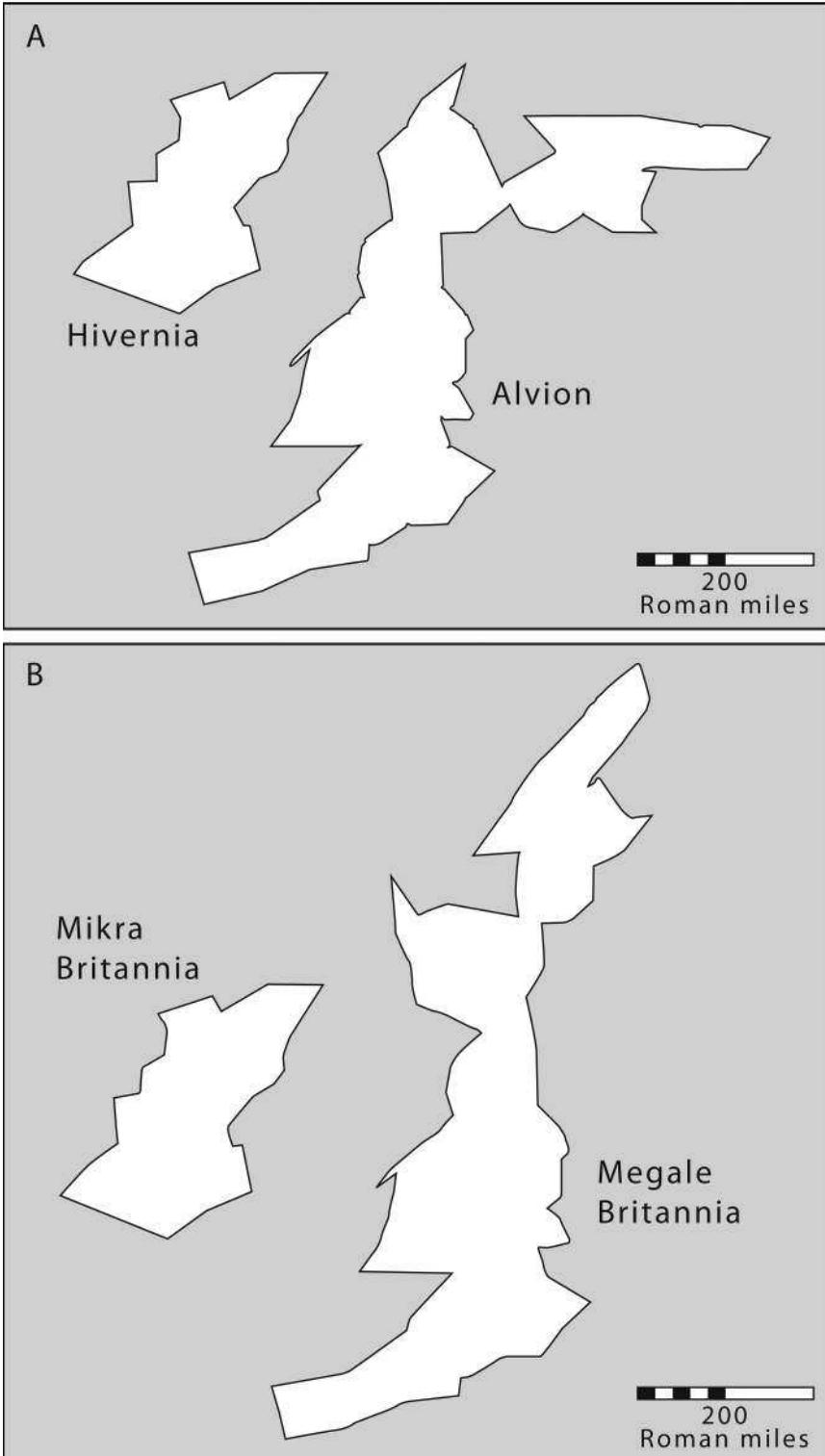
Many of these confusions were not resolved until Britain and Ireland were mapped by Ptolemy in the middle of the second century AD. This was a scientific project which drew on observations assembled from a variety of sources. Ptolemy's map revealed the outlines of both islands, prominent capes and headlands, the mouths of important rivers, and the positions of certain mountains and forests, but it was never his intention to document the pattern of settlement (Rivet and C. Smith 1979: ch. 3). Apart from three important features, the map was basically correct (Fig. 1.3). 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. Part of Scotland 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 reoriented to give a better approximation of the coastline.

Such early accounts 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 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 (the holy island) or its Latin equivalent Hibernia (Rivet and C. Smith 1979: 37–40).

Ptolemy's map of the islands was conceived as a 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. Such accounts were composed according to well-established conventions (Hustwit 2016). Little they said was based on first-hand observation, and many of their contents, including the writings of Caesar, 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 occupied by Scotland today.



**Figure 1.3** A: Ptolemy's map of Britain and Ireland. B: Ptolemy's map as reorientated by Rivet and Smith (1979).

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 they 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 (Bradley et al. 2016a: ch. 8).

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. Hodder (1982) investigated the distribution of Neolithic axes, and the contents of certain exceptionally rich burials in Wessex are considered in discussions of prehistoric chiefdoms by Renfrew (1973) and Earle (1991: 80–98). During later periods the production and distribution of metalwork provided the basis for Rowlands's (1980) influential study of kinship, alliance, and exchange in the ancient world. It also plays a part in Kristiansen's and Larsson's (2005) book *The Rise of Bronze Age Society*.

The early monuments of Britain and Ireland have also inspired studies with a wider application. These include Renfrew's (1973; 1979) accounts of monument building and social organisation in southern England and in Orkney. Tilley (2010) has published widely quoted interpretations of prehistoric landscapes in Wales and England. Julian Thomas (2015a) has discussed Levi-Straus's notion of a 'house society' in relation to prehistoric Britain, and Kelly (2015) uses the archaeology of Stonehenge as a case study in her account of *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies*.

These examples are well known, but each 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 familiar, but it is rarely considered in relation to the other developments that happened during the same period. It is equally true of 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. Such 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 islands. Structures like Newgrange, Maeshowe, Avebury, and Stonehenge are very famous, and the same applies to later monuments like Navan Fort or Maiden Castle, but they are 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, cultural memory, cosmology, and ritual. The megaliths of Neolithic Ireland have featured in a Darwinian model of mating behaviour, on the one hand (Aranyosi 1999), and a discussion of shamanism, on the other (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: ch. 8). The Bronze Age hillforts of Ireland have featured in both a study of ancient warfare (O'Brien and O'Driscoll 2017) and a collection of papers concerned with 'costly signalling' – a concept developed in evolutionary biology (Conolly ed. 2017). 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 1986), and the layout of Stonehenge and allied monuments has been studied by archaeoastronomers for a hundred years (Ruggles 1999).

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 south-west England, and gold occurs in some quantity in Ireland and can be found elsewhere (Timberlake 2016). Archaeologists have studied the distinctive manner in which finished artefacts were deposited (Bradley 2017a). Discoveries of high-quality metalwork do not provide a representative sample of the artefacts that were once available, for their raw material could easily be 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 were made from foreign ores and deposited far from their sources. The Thames, for example, is nowhere near any deposits of copper or tin, 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 the product of an exceptionally long history of landscape archaeology in these islands. In Britain, this began with the work of such antiquarians as 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 (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 on a larger scale and at an earlier date than in many parts of prehistoric Europe. In the late 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. 1.4). Some of them played a specialised role in maritime exchange, including Thanet which commands the route between the Channel and the Thames Estuary, and ‘Ictis’ where Pytheas recorded that traders obtained tin from the inhabitants of south-west England. A number provide important evidence of prehistoric activity, such as in the axe quarries at North Roe in Shetland and on Rathlin and Lambay Islands off the Irish coast. The Isle of Man midway between Ireland and England is noted for its distinctive chambered tombs (F. Lynch and Davey 2017), and Anglesey in north-west Wales was supposedly sacred to the Druids. Just as important are archipelagos where monuments and settlements survive in unusual numbers. They 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 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. From the early work of Sahlins (1955) this argument plays a major role in Pacific archaeology and has been equally influential in the studies of the Mediterranean (Broodbank 2013). It could certainly account for such remarkable phenomena as the megalithic tombs of Neolithic Orkney or the Iron Age towers of the Hebrides, the Northern Isles, and the north mainland of Scotland, 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.

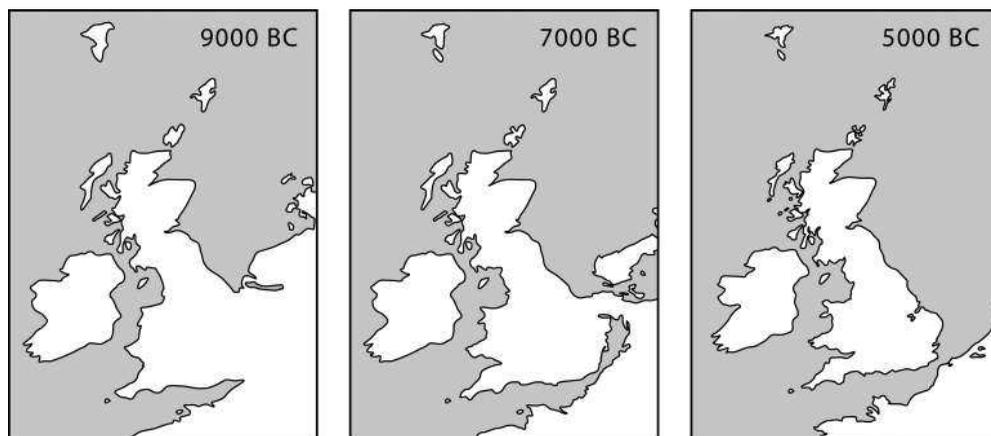
Two observations help to set the limits of this account. In a sense this study cannot commence until both these regions were islands. Before that time the area occupied by England, Wales, and Scotland was continuous with Continental Europe and must not be considered on its own. This investigation begins when their geography assumed more or less its present form. This is also an account of their prehistory, and, although it is not a satisfactory term, it helps to define where the account should end. It concludes with their discovery by travellers from the Mediterranean and their incorporation in a wider world that culminated in Caesar’s invasions of southern England.

#### 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 (Sturt 2015). That happened well before



Figure 1.4 The offshore islands of Britain and Ireland.



**Figure 1.5** Models for the changing coastlines of Britain and Ireland between 9000 and 5000 BC. Information from Sturt, Garrow, and Bradley (2013).

Ireland had any inhabitants and certainly before a number of animal species could have become established (Mitchell and Ryan 1998: table 4), among them cattle, elk, red deer, and roe deer. None 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 (Montgomery et al. 2014).

Because Britain was cut off from the mainland quite late in the development of postglacial vegetation, it had more plant species than its western neighbour. The time interval is extremely significant. It seems as if Ireland became detached from south-west Scotland by a narrow channel. This had happened by about 12,000 BC as the polar ice cap melted and sea levels rose (Sturt 2015). 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 (Fig. 1.5). Finds from the bed of the North Sea show just how important this area had been, and new research has begun to map what must once have been an extremely productive landscape which is sometimes referred to as Doggerland (Gaffney, Thomson, and Fitch 2007).

The earliest settlement of Ireland seems to have taken place by boat around 8000 BC (Woodman 2015: ch. 7). By this stage the North Sea plain was already threatened by rising water, but it was before large areas of territory had been lost. The Isle of Man was separated from Britain and Ireland and was colonised by sea by about 8000 BC (Sturt 2015). 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.

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