CAMBRIDGE WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY

EUROPE IN THE NEOLITHIC

THE CREATION OF NEW WORLDS

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data
Whittle, A. W. R.
Europe in the Neolithic: the creation of new worlds / Alasdair Whittle.
p. cm. – (Cambridge world archaeology)
Rev. edn of Neolithic Europe, 1985.
ISBN 0 521 44476 4 (hardcover). – ISBN 0 521 44920 0 (pbk)
1. Neolithic period–Europe. 2. Man, Prehistoric–Europe.
3. Europe–Antiquities. I. Whittle, A. W. R. Neolithic Europe.
II. Title. III. Series.
GN776.2.A1W45 1966
936–dc20 95-12812 CIP

ISBN 0 521 444764 hardback
ISBN 0 521 449200 paperback

Europe in the Neolithic: the creation of new worlds succeeds and replaces *Neolithic Europe: a survey* by the same author (first published 1985; ISBN 0 521 24799 3 (hardback) and 0 521 28970 X (paperback))

Transferred to digital printing 2002

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CHAPTER 1

THE TIME OF ANCESTORS

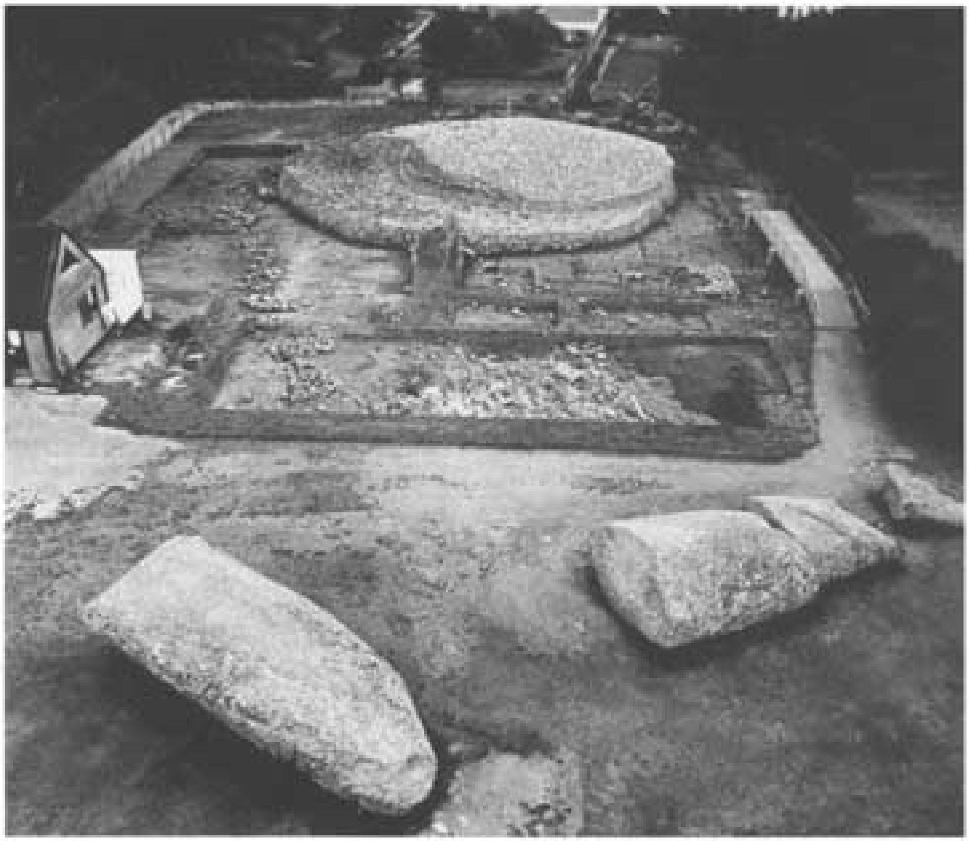
> What then is my Europe? It is in the mind . . .
>
> Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*

Some histories

This history could start in many ways and in many places.[1] In Europe as a whole, the Neolithic period begins from after 7000 BC. What we choose to label as Neolithic societies appeared in south-east Europe between 7000 and 5500 BC, in the central and west Mediterranean from before 6000 BC, and in central Europe from about 5500 BC, and finally in north-west Europe from before 4000 BC. The period can be defined as lasting till around 3000 BC in south-east Europe, and about 2500 BC elsewhere.

In one beginning – in north-west Europe, around 4500 BC, well into a wider history – the ancestors were invited to occupy stone houses, dark, quiet and difficult of access, and cajoled to remain with the hospitality of gifts of food and stone. In their honour, large upright megaliths were set up, trees of stone that resisted time and the seasons. In later generations, with the spirits firmly rooted and now taken for granted, other forms of stone shrine were built, holding the idea of ancestors but allowing easier access for the comings and goings of people. Some chambers in the stone houses of the dead were roofed with pieces of earlier standing stones, fragments of memory from a timeless past. Human ancestors were laid in the shrines of the spirits. Now there were appeals to dry bones, and fingerings of empty skulls and motionless limbs. Human descent was traced through union with the spirits, and the shrines fostered regeneration, celebrated harmony in the universe, and expiated the guilt of beginning to domesticate the natural world.

Here I invoke the early Neolithic sequence of monument building in Brittany. As we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, not everyone would agree with the order of events, let alone my imaginative interpretation of them. In a sense, this hardly matters. What it should be possible to agree on is the individuality of this coastal region and its distinctive sequence. This particular unfolding of changes was also rooted in other, wider histories. I follow many other scholars of recent years in believing that the people of coastal Brittany who built these first monuments were the descendants of foragers who had kept the land in earlier millennia. This may not have been a large population, nor did it live an existence completely isolated from a wider world. Foragers in this area had themselves honoured their dead by placing them in small cists framed by stone, symbol of permanence, and by red deer antler, symbol of fertility and regeneration, inserted in the accumulations of feasting debris which archaeologists prosaically label shell middens. The idea of the stone house



1.1 The *Grand Menhir Brisé*, the former stone row and the restored Table des Marchand at Locmariaquer, Morbihan, Brittany. Photo: Laboratoire de préhistoire armoricaine, Université de Nantes.

must have come from the timber longhouses of central and western Europe, which appeared from about 5500 BC and which are now well documented in the Paris basin as well as as far east as Hungary. The builders of timber longhouses may themselves have been the descendants of native populations, who developed new forms of mobility to colonise the dense woodlands of the valley systems of central and western Europe. They kept domesticated animals and cultivated legumes and cereals. They probably made much less use of game and native plants than their predecessors, though the contrast can be exaggerated. It is unlikely, however, that people in Brittany undertook new constructions in pursuit of or as an expression of the acquisition of a new form of subsistence. In fact, the evidence in the region, as in many others in north-west Europe, suggests that they only very gradually became farmers, a label which is probably inadequate and inappropriate right through the Neolithic period. Other ideas to do with domesticated resources and with novel ways of sharing and presenting food in clay containers may have come up to Brittany from the west Mediterranean via the central-west coast of France.

The north-west coastal region of France at the start of its Neolithic was thus linked to two other major regions. The populations of longhouse builders in central Europe, archaeologically the Linear Pottery culture or LBK, were in turn linked, by one means or another, to a world further east, in the Balkans. Most scholars have accepted that the LBK was the product of further colonisation by farming communities established in south-east Europe from about 6500–6000 BC onwards, as far north as the Hungarian plain in the Carpathian basin. In this book, in chapter 6, I argue for a different history, of the continuity and adaptation of local population. At this stage, the difference of opinion does not matter. What is important is the history around the appearance of the LBK. This takes us on to the history of south-east Europe, and beyond. In the central and west Mediterranean basin, there is likewise little agreement about the conditions in which the Neolithic period began, nor is even the date firmly established in many regions of the basin. I support, in chapter 8, a lower chronology, but again advocate a central role for indigenous population throughout the area. The reasons for the adoption, sometimes wholesale, often at first partial, of new subsistence resources and new forms of material culture were complex. They may have been rather different from those in south-east Europe, in central Europe and in parts of northern Europe. Pots and sheep may have been adopted initially as novelties, to complement existing routines of wide-ranging hunting and foraging, and to bolster already established traditions of food sharing. That the subsistence base of the Mediterranean basin became slowly agrarian tells us nothing about the circumstances of initial change. People in Brittany around 4500 BC were therefore at the end of a complex history of histories, of whose details they may hardly have been aware.

I have begun with Brittany because its evidence is both familiar and appealing to me. One has only to turn to other parts of north-west Europe to find other beginnings and other sequences, even though there are strong similarities. Offshore in Ireland, a pattern of constructions rather similar to that in Brittany can be seen, culminating in the great monuments, the so-called passage tombs, of the Boyne valley. In southern England, stone and wooden shrines became gradually more elaborate and were increasingly annexed for the expression of human concerns. By about 3500 BC, people began another kind of construction new to the region, widespread in other parts of western Europe but markedly absent so far from Brittany and barely present in Ireland. Special places were defined by circuits of ditch and bank. These enclosures were in part sacred arenas, where the ancestors, the dead and the natural world were treated with, but also the scene for an intense social negotiation, to do with the acceptance of a harmony of symbols, a working out through feasting and gift giving of matters of identity and cooperation. We do not really know why such enclosures appeared in such numbers at this time across such a wide area of western Europe, from central-west France to southern Scandinavia, but I argue in chapter 7 that they were part of the process by which new forms of community were created, rather than merely the unexplained symptom of more populous farmers. It should be unsurprising that the idea of enclosures had a longer history. Ditched circuits had first been constructed in the later part of the LBK, and were then elaborated in the Lengyel culture of central Europe. It remains fully to unravel the transmission and elaboration of the idea.

In later phases of the Neolithic, what happened was still dominated by histories of near and far. In Brittany, northern France, Britain and Ireland, the time of ancestors still counted for much. In some areas, shrines and ossuaries were still built or at least used in the old ways. Even larger enclosures were constructed, of ditches, banks and upright stones, creating formalised spaces which guided people through rituals of gathering and feasting. In Brittany people jogged the memory of ancestors with great stonelines. Many scholars have seen these later monumental constructions as expressions of social power exercised by segments of the community, but I shall argue that they were as much to do with preserving and celebrating the timeless world of the past.

Roughly between the Rhine and the Vistula, a different world came into being in the later part of the Neolithic. There the past was more taken for granted. In the Globular Amphora and Corded Ware cultures, burials variously celebrated the memory of particular individuals, the importance of close kin, and the value of animals. People marked their identity by the display of material symbols appropriate to their age and gender. This has often been seen as a more warlike, perhaps male-dominated society, but I shall argue in chapter 7 that older values persisted, of hospitality, generosity and cooperation. People were not on their way to becoming better farmers. Their lives were still mobile. Herding cattle through coppiced woodland may have been a far more common occupation than a sedentary existence tending cultivated plants. But this world was not unchanging. There was much more contact with other regions. The Corded Ware culture or complex as a material phenomenon was spread from the Rhine to far east of the Vistula, and from northern Switzerland far up into the eastern Baltic. It may have been affected by changes in the world of south-east Europe. This is the aftermath of the horizon at which many scholars introduce the speakers of Indo-European, irrupting out of the steppes to upset the stable world of settled life in the Balkans and Greece, and then spreading further west and north. One alternative approach has been to put the Indo-Europeans on a much earlier train, or to have them already in place in central or northern Europe. In chapters 5 and 7, I accept the traditional linguistic arguments for a particular historical moment of language formation, but follow others in arguing for the creation and spread of new language by processes other than population movement. The history of the enculturation of steppe people may have been linked through widening contact to people far to their west.

A Neolithic world

A critique of some past models

The nineteenth-century term 'Neolithic' is redolent of novelty, but what was new in this period, and should an old label be retained? Over the successive generations of research, the Neolithic phenomenon has been approached in several different ways: as a chronology, a technology, a culture, an economy, a population, a social structure, and latterly as a conceptual system. In a sense the phenomenon embodies all these aspects. No one is sufficient on its own, though research has tended to emphasise one or other aspect at any one time, at the expense of others. There is also good reason to criticise the application of each successive dominant model.

Chronology. In crude terms, the Neolithic period was first recognised as part of a wider chronology for prehistory. It rapidly acquired other connotations, but a concern with ordering time sequences has remained. The order of events is vital. Dendrochronology in the Alpine foreland now offers the possibility of reading the biographies of individual sites to precise calendar years, and it is also now possible to offer calendrical calibrations for radiocarbon dates right through the post-glacial period. But there is still not enough concern with the Neolithic period as history rather than as mere sequence.

Technology. On technological criteria, the Neolithic period was separated in the nineteenth century from its predecessors by the appearance of ground and polished stone tools and of pottery, innovations which were later seen to coincide with the introduction of new forms of subsistence. It is very doubtful whether we can meaningfully separate the Neolithic period from the preceding Mesolithic by such criteria. Foragers in the Mesolithic had effective technologies for heavy and light cutting, as well as for hunting, digging, and water and snow travel. They had woven and knotted nets and baskets for fishing, and they had containers. If technology is interpreted in its widest sense, Neolithic people were able to harness the pulling and lifting power of domesticated cattle, and developed use of the ard or scratch plough. But foragers must too have had effective means of tending plants and preparing soil, if they chose to do so.

Culture. Since the 1920s, if not before, the culture model has been a dominant way of organising the evidence for the Neolithic period in Europe. Some of the terminology already used in this introduction reflects the strength of the culture historical approach. One radical approach has been to dismiss the spatial patterning of material culture as an illusion created by the arbitrarily placed viewpoint of any given observer.[2] The problem lies, however, not with spatial patterning but on the one hand with its many layers ('polythetic' culture in the language of the 1960s) and on the other with its interpretation. The dominant mode of interpretation has been to read each cultural grouping as an ethnic entity, and to see the succession of cultural changes as a record of arrivals (rarely departures) of new 'people'. This is changing. Far fewer scholars in the Balkans, for example, now believe that the appearance of the Vinča culture (described in chapter 4) in the sixth millennium BC has to be explained in terms of the arrival of new population from further south, even though Vinča material culture was in many ways very different from what had preceded it. Most scholars in both Scandinavia and Britain would now see the beginnings of their Neolithics as the product of indigenous change rather than of new population arriving by colonisation. But the change of viewpoint has been selective. There is still an enormous disposition to believe in colonisation, which affects our interpretation of beginnings in south-east Europe, in central Europe and in the central and west Mediterranean, and of endings in south-east and central Europe. The development over recent years of both ethnoarchaeology and a theory of agency should allow us to see people as knowledgeable agents actively employing material culture in any number of social situations and strategies.[3] This kind of theory has still to be widely deployed with the European Neolithic evidence. One example is the late forager Ertebølle culture of southern Scandinavia (discussed in chapter 6). This is now widely seen as the indigenous predecessor of the regional early Neolithic, but the argument is often framed in economic terms, with little attention paid to the role of material culture in first maintaining and then altering a sense of identity.

Subsistence economy and settlement. Since the evolutionary characterisations of the nineteenth century (and even of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment), and reinforced by Childe's famous 1920s label of a 'Neolithic revolution', the Neolithic period has been seen again and again as an economic phenomenon. People in south-west Asia are seen to have developed control over both plants and animals, whether to solve problems of population and resource depletion or to underpin a sedentary lifestyle,[4] and the resulting spread of a new economy becomes inexorable. The inherent superiority of early agriculture over foraging has rightly been challenged, but the existence of a pre-formed agricultural 'package' is still widely accepted; discussion then centres on how long foragers could hold up the new machine. The whole concept received a further boost with the introduction some fifteen years ago of the idea of a 'secondary products revolution', in which new forms of traction and transport technology and new forms of animal exploitation, including milking and the use of wool, supplemented the initial intensive cultivation of cereals and the breeding of animals for meat.[5] In this view, whatever the undoubted merits of some aspects of the secondary products model, people hit the soils and grazing resources of Europe already as sophisticated 'farmers', programmed for a future career of relentless growth and intensification. There has been too little discussion of the social context of production.[6] In the chapters that follow I note many examples of what may be called a non-intensifying Neolithic, when people can be characterised by lives spent following cattle in woodland as much as on land cleared for cultivation, and when they defined themselves in relation to animals as subjects of social value rather than as objects of economic or dietary concern.

A recurrent and pervasive element of the economic model has been the assumption that while foragers led mobile lives, farmers were sedentary. Aspects of this have been challenged. Better knowledge of ethnography has produced many examples of more or less sedentary foragers, and a more discriminating vocabulary with which to describe different kinds of mobility. It has also raised awareness of patterns not well represented in the ethnographic record. On the other hand, the relation of sedentism to food production has been examined. It is possible to see sedentism as the cause of the adoption of food production, rather than food production as the enabler of sedentism.[7] But few scholars (including myself) have resisted the equation of 'farming' with 'settled life'. Following the lead given by a minority of scholars, this book strongly advocates a much more flexible approach to all these matters, right across the continent. I shall describe tell occupations in south-east Europe, for example, which have so often been seen as the acme of successful, sedentary Neolithic existence, as the anchors or tethers in patterns of radiating mobility.

Population. 'Economic archaeology' had its heyday in the early phase of 'processual archaeology', in the 1960s and 1970s, but both preceded that and has outlasted it. Interest in population dynamics has a similar history. Several population-led models were developed for the beginnings of domestication in south-west Asia, and in Europe the vision became one of farmers, blessed not only with an adaptable and productive subsistence base, but with powers of rapid breeding as well. In some circumstances, the adoption of agriculture was seen to lead to an unleashing of reproductive potential, after the heavy constraints of foraging existence. In one view, the Neolithic spread across Europe at a steady rate in a 'wave of advance', fuelled by a burgeoning population increasing on its frontiers.[8] Such expectations have rarely been met by the dating evidence for a much more punctuated process, or by the lower than predicted density of sites on the ground, and they bypass comparative ethnographic and historical evidence for effective means of population control. The landscapes I envisage had in them much more movement by far fewer people.

Social structure. Again since evolutionary schemes of the nineteenth century, reinforced by Childe's interests in social change, and encouraged in turn both by processual archaeology's rather rigid classifications and by the concerns of post-processual archaeology with the concepts of power and ideology, students of the Neolithic period have long assumed a steady process of social change. Different kinds of journey have been envisaged, from savagery to barbarism, from hunters to peasants to leaders, from bands to tribes to chiefdoms, from lineages to households, or from 'big men' to 'ritual authority structures' to 'prestige goods economies'.[9] But the nature of the journey has been the same whichever theoretical tour operator one travels with: farmers different ('more complex') from foragers, and later farmers more riven by concerns with power and control than early farmers. All such accounts rely to a greater or lesser account on a sense of evolution. They draw on a broad ethnography which is itself the product of very specific and much later historical conditions. They tend to reduce diversity to a limited number of stereotypes (rather like social characterisations offered by structural functionalists in the anthropology of the 1920s and 1930s). And they minimise the importance of individuals.[10] Assuming some kind of universal human nature, the divisions of the present day are projected into the past; the spark in the engine of social change is one given off by relentless conflict and competition.

I do not envisage the Neolithic period as some far-off Arcadia. There may well have been endemic bickerings, and we shall see evidence for individual killings and destructions, and the occasional more brutal massacre. The stone axes and adzes of the period, some of which were undoubtedly put to good use on wood, may also have been weapons. But there is little evidence for an increase in endemic levels of conflict during the period, except perhaps in arid parts of Iberia towards the middle of the third millennium BC, a complex issue which I discuss in chapter 9. One frequent response is to claim more subtle forms of domination or hegemony, through control of knowledge, ritual and belief.[11] This makes extravagant demands on the concept of ideology, and ignores the context of landscapes with space in them in which to avoid coercion. I prefer an emphasis on values, ideals and social sanctions, rather than on social structures. We may be dealing with a very broad range of fluid social relationships, for which a vocabulary derived from a recent ethnography is quite inadequate. Terms like lineage and household have their uses in making us think about social organisation, but it is an illusion to think that we can capture Neolithic social reality with them. So much of the Neolithic evidence seems to be to do with people coming together in shared activities and projects, that I use the term, admittedly itself vague, of community. In part, the long process of becoming Neolithic – which in some areas, for example southern Scandinavia, began in the Mesolithic – was the participation by people in new forms of social interaction. It must be legitimate therefore to canvass the relevance of ideals and values of sharing, hospitality, generosity and honour, with shame as a powerful sanction for non-participation, non-reciprocity or deviance.[12] These too are probably anachronistic, but the shift in vocabulary is fundamental. We can substitute conflict, domination and coercion, even if we deny the existence of Arcadia, with notions of rivalry and emulation.

Belief. In the 1930s, some scholars discussed the spread of monument building in northwest Europe in terms of 'megalithic missionaries'. From the 1970s monuments were associated with profaner concerns, such as the marking of territory, the display of group solidarity, or the duping of other members of society. The idea of 'megalithic missionaries' could be dismissed as just another version of the invasion hypothesis of the culture history model, but it does contain a sense of the sacred. This needs to be revived in Neolithic studies. Part of the ground has been prepared in the recent *domus:agrios* model, which demands attention to the conceptual world of the Neolithic.[13] The model proposes that a set of concepts based around the idea and practice of the house, the *domus*, was both a metaphor and the mechanism for the domestication and socialisation of people. The *domus* was defined in relation to the wild or *agrios*, which became a more important organising principle in later parts of the Neolithic. Stimulating though the model has been, it raises many questions. It relies on a simplistic binary opposition, in the style of structuralist anthropology, and it is simply implausible to consign hunters and foragers, and then the world beyond the Neolithic settlement, to a domain characterised as wild. The model makes many conventional assumptions about the nature of Neolithic society, sedentism and landscape. *Domus* and *agrios* seem to operate as substitutes for individuals. And it is, in common with other approaches since the 1970s, a very secular world that is presented.

Time and histories

If part of the process of becoming Neolithic was participation in new forms of social interaction, another part was a changing sense of belonging, of descent and of place in the scheme of things. It is vital to consider notions of time and the sacred.[14] Becoming Neolithic may have been much more a spiritual conversion than a matter of changing diets. Notions of human community may have been sanctioned by links to a divine community of sacred beings, from whom descent was derived. Sacred beings could have been seen to have offered gifts of new resources, but in so doing brought a beginning to a previously timeless world. The web of social values and social relations was underpinned by a sense of divine or ancestral intervention. Community was created to satisfy spiritual prerogatives.

This is not a covert recall of 'mother goddesses'. I shall not argue for any uniform set of beliefs about time, descent and the sacred across Neolithic Europe as a whole. Histories intervene. The sense of sacred beginnings held by monument builders in fifth-millennium BC Brittany may have been very different from that of the first generations of tell users in the Balkans. In chapters 3 and 4, I shall follow others in arguing that figurines in human and animal form may in fact be to do with human ancestors rather than a pantheon of divine beings as the late Marija Gimbutas and others have suggested. The growing bulk of tell mounds themselves was further visible proof for successive generations of the time of their ancestors. In the LBK of central and western Europe, dominant spiritual concerns may have been cattle, woodland and again the community of human forebears. The welladapted foragers of north-west Europe, already in many ways themselves on parallel tracks, may have been converted to new ways by the transmission of a new sense of time, of beginnings and of their place in the scheme of things, derived from these long histories.

I have begun to set out some aspects of the diverse Neolithic phenomenon. We can retain the term as a useful if at times clumsy label, but its connotations are shifting rapidly. The changes we are interested in cannot be confined to the Neolithic period alone. There was no uniform process, no single history. The Neolithic period is itself a series of becomings, rather than the spread of something already formed. The ultimate consequences of settled life and agrarian subsistence, perhaps achieved only in the first millennium BC, cannot be projected back into conditions at the beginning.

I shall try to situate each region in the context of its history. There are many histories to tell, each affected by another. I shall evoke a world of woodland and rich resources, native and imported, a world not without risk but endowed also with the possibility of choice. I envisage routines of restrained mobility, people and their animals moving through landscapes, only partially tethered by the needs of cereal cultivation, which may have been as much for fodder or beer as for human food, but strongly attached to chosen places as part of their identity. The evidence for growth of population, spread of settlement, and intensification of economy is more limited than our models have predicted. For the most part, I envisage patterns of slow change, of convergence, of continuity of indigenous population. These were small-scale, face-to-face societies, held together, even when dispersed through their landscapes, by a strong sense of community. I shall argue that that sense of community and the values which underpinned it were linked to a sense of time and descent, and to a sense of the sacred. In the chapters that follow I try to show why.