

Dr Whittle reviews the latest archaeological evidence on Neolithic Europe from 7000 to 2500 B.C. Describing important areas, sites and problems, he addresses the major themes that have engaged the attention of scholars: the transition from a forager lifestyle; the rate and dynamics of change; and the nature of Neolithic society. He challenges conventional views, arguing that Neolithic society was rooted in the values and practices of its forager predecessors right across the continent. The processes of settling down and adopting farming were piecemeal and slow. Only gradually did new attitudes emerge, to time and the past, to the sacred realms of ancestors and the dead, to nature and to the concept of community.

Unique in its broad and up-to-date coverage of long-term processes of change on a continental scale, this completely rewritten and revised version of Whittle's *Neolithic Europe: a survey* reflects radical changes in the evidence and in interpretative approaches over the past decade.

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EUROPE IN THE NEOLITHIC

THE CREATION OF NEW WORLDS

ALASDAIR WHITTLE

*School of History and Archaeology
University of Wales, Cardiff*



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For Elisabeth

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PREFACE

The publishers of this series asked me for another edition of my *Neolithic Europe: a survey* (1985), and this is the result: a new book altogether. In it I try to characterise a way of life rooted in the forager past, especially in its social values of sharing and integration, but distinguishable not only by material and economic changes but by new beliefs about descent, beginnings and time: about the place of people in the scheme of things. If I give less importance than many to some of the technological changes seen in the archaeological record, I emphasise throughout the importance of long, slow, Neolithic histories.

This book is more selective than its predecessor. I say far less about research traditions and conditions, and problems of chronology, except when they directly affect my narrative, and I describe far fewer material sequences for their own sake. These matters have not become less important, but both the specialist and the student interested in them will find plenty of signposts to them in the references at the end of the book. In presenting a personal synthesis achieved through selection, I am not aiming to reflect orthodoxy or consensus, even if such existed. I try to make it clear where I diverge from other possible versions of Neolithic histories.

Where does Europe begin and end? My Europe in this book is a selection of places and regions from the wider area of modern political Europe. Some might extend Europe as far east as the Urals. I cover selected aspects of Ukraine, and the river Dniepr is my effective boundary. Though I wish I had more, I have little space for Byelorussia or the north-west part of Russia. I discuss southern Scandinavia in some depth, but not the rest of the north. In the heart of central and western Europe, I have had to choose some areas for longer treatment than others; I say little in detail about the upper Danube basin, for example, nor about the catchment of the Seine: the Paris basin. In times later – and earlier – than the Neolithic period, it would be quite arbitrary to separate the north African coast from the Iberian peninsula or the central Mediterranean; in the Neolithic I see a different kind of development in north Africa, and in this instance it is convenient to follow the political geography of modern or historical times. For lack of space, my treatment of the central and west Mediterranean is briefer than the region deserves.

Not only is this Europe geographically very varied, but it has numberless histories. In the Neolithic period, there were many Neolithics. Such diversity encourages me to select themes and problems. I offer neither a handbook nor an encyclopaedia. I try first to characterise the forager way of life, and then to examine the conditions in which new forms of belief, social relations, material culture and subsistence were adopted. In nearly all areas, I now believe that it was largely indigenous people who created Neolithic histories. Not only was this process gradual in most regions, in no one region were its consequences quite

Preface

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the same. That is my justification, if such is needed, for selection. I recognise the sting in Peter Levi's dictum in *The Hill of Kronos* that 'the naive and parasitical scholar with insufficient time to be thorough is like a greedy man without a tin opener'. I can only say that I have opened many cans, and hope that the reader enjoys my arrangement of the resulting heaps.

Interpretation is unavoidable, central, obligatory. There can be no retreat into description alone. I do not believe that the past exists only in the present, but the evidence from the past that is available to us is the result of choices and interpretations (where to look, what to excavate, how to record) in the first place. I make no claim that we can truly know what went on in the Neolithic period. Would there not have been innumerable contemporary ways of telling the same story, even in one region at one moment of time? The challenge is to try to think imaginatively about other lives. Any book of this kind is really a prolonged conditional sentence, an extended hypothetical argument. In the interests of readability, I have tried to reduce the number of stated qualifications, but they should be taken as read throughout.

I use calendrical chronology throughout, based on calibrated radiocarbon dates, and tree ring dates where they are available. Radiocarbon dating is not precise. That is part of the nature of a Neolithic narrative. The rich evidence also allows many other ways of telling. The reader can decide which are most successful.

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