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978-0-521-10502-6 - The Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles: A Study of the
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THE
NEOLITHIC CULTURES
OF THE
BRITISH ISLES

*A Study of the
Stone-using Agricultural Communities of Britain
in the Second Millennium B.C.*

BY

STUART PIGGOTT

*Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology in the
University of Edinburgh*



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FOREWORD TO NEW EDITION

THIS edition is an unaltered reprint of the original text published in 1954, which represented the state of knowledge up to 1951. In the intervening 18 years there has been a considerable accession of new primary material as the result of excavation, and perhaps even more important, fundamental new interpretations of the whole period have been made. The most important of these are outlined below, and the factual information contained in the book should now be viewed in their light.

The most striking revolution in thinking has come about since 1950 with the development of the technique of absolute dating by means of the radioactive isotope of carbon, C_{14} . Two such dates only were available for the British Neolithic in 1951: today there are over 100 radiocarbon dates directly applicable to the Neolithic material of the British Isles, in addition to numerous determinations of such relevant natural phenomena as the palaeobotanical and climatic zones within the same period. As a result the time-scale given in 1954, containing the Neolithic cultures of the British Isles within a 500-year span from c. 2000 B.C. to c. 1500 B.C., can now be seen to be ludicrously short, and must be replaced by one running from not later than c. 3000 B.C. to an approximate terminal date still c. 1500 B.C., substantially overlapping with the Beaker cultures and the first copper (or even the earliest bronze) technology in the British Isles (Clark & Godwin 1962; Clark 1965; 1966). Not only have the C_{14} dates from these islands been internally consistent, but they are consonant with what we know, in increasing detail, to have been the general pattern of events, when ordered by radiocarbon dating, of the spread of agriculture in the Near East and Europe (Clark 1966).

Within this extended time-span, with all its implications for a lengthy development, it is now equally clear that we must visualise the British Neolithic pottery sequence as a continuously evolving insular phenomenon and not, as in 1954, as the product first of a 'Windmill Hill Culture' and subsequently of 'Secondary Neolithic' cultures with pottery traditions of alien origins. Dr Isobel Smith has demonstrated that the 'Peterborough' group of pottery styles (Ebbsfleet, Mortlake and Fengate wares) evolve directly from the earlier 'Windmill Hill' traditions of Whitehawk, Abingdon and East Anglian (now Mildenhall types, and that the later of these (e.g. Fengate) are themselves ancestral to our Bronze Age Cinerary Urns and Food Vessels of the second millennium B.C. This essential continuity involves a rejection, or at best a drastic re-thinking of the concept of 'Secondary Neolithic' cultures in Britain as set out in 1954, though Rinyo-Clacton pottery remains stubbornly intractable in any assessment.

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A broad tripartite division into Early Neolithic, from the beginnings to c. 2500 B.C.; Middle Neolithic to c. 2000 B.C.; and a final Late Neolithic seems today to provide a more satisfactory model of the assumed situation (Smith 1965; Clark *loc. cit.*)

A final point may be made in respect of the European antecedents of the Windmill Hill Culture. It has become increasingly difficult to derive all the relevant features of this culture, especially the non-megalithic long barrows, from a source among the Western European Neolithic cultures, and the suggestion of a dual origin, partly in these cultures and partly in those of broadly Funnel-Beaker affiliations on the North European Plain, has been increasingly supported by new evidence. The recognition that many 'unchambered' long barrows covered timber mortuary houses; that both barrows and chambers may have an easterly origin; and that C₁₄ dates suggest that they are predominantly Early Neolithic, has in turn affected thinking on the relationships of such barrows to the long cairns in the Cotswold areas and elsewhere (Piggott 1961; 1967; Ashbee 1969; Powell 1969).

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PREFACE

THE original impetus to undertake a study of the British Neolithic cultures was provided fortuitously in 1928, when, on my first excavation, I worked with Dr E. C. Curwen at The Trundle in Sussex, the first Neolithic causewayed camp to be dug after the recognition of the type at Windmill Hill. The interest in the period then aroused continued after the excavation, and in 1931 I published a catalogue, with commentary, of the Neolithic pottery of the British Isles. Since that time the problems of the period have continued to intrigue me, and this book is the outcome of intermittent study of the British Neolithic in the field and in museums over the past twenty years.

In its original form, the book was begun, singularly inauspiciously, in the summer of 1939, for as Tristram Shandy observed, 'when a man sits down to write a history—tho' it be but the history of *Jack Hickathrift* or *Tom Thumb*, he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is to meet with in his way'. Work was resumed on it, and the earlier drafts rewritten, after the War, and in its present form it includes, with some minor exceptions, information available up to the spring of 1951.

During the preparation of the book I have examined practically all the museum material and visited a very large proportion of the field monuments described. But while much is based on first-hand study of sites and finds, such a work of synthesis must inevitably owe a large debt to other archaeologists, and the Bibliography, at the end of the volume, will indicate how much I owe to scholars in many European countries and extending in time from Sir Richard Colt Hoare in the days of the Regency to my own contemporaries.

The impersonal thanks implicit in a bibliography are, however, wholly inadequate to express the gratitude one feels to those who have played a personal part in a long-sustained piece of work. Of these, my wife has not only continuously encouraged me and offered lively and penetrating criticism to the book's great advantage, but has also undertaken the greater part of the line illustrations which form an essential accompaniment of the text. Among my colleagues, there are three to whom I owe a degree of intellectual stimulus and friendship of long standing that I find hard to measure and more difficult to repay. To Professor Gordon Childe, Professor Grahame Clark and Professor Christopher Hawkes my archaeological work and thought stand indebted at every turn, and to them I offer this small expression of my gratitude.

That portion of the book dealing with the Secondary Neolithic cultures owes much to discussions with Mr R. J. C. Atkinson, while Dr E. C. Curwen, since introducing me to Neolithic sites in 1928, has helped me at

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many points. During the time of the 'confounded hindrances' of 1939-45 Dr G. E. Daniel and I found opportunities of discussing the problems of the chambered tombs together, on occasion in extremely curious circumstances, and the discussions continue in more congenial settings today.

To Mr Alexander Keiller this book, and its author, owe an especial debt for his unreservedly placing at my disposal the unpublished material from Windmill Hill and Avebury, as well as for stimulating discussion during our field-work on the latter site. Mr T. G. E. Powell helped to alleviate the tedium of many a military *longueur* with conversations on Irish prehistory, and since the War we have worked together in the field on more than one occasion. Sir Lindsay Scott was always ready with illuminating and provocative comment, and Dr J. F. S. Stone has throughout the writing of the book offered valued and critical advice as well as the stimulus of his own alert approach to prehistory.

I am indebted to all the museum curators and other guardians of original material from whom I have obtained information, and to those many scholars who have helped so willingly and generously. In the British Isles I should like especially to thank Mr A. L. Armstrong, Mrs E. M. Clifford, Prof. Estyn Evans, Dr H. Godwin, Mr W. F. Grimes, Dr Elizabeth Knox, Mr E. T. Leeds, Mr Basil Megaw, Dr Frank Mitchell, Prof. Sean O'Riordain, Dr J. Raftery, Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, and Mrs Audrey Williams. On the European continent I am particularly grateful for the help I have received from Dr J. Arnal, Dr C. J. Becker, Dr Bernabo Brea, Prof. J. Brønsted, Dr V. von Gonzenbach, Major A. do Paço, Dr Gustav Schwantes and Prof. Emil Vogt.

For permission to publish redrawings of their line illustrations, or half-tones from their photographs, I have to thank Mr A. L. Armstrong, Mr R. J. C. Atkinson, M. l'Abbé Breuil, Mr J. P. T. Burchell, Prof. V. G. Childe, Dr R. C. C. Clay, Mrs E. M. Clifford, Dr E. C. Curwen, Dr G. E. Daniel, Prof. O. Davies, Prof. E. E. Evans, Miss C. Fell, Mr W. F. Grimes, Mr A. Keiller, Mr E. T. Leeds, Mr B. R. S. Megaw, Miss F. Patchett, Mr C. W. Phillips, Mr T. G. E. Powell, the late Sir W. L. Scott, Mr Hazzledine Warren, Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Mr W. E. V. Young, and the following museums or institutions: the British Museum, the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, the National Museum, Dublin, the Ancient Monuments Department of the Ministry of Works, the Surrey Archaeological Society and the Central Office of Information. Acknowledgement of the individual source of illustrations has been made in each instance in the body of the work.

S. P.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is an attempt to make a detailed study of a series of interrelated communities in prehistoric Britain at the beginning of the second millennium B.C., and is a description and discussion of the material culture of a number of groups of stone-using agriculturalists, united by trade and intercommunication and forming a recognizable entity in the archaeological record as we see it today. Conventionally, such farming communities using only stone for their tools and weapons are labelled 'Neolithic', and this time-hallowed nomenclature has been retained in the title of the book and in its text, although many of us today feel that our archaeological terminology is in serious need of revision and that such phrases as 'Neolithic' or 'Bronze Age' periods have a rather dubious validity.

The cultures described in this book are, however, sufficiently homogeneous to justify their treatment as a group. Their inception, with the arrival of immigrants from the European continent bringing the first elements of an agricultural economy to the British Isles, marks a break with the ancient hunter-fisher mode of life with its roots in the Palaeolithic, and although as we shall see the indigenous Mesolithic cultures were profoundly to influence the character of the British Neolithic, nevertheless a fresh era in British prehistory opens with the coming of the new colonists. The lower limits of the phase are less easy to define. Sporadic objects of copper or bronze are likely to have been traded into Britain while many of the cultures described in this book were flourishing with a completely stone-using economy, and it is difficult to regard the scanty metal equipment of the beaker-using population of these islands as really constituting a Bronze Age. Makers of Beaker pottery certainly arrived in Britain at a time likely to be the middle of our so-called Neolithic period, so that we cannot say that the phase ends with the arrival of the Beaker folk—indeed, those British beakers which come within the continental Bell-Beaker class (Abercromby's type *B*) might be regarded as a ceramic component of our later Neolithic cultures, though they have not been so treated in this book.

A more effective boundary seems that afforded by burial rites. Some form of collective burial, by inhumation or cremation, appears to be characteristic of all the Neolithic cultures described in this book, often finding expression in monumental chambered tombs and allied monuments. But with the beginning of what is usually classed as the Early Bronze Age in Britain, a novel rite of individual burial, often beneath a barrow or cairn, appears, and in such inhumation graves the first known metal objects in our prehistory appear also. The inhumation rite changes to cremation, but the single-grave tradition and the barrow persist until the arrival of immigrants

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of continental Urn-field affinities in southern England early in the first millennium B.C. to bring our Middle Bronze Age to an end and initiate a Late Bronze Age phase.

The appearance of single-grave burial, therefore, has been taken to mark the end of the British Neolithic cultures. Overlapping naturally occurs, and our final Neolithic phase is undoubtedly much influenced by traditions belonging to the single-grave immigrants reaching Britain at this time from northern Europe, burying their dead with stone battle-axes, metal tools, beakers of continental or insular types, and pots of the Food-vessel class, again of British origin. Certainly in many areas of the west and north the Neolithic traditions exemplified in the chambered tombs continued to flourish at this time, and later, so that the line dividing 'Neolithic' from 'Early Bronze Age' in the British Isles is of varying chronological significance within the first half of the second millennium B.C.

The work I have undertaken follows naturally upon the studies of the Northern Mesolithic cultures made by Professor Grahame Clark and published as *The Mesolithic Age in Britain* (1932) and *The Mesolithic Settlement of Northern Europe* (1936): for the British Isles I hope that it may serve as a sequel, carrying a detailed presentation of our prehistoric material a stage further. Professor Clark's admirably lucid presentation in his second book has led me to cast my own work into much the same form so far as the differing material allows, but it is admittedly experimental in so far as, apart from his studies, it represents the first attempt to present a detailed account of all aspects of the material culture of a complicated phase of British prehistory, rather than a treatment of a selected element such as pottery or tomb types.

Following a brief statement of the background, human and ecological, against which the British Neolithic cultures must be considered, the book is planned to fall into two broad subdivisions. In the first, the cultures within the Western Neolithic group of European prehistory are described, brought to these islands by immigrants from the Channel and Atlantic coasts of the Continent, and including those distinguished by the building of chambered megalithic tombs. These, representing as they do the first impact of agricultural economies upon Britain, may conveniently be classed as primary Neolithic in content, and their abundant archaeological material is discussed in Chapters II to IX. With the establishment of these colonies, however, there arose in many parts of Britain derivative cultures in which there is a marked resurgence of indigenous Mesolithic elements as well as contributions from Scandinavian and north European sources themselves largely of Mesolithic stock. The resultant secondary Neolithic cultures of Britain form the content of Chapters X and XI, and in the final chapter of the book the relationships of all the British Neolithic cultures is considered, within these islands and in their Continental setting, and some attempt at a relative and absolute chronology made.

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Under these two main divisions cultural or regional groups have been distinguished, and under each group the treatment of the material has been made to follow the same basic pattern throughout, with numerous sub-headings to aid clarity and to assist in comparison. References to published works are made in the text by citing author and date, the works consulted being arranged alphabetically in a bibliography at the end of the book.

The illustrations, which form an essential part of the book, have been prepared with particular care to ensure that all plans and line-drawings should conform to uniform scales, conventions and techniques of draughtsmanship in order to facilitate comprehension and comparison. All plans have therefore been redrawn from published or unpublished originals, and the necessarily large series of chambered-tomb plans have been reduced to a common scale of 40 ft. to 1 in. (1 : 480).¹ Complete or restored pottery forms are uniformly one-quarter full size, and other objects normally one-half. While many of the objects illustrated are well known, the opportunity has been taken of including much obscure or unpublished material, and by redrawing it is felt that objects known all too well from old and hackneyed illustrations may take on a new significance when presented afresh.

¹ The source of plans or other illustrations is given in all cases except where they are from original surveys or drawings by the author.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

FOR the CUPLE reprint it has been necessary to photographically reduce the size of the text matter. The reduction of the figures is now $13\frac{1}{8}\%$ greater than that indicated on the figure captions. However, the plates have been printed the same size as before and reductions mentioned in plate legends remain correct.