CHAPTER 1

Detached fragments of humanity

> *The Berawan of Long Teru lost their stock of skulls in a disastrous fire that consumed the entire longhouse. It was an incident that was often recalled, and the poor woman, now elderly, whose kitchen fire started the blaze has never been allowed to forget it. But oddly enough, the loss of skulls was not lamented. Though it was claimed that the heads had the potential to bring benefits to the community, the service of them was considered onerous. The heads had to be 'fed', so it was said, with small offerings, and kept warm with a fire that never went out. Women had to avoid that part of the longhouse veranda, or pass by in a crouched position. Any contact with heads was dreaded, so that only old men, weary of life, would dare move them, whenever the house needed rebuilding.*
>
> Metcalf 1996, 251

> *And so they met and there was a hard battle, and not long ere Melbricta fell and his followers, and Sigurd caused the heads to be fastened to his horses' cruppers as a glory for himself. And then they rode home, and boasted of their victory. And when they were come on the way, then Sigurd wished to spur the horse with his foot, and he struck his calf against the tooth which stuck out of Melbricta's head and grazed it; and in that wound sprung up pain and swelling, and that led him to his death.*
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> *Orkneyinga Saga*, 5, trans. Dasent, 1894

Introduction

Some of the best-preserved prehistoric buildings in Europe are to be found in the Western Isles of Scotland. Along the coastal fringes of islands such as Lewis and North Uist are the buried remnants of extraordinary structures, long since engulfed by sand. One wet spring, in the late 1980s, I was busy excavating a settlement in the small township of Cnip, on the west coast of Lewis (Ill. 1.1). People living nearby had noticed the remains of some stone buildings eroding onto the beach, and a rescue excavation had been hastily arranged. The settlement at Cnip turned out to be a remarkable site, spanning the first century BC to the second century AD. The original building was a wheelhouse, a type of drystone round-house dug down into the sand. Soaring drystone piers (the 'spokes' of the wheel) formed a circle of small cells around a central, communal space. The walls still stood above head height in places.

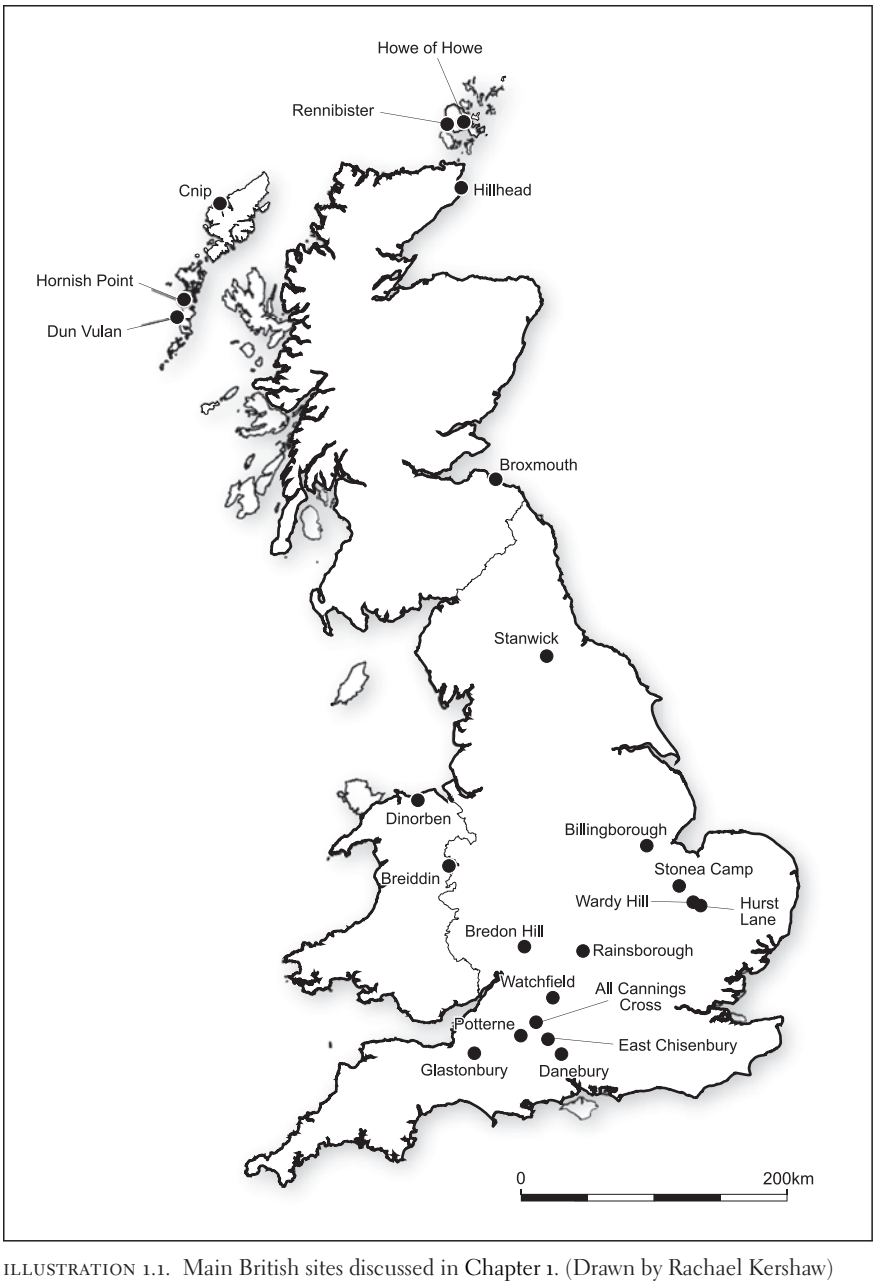

ILLUSTRATION 1.1. Main British sites discussed in Chapter 1. (Drawn by Rachael Kershaw)

This exceptional survival meant that the houses at Cnip could be dissected in great detail (Armit 2006a). When we began dismantling the walls, it soon became apparent that each stage in the life of the settlement had been marked in some way. In most cases, small deposits of carefully selected objects had been placed in pits, under thresholds, or behind the walls of the houses as they were built. Behind one wall, for example, were several

ILLUSTRATION 1.2. Votive deposit, comprising a cranium, a rounded stone, and some fragments of pottery and bone, placed in a pit below a small cell at the Cnip wheelhouse, Isle of Lewis, during the first century AD. (Photograph by author)

separate deposits: a complete pot, a length of articulated cattle vertebrae, and the head of a great auk, a now-extinct sea bird.

One of these deposits was particularly striking. Sometime during the first century AD the inhabitants of the wheelhouse had decided to create a small cell within the remains of a disused building. Before laying the foundations, someone scooped a hollow into the sand and placed in it a few objects, specially selected for the occasion (Ill. 1.2). Among these was the upper part of a human cranium, laid in the base of the hollow. Next to it was a smooth, rounded stone, which seemed to echo the shape of the cranial vault, and which was quite unlike the usual angular building stones found around the site. There was also a second cranial fragment, probably human but perhaps animal, and two scraps of pottery. Once placed in the hollow, this collection of broken and fragmentary remains was covered over with sand and buried beneath the slab floor of the new building (Armit 2006a, 244–8).

On one level this deposit fits rather neatly into the wider pattern of votive deposition at Cnip. Yet the deliberate incorporation of human remains marks it out and raises some important questions. Who was this person: perhaps an ancestor, or an enemy, or maybe a recently deceased inhabitant of the wheelhouse? Why was it judged appropriate to place human remains in this particular place and not in others? And why was only the head deposited?

The cranium itself yields few clues. It belonged to an adult, probably middle-aged. Its partial condition suggests that a significant period of time had elapsed between death and this ultimate burial. What had happened during that time? Was the head curated in some way by the inhabitants of Cnip, as a defleshed skull or cranium, or perhaps as a fleshed head, preserved by smoking or drying? Or had the cranium simply been retrieved from a grave, or some other location, with this votive deposit in mind? The smaller cranial fragment found next to it showed traces of gnaw marks, suggesting that it at least had been left exposed to animals, either within the settlement (where dogs and pigs were kept) or elsewhere.

The alkaline qualities of the Hebridean machair sands are ideal for the preservation of bone. Yet, although thousands of animal bones were recovered, the excavations at Cnip yielded only three other pieces of human bone. One was a fragment of tibia, or shin-bone, from a domestic midden. The others, found within the buildings, were, once again, pieces of cranium. One fragment from a young adult, found in wall packing, bore a series of cut marks, which were hard to interpret. Some of them could be the result of scalping, but this would not explain them all. Some may result from an unsuccessful attempt at trepanation (McSweeney 2006, 134–5), although they may equally have been made shortly after death. The third piece, from the cranium of a middle-aged adult, found at the entrance to a small cellular building, had unquestionably been modified after death, because a hole had been drilled from both inside and out (136). This may have been intended to allow the head, or cranium, to be suspended from a cord.

The small but intriguing assemblage of human bone from Cnip was plainly not randomly generated. Three of the four pieces (the only three found inside the houses) were cranial fragments, all from middle-aged or young adults. All had been modified and/or curated. For whatever reasons, the Iron Age inhabitants at Cnip had a strong interest in human heads. How might we interpret such material? With only four bones to work with, should we even bother to attempt interpretation at all?

The published literature reveals some intriguing parallels for the Cnip cranial fragments. One of the most dramatic was recovered by the Caithness landowner and antiquarian, Sir Francis Tress Barry, during his excavations at the complex Atlantic roundhouse of Hillhead (Anon. 1909). This calvarium, or skullcap, had been drilled through with three evenly spaced holes. These suggest that the skull, or fleshed head, like the drilled fragment from Cnip, might have been strung up for display (Ill. 1.3). Interestingly, this fragment was also found at an access point into a building, in this case on the floor of the entrance passage leading into the roundhouse (Tress Barry n.d., 7). Slightly further north, at Rennibister in Orkney, disarticulated bones representing six adults and at least 12 children were discovered in a rock-cut 'earth house', which probably dates to the early part of the Iron Age (Marwick 1927a; Armit and Ginn 2007). From the published records it appears that the

ILLUSTRATION 1.3. Perforated skullcap from Hillhead, Caithness. (Photograph by Fiona Shapland)

bodies had been carefully sorted after a considerable period of decomposition. Four of the skulls had been placed beside one of the pillars supporting the roof. In each case, the cranium had been inverted over a mandible (Marwick 1927b, 299).

Further instances come from the excavations at the complex roundhouse of Dun Vulan in South Uist, where the long sequence of occupation yielded numerous small fragments of human bone (Parker Pearson and Sharples 1999; Chamberlain 1999). These again included a wholly disproportionate number of cranial and mandible fragments, some of them in contexts suggestive of votive deposition. Radiocarbon dates suggest that some of these fragments were several centuries old at the time of deposition (Mulville et al. 2003). For instance, one piece of human mandible recovered from a stone-lined drain was radiocarbon dated to 110 BC – AD 130: yet the small rectangular building that this drain served was not itself built until some time during the third and fourth centuries AD. The excavators thus argue that this carefully curated fragment, some centuries old, was deliberately offered up as a foundation deposit when the later building was constructed (23–4). As at Cnip, human remains at Dun Vulan had apparently been curated for a significant period. Further skull remains from various contexts in the long-lived settlement of Howe of Howe in Orkney, although not as well-dated, hint at similar processes (Ballin Smith 1994; Armit and Ginn 2007). Indeed, the more closely one looks in the records of earlier excavations in Atlantic Scotland, the more of these apparently isolated and anomalous human bones one finds (Armit and Ginn 2007).

Midden bones

The situation is similar elsewhere in the British Iron Age, where fragments of human bone are often encountered in seemingly unlikely places. All Cannings Cross, in Wiltshire, for example, offers some parallels. This site, excavated between 1911 and 1922, dates to the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. It comprised an extensive area of dark soils, apparently unenclosed, incorporating occasional laid floors,

hearths, pits, and even some post-built structures (Cunnington 1923). All Cannings Cross has been linked to other sites in and around the Vale of Pewsey, characterised by similar spreads of dark soil (Lawson 2000, 265). These have sometimes been described as middens, on the basis of their rich assemblages of discarded rubbish and their general lack of evidence for permanent occupation. They were, however, more than simple rubbish dumps. Instead, they seem to have been used for feasting and other activities associated with periodic gatherings of people – events that generated huge quantities of debris. David McOmish (1996, 75) has suggested that the term 'ceremonial feasting places' would be a better fit.

At All Cannings Cross, among the broken pottery, animal bone, and other debris, the excavators found more than 30 human cranial fragments, scattered and dispersed with no obvious pattern to their distribution. Aside from these, no other human remains were found. As in Atlantic Scotland, some of the All Cannings Cross fragments had been deliberately modified, apparently to be 'used for scraping or other purposes' (Cunnington 1923, 40). One had been worked into a small circular roundel, 'almost exactly the size of a penny-piece' and had a hole bored well off-centre (Keith 1923, 41, plate 26). Judging from the wear marks, it had apparently been carried or worn for some time, perhaps as a charm or amulet. A similar perforated roundel, made from the occipital bone 'of an old person', was found at Glastonbury lake village in Somerset (Bulleid and Gray 1917, 405). However, the Glastonbury piece is around 7cm in diameter with a central perforation, resembling a spindle whorl.

Another midden, at Potterne, some 10 km from All Cannings Cross, covers a larger area of around 3.5 hectares (Lawson 2000). Excavations of a small part of this site uncovered an enormous artefactual assemblage and around 134,000 animal bones (Locker 2000, 101). Compared to this, the human bone assemblage was tiny, with only 139 fragments recovered (J. McKinley 2000, 96). Yet, once again, these few bones raise many questions. Unlike the material from All Cannings Cross, the human bone at Potterne was not restricted to cranial fragments, though these did make up more than half the assemblage. Both sexes were represented as well as a range of age groups, including a child of around six (table 9). The absence of mandibles and cervical vertebrae suggests that it was defleshed crania, rather than heads, that were present on the site. Indeed, the virtual absence of facial bones may suggest that only calvaria, or cranial vaults, were present. The rest of the human bones had been equally selectively obtained. Most were long bones, with the femur predominating, while axial bones (such as vertebrae and ribs) were extremely rare. Small bones, such as those from the hands and feet were entirely missing. Selectivity was also marked in other ways. Among the leg bones, for example, there was a marked preference for right over left limbs; and, although numerous neonatal and foetal bones were present in the assemblage, there were no cranial remains from these individuals (99 and table 9).

None of the cranial fragments from Potterne seem to have been worked into objects, but at least two had a 'polished' or 'ivoried' appearance. Although the suggested causes of this condition included possible variations in the depositional environment, or 'some form of human manipulation' (J. McKinley 2000, 97), the same condition in the animal bone assemblage is interpreted, much less ambiguously, as being due to 'some cooking treatment, such as boiling' (Locker 2000, 103). Because there is no sign that any of the

human bones were butchered, boiling may have formed part of the preparation of heads for display rather than consumption.

Human remains were also found in small-scale excavations at East Chisenbury, another of these midden sites, which extends over nearly 4 hectares (McOmish 1996). Although only a tiny area was examined, the excavators once again found human remains including four skull fragments (David Field pers. comm.). One of these seemed to have been deliberately placed, since it was surrounded by broken sherds from a single vessel and a small block of stone (McOmish 1996, 73). Seven centuries and nearly 600 miles may separate them, but the resonances with the cranial deposits from Cnip are strong.

Trophies and offerings

A different sort of head deposit was encountered by Sir Mortimer Wheeler during his excavations at Stanwick, in North Yorkshire in the early 1950s. Stanwick is an enormous complex, with enclosures covering more than 250 hectares, and it seems to have been built at the end of the Iron Age, in the middle of the first century AD. It appears to have been an important stronghold of the Brigantes, the most powerful northern English tribe at the time of the Roman invasion (Wheeler 1954). Although Wheeler's excavations were restricted to a few short stretches of ditch and a tiny fraction of the interior, he did encounter some striking deposits. Wheeler's Site B examined a length of ditch adjacent to one of the gateways and probably dating to the second half of the first century AD. In the waterlogged ditch terminal were various objects, including an iron sword in a bronze-bound wooden scabbard and the cranium, mandible, and cervical vertebrae of a middle-aged man. The cranium bore traces of at least three severe wounds inflicted by a sword or axe at the time of death (Osman Hill 1954). It appeared that this was the head of a warrior killed in battle and subsequently decapitated. The association of the cranium, mandible, and vertebrae shows that it was a fleshed head that was originally deposited in the ditch.

Wheeler (1954, 53) suggested that both the sword and the severed head may have formed parts of a trophy, displayed over the gateway, which subsequently tumbled into the ditch terminal when the site was destroyed. There is no apparent indication, however, in Osman Hill's (1954) osteological report as to how the head might have been fixed to the gate structure, and we should not exclude the possibility that the head, and perhaps the sword and scabbard, were simply placed into the ditch terminals. Interestingly, although this particular head deposit is often cited (e.g., L. Laing, 1981, 115), there were other cranial fragments found at Stanwick. Two other ditch cuttings, one of them more than a kilometre away at the far south of the enclosure system, yielded a further four pieces of human skull, which were not described in any detail in Wheeler's report (Osman Hill 1954, 56). Compared to the overall extent of the ditches at Stanwick, Wheeler's excavations were minimal, making it all the more surprising that so many cranial fragments were recovered. We must, presumably, expect that many more skull fragments remain within the several kilometres of unexcavated ditch.

Several other Iron Age British sites seem to support Wheeler's suggestion that human heads were put on display. At Bredon Hill, in Gloucestershire, for example, three crania and six mandibles were found during a 1930s excavation, under the debris from the collapsed

gate. The excavator suggested that these were the remains of trophy heads, displayed above the gateway (Hencken 1938, 57). We should bear in mind, however, that many other human bones were found in the debris surrounding the entrance to this site, representing up to around 64 people, many of whom appear to have been subject to 'extensive mutilation … possibly on ritualistic grounds' (55). In the early Iron Age levels of the hillfort of Dinorben, in northeast Wales, fragments of human crania were found in the floors of three houses, as well as in one of the guard chambers at the main entrance. A further mandible fragment, recovered from the ditch next to the entrance, was interpreted by the excavators as a fallen part of a decayed trophy head, formerly displayed over the gateway (Gardner and Savory 1964, 221). As at Bredon Hill, however, it should be noted that other postcranial fragments found in the Early Iron Age levels did not attract detailed discussion in the excavation report. Elsewhere, heads seem to have been associated with the construction of ramparts, as at the Breiddin hillfort in Powys, where the maxilla (facial bone) of an adult had been incorporated within the Late Bronze Age rampart (Musson 1991, 23).

The phenomenon of display is not restricted to hillforts. Numerous skull deposits are recorded from the early excavations at the Glastonbury lake village (Bulleid and Gray 1917), where they dominated a human bone assemblage otherwise largely restricted to two partial burnt skeletons and around 10 neonatal burials. Most of the material was fragmentary, but in at least two cases, crania and mandibles were found together (Coles and Minnitt 1995, 170–4), suggesting the deposition of fleshed heads. Both showed evidence for unhealed sword injuries, suggesting a rather violent death. At least one had suffered significant damage to the foramen magnum, suggesting they it had been displayed on a spear or stake (ibid.; Boyd-Dawkins 1917).

I could, of course, go on. This brief survey of the British evidence omits a host of intriguing assemblages; skull fragments displaying signs of perimortem trauma from the interior of Broxmouth hillfort in East Lothian (Armit and McKenzie in prep.); a severed head in the 'guard-chamber' at Rainsborough hillfort in Northamptonshire (Banks 1967); evidence of decapitation and ritual deposition in the grain pits at Danebury (Craig et al. 2005); the structured deposition of sometimes modified skull fragments from a range of Iron Age sites in the eastern counties of England, including Wardy Lane, Billingborough, Hurst Lane, and Stonea Camp (Evans 2003); and innumerable other examples (Wilson 1981). Nonetheless, the basic point is clear – that Iron Age communities across Britain engaged in a range of practices relating to the removal, curation, and display of the human head.

Interpretations

How should we interpret these strange and highly selective assemblages of human remains, these 'detached pieces of humanity' (Cunnington 1919, 25)? Writing her report on the excavations at All Cannings Cross, Maud Cunnington had little doubt that she had found evidence for Celtic headhunting, as described in the writings of the classical authors (Cunnington 1923, 40). Indeed, wherever human skull fragments have been found on Iron Age settlements, the Celtic 'cult of the head' has been a popular explanation (e.g., Whimster 1981, 189; Wait 1985, 120), drawing on a powerful blend of classical and medieval literature, as well as archaeological and iconographic material from across much of Europe. The Celts, it was thought, saw the head as the seat of the soul, and thus severed

heads could retain special powers after death. By cutting off and keeping the heads of their enemies, warriors could gain control over the spirits of the dead. By the same token, the heads of important individuals might be venerated after death. Identifications of 'headhunting' or the 'veneration of the head' in the archaeological record have thus tended to be seen as indicating local adherence to a perceived pan-Celtic tradition, linking the islands of northern and western Scotland, and the chalklands of southern England, to the Mediterranean coasts of France and Spain.

Can we then understand the contents of the pit at Cnip, the cranial fragments from All Cannings Cross, and all the other instances discussed here as local expressions of some deep-rooted, distinctively Celtic, cosmological principle? This is doubtful. The concept of a culturally unified Celtic people in prehistory has been vigorously questioned in recent times (e.g., S. James 1999; Collis 2003), and there has been an increasing awareness of marked regional variations within the traditionally Celtic world of the European Iron Age. Iron Age communities of Atlantic Scotland were, in many ways, very different from their contemporaries in Wessex (e.g., Armit 2003; Cunliffe 2005), and neither need have had much in common with the continental communities described in the classical literary descriptions of the Celts. More fundamentally, however, special treatments of the head are present in chronologically disparate archaeological contexts in Europe, from Mesolithic 'skull nests', as at Ofnet (Orschiedt 2002, 2005) and Kaufertsberg in southwest Germany (Orschiedt 1998), to the relics of medieval Christian saints. In fact, similar practices can be documented from the earliest times through to recent centuries in most parts of the world (e.g., Chacon and Dye 2007). In such circumstances, it is difficult to explain headhunting, and head veneration, by reference to some Celtic cultural milieu.

It is also increasingly evident that, despite the high visibility of skull fragments at many Iron Age sites, other parts of the body were also subject to unusual treatments. We have already seen how the human bone assemblage at Potterne had a disproportionate representation of femurs, an under-representation of axial bones, and a bias towards right, as opposed to left, limbs. The Iron Age hillfort of Danebury, in Hampshire, has yielded considerable evidence for a special interest in heads (e.g., Walker 1984; Craig et al. 2005), yet, as Niall Sharples (1991, 81) has pointed out, numerous other body parts, including articulated limbs and pelvic girdles, were also deposited in pits around the interior of the hillfort. Nobody has yet argued the case for a 'Celtic cult of the pelvic girdle'. It is clear, however, that any attempt to understand the treatment of the human head in the Iron Age must also address wider attitudes to the human body.

Another issue, often overlooked, is the frequent association of human and animal bones. At Watchfield, in Oxfordshire, for example, a human cranium had been placed into a pit with a pig skull (Roberts and McKinley 2003), and at Hornish Point in South Uist, the remains of a young boy had been quartered and placed in four pits along with the butchered remains of young cattle, sheep, and pigs (Barber 2003). Neither of these instances is resonant of conventional rubbish disposal. Instead, the deliberate admixture of animal and human bodies seems to carry quite specific meanings. The killing, consumption, and deposition of animals may in some cases have substituted for the similar treatment of humans. In other cases, the deposition of particular animals, or animal parts, may have lent additional meaning to the human remains that accompanied them into the earth. Elsewhere we may be seeing a blurring of categories between animal and human (Hill 1995, 16).

In the following chapters, I want to re-examine the archaeological evidence for Iron Age headhunting, and associated practices, from a rather different perspective. Although the classical and early medieval literature dealing with the Celts remains essential, I try to develop new approaches using, primarily, anthropological studies of more recent headhunting societies and close contextual analyses of particular Iron Age communities. Anthropological literature on headhunting has been affected by the reluctance of recent generations of anthropologists to focus on aspects of non-Western cultures that might lend support to popular caricatures of the 'primitive'. Nonetheless, detailed case studies and synthetic works exist for certain areas, notably Southeast Asia (e.g., R. Rosaldo 1980; Hoskins 1996a) and Oceania (e.g., Aswani 2000a), as well as an enormous body of early ethnographic literature of highly variable quality. The insights that such studies might generate have been largely ignored in past studies of Iron Age Europe. In part, this is because the existing literature on the Celts has sometimes seemed to provide all the information we need. I do not suggest that the anthropological literature can provide ready-made templates that can simply be applied to the communities of Iron Age Europe. Yet it can potentially furnish us with fresh ideas and approaches, opening up new avenues for interpretation of the Iron Age material and revealing connections and meanings that were previously dormant.

Anthropological studies, as we will see in Chapter 3, reveal the centrality of headhunting within many non-Western cultures and the wide range of cultural and material expressions associated with the treatment of the human head. Headhunting, clearly, is far more than the collection of battle trophies. Heads may be taken from the out-group, through acts of group-sanctioned violence, or from the in-group, as a product of funerary practice. The head can be a potent symbol, with associations relating to power, fertility, coming of age, the acquisition of status, and gender. The control and deployment of this symbol can potentially tell us a great deal about wider social relationships and practices.

Ideas and practices associated with headhunting manifest themselves quite differently, even in neighbouring communities, and this idea of 'difference' will be important when we come to look again at the societies of Iron Age Europe. As will become clear in Chapter 2, I am not setting out to define a distinctively 'Celtic' belief system, applicable across the length and breadth of Iron Age Europe. I want instead to explore the nature of specific Iron Age communities, in particular historical circumstances. This requires a close analysis of the archaeological material within particular regions, rather than recourse to pan-Celtic explanations. Variations on the theme of headhunting, curation and display, can help us to reassess the social and cultural relationships between Iron Age societies without resorting to blanket attributions of shared Celtic ethnicity.

Some definitions

Headhunting

The anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1996b, 2) defines headhunting as 'an organised, coherent form of violence in which the severed head is given a specific ritual meaning and the act of head-taking is consecrated and commemorated in some form'. This is a useful