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PART TWO

MOVING LANDSCAPES: WORLDVIEWS AND CONTACT
This contribution offers a model for the Neolithization of Britain and Ireland featuring multiple strands of immigration, from different parts of France to different parts of these islands – at differing scales and for differing reasons – over the course of several centuries from the third quarter of the 5th millennium to the first two centuries of the 4th. A critique of the ‘indigenous communities as prime agents of this change’ model is offered, and the importance of understanding events in these islands within a broader picture of continental developments is emphasized.

Introduction

Archaeologists have been speculating about the nature of the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in Britain and Ireland since well before Stuart Piggott proposed his ‘multiple colonization’ hypothesis in 1954 (Piggott 1954). Over the last two decades the debate has essentially been polarized around the issue of whether the prime agents for the observed changes in economy, lifestyle and material culture were the indigenous population of these islands, actively adopting novel resources and ideas from the continent, or were immigrants. The two points of view entail different perspectives on the nature of the Neolithic economy and lifestyle, and these colour interpretations of the evidence. The proponents of the ‘indigenous adoption’ model – championed by Julian Thomas (e.g. Thomas 2003; 2004; 2007; 2008) – characterize early farming and its associated lifestyle in Britain and Ireland as being largely mobile, with strong continuity from the traditional hunting, gathering and fishing way of life and the selective uptake of novel practices and traditions. The apparent paucity of house structures over much of Britain is held up as evidence for a non-sedentary way of life, and where house (and house-like) structures exist, their role as settled places for living is downplayed (Thomas 1996). Cereal agriculture is presented as a very minor element in subsistence practices. The proponents of the ‘colonization’ model portray the change in terms of the introduction of a package (or rather several packages) of radically novel practices, resources, traditions and beliefs, countering claims about the nature of farming and settlement, for example, through a careful reassessment and re-statement of the evidence (e.g. Cooney 2001; Monk 2000; Pailler and Sheridan 2009; M. P. Richards 2004; Richards and Schulting 2006; Rowley-Conwy 2004; Schulting 2000; 2004; Sheridan 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2005; 2007; in press).

It will come as no surprise to those familiar with the present author’s work that her position is firmly within the ‘colonization’ camp, whereby indigenous acculturation is regarded as a subsequent development from, rather than a prime mover of, the introduction of novel traditions and practices. (Such a view is not at odds with that of commentators such as Alasdair Whittle (2007; Bayliss et al. 2008), who have appealed for models that encompass both immigration and acculturation.) While this contribution starts with a brief critique of the ‘indigenous adoption’ model, its main thrust is to demonstrate that the Neolithization of Britain and Ireland was by no means a unitary phenomenon, nor did it all happen abruptly around 4000 BC. By sketching the ‘big picture’, within which more nuanced models of regional processes of change can be situated (e.g. Sturt and Garrow, this volume), it is hoped to broaden and advance the debate, focusing attention on key outstanding questions and encouraging researchers...
to move on and examine what happened after the initial appearance of ‘the Neolithic’, however it is defined, in Britain and Ireland (cf. Bradley 2007; 2008). Note that the term ‘Britain’ will here include the Isle of Man. Note also that individual radiocarbon dates cited here (all at 2σ) have been calibrated using OxCal v4.1.

Brief critique of the ‘indigenous adoption’ model: a plea for informed discourse

... it is impossible to imagine how anything other than a colossal invasion of Neolithic people could have completely displaced the indigenous within a couple of centuries ... I submit, then, that small-scale colonization is the least likely explanation for the abrupt beginning of the Neolithic in Britain. (Thomas 2004, 117)

The principal alternatives are a massive, coordinated seaborne invasion, or the adoption of a Neolithic way of life by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. The author considers the latter to be more likely. (Thomas 2008, 65)

These two quotes, which demonstrate a retrenchment of a view in the face of all the evidence that has been published in the intervening four years, represent for this author all that is at fault with the ‘indigenous adoption’ model. To postulate a ‘colossal invasion of Neolithic people’ as the only alternative to indigenous adoption, and to characterize the process of Neolithization through immigration as complete displacement of the indigenous, is to set up two ‘straw man’ arguments that betray an ignorance of how culture change has actually worked around the world and over time. As countless examples show, from the ‘Founding Fathers’ of America to early European traders in Asia, small numbers of immigrants can, sooner or later, have a disproportionate influence on indigenous populations.

The key faults – in this author’s opinion – with the ‘indigenous adoption’ model expounded by Thomas and others are as follows. Firstly, the model is predicated on the assumption that hunter-gatherer-fisher communities in Britain and Ireland were (and had previously been) in contact with Continental farming groups. As pointed out by Pailler and Sheridan (2009), however, there is not one shred of evidence to substantiate this view (and here, the Ferriter’s Cove (Co. Kerry) evidence which Thomas cites to support his argument is regarded as an early example of migration from the Continent, rather than as contact initiated from Ireland: see below). Rather, later Mesolithic communities in Britain and Ireland are remarkable for their insularity: their lithic traditions are markedly different from those on the near Continent, for example (see Kador, this volume). While one cannot rule out the possibility that some short-distance cross-Channel contact took place between Mesolithic groups in southern England and their Continental neighbours, this has left no traces; and regarding farther-flung contacts, to postulate that, say, a group of hitherto insular-orientated Mesolithic hunter-gatherer-fishers from Sligo in north-west Ireland sailed to France and adopted an entire new way of life, including the tradition of constructing causewayed enclosures (see below), stretches credibility and invites the questions ‘how?’ and ‘why?’

Secondly, the ‘indigenous adoption’ model represents an inappropriate application of a model that had been developed to account for observed changes in hunter-gatherer-fisher communities along the coastal fringe of north-west continental Europe, where these groups were not separated by the sea from their farming neighbours. As Rowley-Conwy (2004) and others (e.g. Louwe Kooijmans 2007) have pointed out, these Ertebølle/Ellerbek/Swifterbant communities had a long history of contact with farming groups further inland, and adopted those elements of the farming lifestyle that suited their own lifestyle and their environment. The archaeological traces of this long relationship are in striking contrast to the appearance of entire packages of novelties in Britain and Ireland.

Thirdly, the model offers no convincing evidence to explain why British and Irish Mesolithic communities should change their lifestyles (including their diet) so profoundly at this time.

Fourthly, and similarly, it fails to take into account the known changes that were occurring on the near Continent during the late 5th and early 4th millennia (see below). In other words, developments in Britain and Ireland are considered from an insular viewpoint, and are not integrated within a broader picture of European developments.

Fifthly, the evidence put forward to support the idea of continuity with pre-existing indigenous ways of life – such as the positioning of some megalithic tombs on shell middens (e.g. Telford 2002) – often ignores the fact that the Mesolithic and Neolithic evidence in question is often separated by well over a millennium, and sometimes by much longer. While one should not underestimate the longevity of traditions, and the potential role of post-colonization contact in the choice of specific landscape locales, nevertheless other factors – including chance, or the desirability of a location for different reasons – could well apply.

Finally, the arguments that have been advanced to play down the role of cereal cultivation and the domestic nature of house structures have already been thoroughly critiqued by others (e.g. Cooney 2001; Monk 2000, Rowley-Conwy 2004), so they will not be repeated here; the question of whether ‘halls’ are large houses or ritual centres will be covered below. The debate surrounding Richards and Schulting’s arguments about the marked Mesolithic–Neolithic dietary change of coastal communities, from predominantly marine to terrestrial (e.g. M. P. Richards 2004; Richards and Schulting 2006; Richards et al. 2003; Milner et al. 2006), continues, but the basic finding has not been overturned: the ‘indigenists’ claims for a substantive continuity of lifestyle are not supported by the available evidence. As for arguments concerning material culture – and here one thinks of Thomas’ critique of the current author’s work identifying Breton-style pottery at Achnacreebeag, for instance (Thomas 2004) – all too often
these betray a depressing lack of familiarity with the British and Continental material in question. While it is perfectly legitimate to argue a position, there is an obligation to be well-informed about the evidence being discussed.

It is with the last point in mind that the author offers the following review of the evidence for Neolithization in Britain and Ireland, pointing out the key developments that enable the ‘big picture’ narrative to be constructed and refined.

Building and refining the narrative of Neolithization in Britain and Ireland

Our understanding of what happened when, where and why in the process of Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in Britain and Ireland has recently been aided by several key developments on both sides of the Channel.

On this side, the systematic chronological work undertaken by Whittle, Healy and Bayliss regarding the dating of funerary monuments in southern England (Bayliss and Whittle 2007) and of enclosures, mostly but not exclusively in southern England (Bayliss et al. 2008; Whittle et al. forthcoming), has demonstrated that many of the sites that had traditionally been regarded as belonging to the earliest Neolithic actually date no earlier than the 37th or 38th century BC, and may thus have been constructed by the descendants of the first farming communities. That there was a Carinated Bowl Neolithic (see below) presence in Britain and Ireland prior to that date is indicated by several recently excavated or recently dated sites, including the causewayed enclosure at Magheraboy, Co. Sligo (but see below, p. 98), the large rectangular house at White Horse Stone, Kent, the megalithic monument at Coldrum, also in Kent, and a non-megalithic wooden grave chamber at Yabsley Street, London, all of which have dates for construction or use as early as the 40th century BC (Bayliss et al. 2008, 35; Coles et al. 2008; Danaher 2007). Peter Woodman’s work in Ireland on dating domesticated species’ faunal remains from ostensibly ‘Mesolithic-style’ contexts (Woodman and McCarthy 2003) has helped to clarify the picture, showing where some bones had previously been mis-identified and demonstrating that the only site to have produced pre-Carinated Bowl Neolithic domesticated animal remains is Ferriter’s Cove (see below).

On the Continent, our understanding of the processes of late 5th- and early 4th-millennium economic and social change has been transformed by the work of Cassen and colleagues in Brittany (Boujot and Cassen 1992; 1993; Cassen 2000; Cassen and François 2006), Marcigny and colleagues in Normandy (Marcigny et al. 2007), Jeunesse and colleagues in the Paris Basin (e.g. Jeunesse 1998), Vanmontfort and colleagues in Belgium (e.g. Vanmontfort 2001, 2004, 2006; Crombé and Sergant 2008), and Louwe Kooijmans and colleagues in the Netherlands (e.g. Louwe Kooijmans 2007). And a remarkable international research project led by Pierre Pétrequin, Programme JADE, is shedding significant new light on one of the intriguing elements of Early Neolithic material culture on both sides of the Channel, the ‘socially valorised’ axeheads of rare Alpine rock types, principally jadeite and eclogite (Pétrequin et al. 2008).

All this, together with the plethora of recently discovered ‘Carinated Bowl Neolithic’ houses in Ireland (Grogan 2004; Smyth 2007) and other work such as Torben Ballin’s and Graeme Warren’s careful re-evaluation of aspects of Early Neolithic lithic traditions in Scotland (Ballin 2009; Warren 2004) and Rick Schulting’s radiocarbon dating and isotope analysis of human bones from the passage tomb at Broadsands, Devon (Sheridan et al. 2008), helps in the creation of the ‘big picture’ of British and Irish Neolithization, as outlined below.

Neolithization in Britain and Ireland: the ‘big picture’

As Stuart Piggott argued over half a century ago in his Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles (1954), the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in Britain and Ireland was not a unitary process of change: we are not dealing with one ‘Neolithic’, but with several strands, deriving from different areas along the adjacent part of the Continent, and arriving at different times and for different reasons (cf. Kinnes 2004). The principal strands would appear to be as follows (in chronological order): first, there was a possible ‘false start’, from west or northwest France to southwest Ireland, possibly during the third quarter of the 5th millennium: this is represented by the evidence from Ferriter’s Cove, which is reviewed critically below. Secondly, there was a Breton, ‘Atlantic’ strand, arriving some time between 4300/4200 and 4000 BC at various points on the western coast of Britain and on the coast around the northern half of Ireland. Third, the ‘Carinated Bowl Neolithic’, or ‘trans-Manche east’ strand, from the northernmost part of France, arrived over much of Britain and most of Ireland within the first two centuries of the 4th millennium. And finally, there was a ‘trans-Manche west’ strand (or strands), probably from Normandy, to southwest (and parts of southern) England, arriving some time between 4000 and 3800 BC. Contacts between Normandy and the southern/southwestern English coast continued, or were renewed, in subsequent centuries.

Since some of this evidence has already been discussed extensively elsewhere by the current author (e.g. Sheridan 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2005; 2007; Sheridan et al. 2008; Pailler and Sheridan 2009), it is not proposed to describe each strand in detail here. Rather, the main characteristics will be sketched, and the main outstanding research questions highlighted.

1. A possible false start in southwest Ireland during the third quarter of the 5th millennium: the Ferriter’s Cove evidence

The discovery of seven bones of domesticated cattle
within a Late Mesolithic hunter-gatherer-fisher settlement at Ferriter’s Cove, Co. Kerry, raised the possibility of an early episode of contact with the Continent, since both these species would have had to be imported (Woodman et al. 1999, 90, 144–51; Woodman and McCarthy 2003). Initial dating of one of the cattle bones to 5510±70 BP (OxA-3869, 4500–4180 cal BC; Woodman et al. 1999, 219) suggested that this had occurred during the third quarter of the 5th millennium; another cattle bone, from a different context, subsequently produced a yet earlier date of 5825±50 BP (OxA-8775, 4790–4550 cal BC: Woodman and McCarthy 2003). It was argued (Woodman and McCarthy 2003; Tresset 2003) that the most plausible area of origin for these animals was west France (Fig. 9.1.1), and a possible explanatory scenario was proposed, featuring a very small-scale immigration of pioneering farmers from France; the hunting of their stock by the indigenous inhabitants of Ferriter’s Cove; and the consequent failure of a Neolithic way of life to take root at that point, owing to the absence of a critical mass of people and of domesticates (Sheridan 2003a; Tresset 2003). Since then, the reliability of the earlier cattle date has been thrown into doubt, as the bone had been charred (P. C. Woodman pers. comm.); and given the chronological range afforded by the later date, the candidate area of origin for the cattle and sheep can be expanded to include parts of Brittany (S. Cassen pers. comm.; Tresset and Vigne 2007).

Currently, the Ferriter’s Cove evidence remains the earliest directly dated evidence for the presence of domesticated animals on this side of the Channel (not counting dogs). Peter Woodman’s aforementioned dating project on other ostensibly early remains of cattle and sheep in Ireland confirmed that none pre-dates the appearance of the Carinated Bowl Neolithic (see below), around or shortly after 4000 BC. Indeed, the most recent discovery of domesticated cattle remains on a hunting/fishing/gathering site (at Lough Kinale II, County Longford) provides another example of their appearance after that of the Carinated Bowl Neolithic (Fredengren 2009; I. Stuijts pers. comm.) This may well explain how the localized acculturation of a ‘Mesolithic’ group through contact with a ‘Carinated Bowl’ farming group.

Given that the evidence for a precocious and apparently unsuccessful episode of Neolithization rests on a single acceptable radiocarbon date and on the contextual evidence from just one site, this is clearly not a strong basis from which to argue. Nevertheless, the Ferriter’s Cove evidence demands an explanation, and so far the scenario outlined above has not been challenged convincingly. That we are dealing with people coming from western/northwest France, and not with Irish Mesolithic groups travelling to France, is suggested by: a) the insular nature of Late Mesolithic communities in Ireland (pace Kador, this volume); b) the absence of evidence for any Irish Mesolithic-like material in France (although it has to be admitted that nobody has seriously searched for it); and c) a prior history, in the Morbihan area of Brittany, of long-distance seaborne contacts (with Spain) around the mid-5th millennium, which was responsible for the importation of Spanish fibrolite and variscite, and for the copying of Breton-style Alpine axeheads in northwest Spain (Pétrequin et al. 2008 and P. Pétrequin pers. comm.). Whether it is feasible to undertake targeted searches around Ferriter’s Cove for other evidence relating to our putative early incomers is a moot point; one suspects that any such evidence is most likely to turn up by chance.

2. The Atlantic, ‘Breton’ Neolithic, arriving c. 4300/4200–4000 BC

This strand of Neolithization is characterized by the appearance of small megalithic closed chambers and simple passage tombs in coastal areas along the Atlantic façade in southwest and northwest Wales, western Scotland and around the northern half of Ireland (for further details, see Sheridan 2003a; 2003b; 2005) (Figs 9.1.2, 9.2). They constitute the earliest megalithic monuments in Britain and Ireland, and the pottery found in at least one of them (at Achnaacreebeag, Argyll and Bute) also constitutes the earliest pottery in use in Britain and Ireland. Their structural simplicity has led some of these tombs to be mis-identified as portal tombs (e.g. Carreg Samson, Pembrokeshire: C. Richards 2004), but their affinity with the closed chambers and simple passage tombs of the Morbihan region of southeast Brittany is demonstrable (Pailler and Sheridan 2009). At Achnaacreebeag, Graham Ritchie excavated a two-phase monument featuring a closed chamber that had a simple passage tomb added to it (Ritchie 1970). Although the chambers’ contents had been almost entirely cleared out, in the passage tomb he found fragments of three distinctive pots, which the current author has identified (with verification from Breton pottery specialists) as being of Breton Middle Neolithic types, namely late Castellic, Pinacle, and a variety that has been found associated with late Castellic pottery in the Morbihan (Fig. 9.3). Despite Thomas’ argument that these types of pottery are very diverse and their presence cannot be taken to indicate incomers from the Morbihan (2004), in fact they all form part of the repertoire in use in this part of Brittany during the period 4300/4200–4000 BC (as confirmed, for example, by radiocarbon dates from the Table des Marchands: S. Cassen pers. comm. and see Cassen 2009). Since there is no evidence for external contacts by west-coast Scottish Mesolithic communities, it is hard to explain how Breton-style pottery, in a Breton-style monument, could have appeared in the west of Scotland by means other than a northward movement of people from the Morbihan.

Other pottery has been found in these tombs: a deep, undecorated bowl found at Carreg Samson (Lynch 1975) could form part of the Breton Middle Neolithic repertoire, and stands out as being different from Welsh traditional Carinated Bowl pottery; but as it is of such simple form, it has been hard to persuade sceptics of its likely Breton origins. In Ireland, at the passage tomb cemetery at
Fig. 9.1. The proposed strands of Neolithization. 1. Northwest France to southwest Ireland (Ferriter’s Cove); 2. The Atlantic, ‘Breton’ Neolithic; 3. The ‘Carinated Bowl Neolithic’ (overall extent and routes taken from northern France remain open to discussion); 4. The ‘Trans-Manche west’ strand.
Fig. 9.2. 1. (left). Plan and sections of the closed chamber and simple passage tomb at Achnacreebeag, Argyll and Bute (from Ritchie 1970; Crown copyright). 2. (right) Distribution of Breton-style closed chambers and simple passage tombs in Britain and Ireland. A = Achnacreebeag; star indicates the likely source area in the Morbihan area of Brittany.

Fig. 9.3. The Breton-style pots from Achnacreebeag (1–3) and some comparanda (4–6): 1. Late Castellic-style bowl with fringed rainbow decoration (photo: NMS); 2–3. Undecorated and decorated bowls (from Ritchie 1970); 4. Early Castellic bowl from Le Castellie, Brittany (from Bailloud 1975); 5. Late Castellic bowl from Vierville, Normandy (from Verron 2000); 6. Late Castellic bowl from Er Grah, Morbihan (from Cassen 2009).
Carrowmore, Co. Sligo, the occasional sherds of coarse decorated ‘Carrowkeel’ pottery derive, like most or all of the other artefacts from the tombs, from the monuments’ secondary use, centuries after their construction (S. Bergh pers. comm.).

Support for the idea that these Breton-style closed chambers and simple passage tombs were constructed broadly within the 4300/4200–4000 BC date bracket is ostensibly provided by a set of dates obtained by Göran Burenhult in the 1990s, which, he argued, relate to the construction and early use of several of the tombs in the Carrowmore cemetery (Burenhult 2001; Sheridan 2003b; note, however, that Stefan Bergh has pointed out (pers. comm.) that the contextual information is not as robust as one might like). A post-4000 BC date for the construction of one simple closed chamber, at Ballintoy, County Antrim, is suggested by the fact that it overlies a layer containing Carinated Bowl pottery (Sheridan 2003b, 11).

The putative immigration evidenced by the appearance of these tombs seems to have had differing outcomes in different areas along the Atlantic façade. In Scotland and Ireland, these simple monuments stand at the beginning of long and complicated sequences of passage tomb development (Sheridan 1986; 2006); and in Scotland, the pottery stands at the beginning of the similarly long and complex sequence of west-coast ceramic developments (Sheridan 2004). This suggests that their builders flourished in these regions. In Wales, by contrast, the passage tomb tradition appears to have died out until its re-introduction, from eastern Ireland, towards the end of the 4th millennium (Lynch 2000).

The possible causes of a small-scale emigration from the Morbihan between 4300/4200 and 4000 BC have been discussed elsewhere. Following Boujot and Cassen (1992; 1993; Cassen 2000), it appears that the shift, at this time, from building massive tumulus carnacéens and other monuments to the construction of passage tombs – with the attendant incorporation of parts of some massive decorated menhirs within passage tombs – was part of a broader set of ideological, social and economic changes. These bouleversements are perfectly illustrated by the developments at Locmariacuer, where a low earthen barrow (Er Grah) and a stupendously large menhir (le Grand Menhir Brisé) were succeeded by a passage tomb (la Table des Marchands) that incorporates part of a huge decorated menhir, second only in height to the toppled Grand Menhir, as its capstone (Bouillon and Cassen 2008; Cassen 2009; le Roux et al. 1996). That some people should choose to leave the Morbihan during this period of change, for a new life in an unknown destination, is consistent with such a reading of the evidence; and, as seen above, there had been a local precedent during previous centuries for the undertaking of long sea journeys. Indeed, if the domestic animals found at Ferriter’s Cove were from stock brought from Brittany, this offers a further possible precedent for the undertaking of speculative westward and northward journeys by sea. (Alternatively, given the potential overlap between the Ferriter’s Cove date and the estimated date of the ‘Atlantic’ emigration, it is not impossible that the move to southwest Ireland had actually been part of this strand of Neolithization). Other evidence indicating some kind of movement from Brittany during the late 5th millennium comes from the simple passage tomb at Vierville in Normandy, where the ceramic assemblage includes at least one pot that is believed to have been imported from the Morbihan: a Late Castellic bowl, which incidentally shows marked similarities to its counterpart from Achnacreebeag (Marcigny et al. 2007, 143; S. Cassen pers. comm.).

The evidence for this putative Atlantic, ‘Breton’ strand of Neolithization is – to this author’s eyes – persuasive, and yet some commentators have been reluctant to accept it (e.g. A. Whittle pers. comm.) – although none has produced a more plausible explanatory hypothesis. At present the model relies solely on funerary evidence: no associated settlement has been found, nor is there evidence relating to subsistence practices. No bones have survived in the British tombs, and the plentiful deposits of cremated bones found in the Carrowmore cemetery may well relate to secondary tomb use; direct dating of these bones is recommended, to complement Stefan Bergh’s current programme of dating bone and antler pins from the tombs, whose results indicate such a scenario (S. Bergh pers. comm.). It may well be that a targeted programme of palaeoenvironmental study and fieldwork in the areas around these monuments might produce evidence relating to their builders (although Burenhult’s previous attempt, around Carrowmore, sadly did not produce the kind of information he sought: Burenhult 1984). Perhaps the excavation of a hitherto-uninvestigated Breton-style monument would provide further evidence to support or modify the working hypothesis.

3. The ‘Carinated Bowl Neolithic’

This is the most extensively dispersed and best-documented strand of Neolithization (Fig. 9.1.3), even though much remains to be discovered and clarified, particularly as regards its dating, its limits of distribution and its exact geographical area of origin. The ‘Carinated Bowl (henceforth CB) Neolithic’ is attested over much of Britain and Ireland, and its key features have recently been outlined by this author (Sheridan 2007). These comprise the following ‘package’ of novelties, which would all have appeared alien and exotic to indigenous Mesolithic communities:

1. A ceramic tradition dominated by the use of gently carinated and S-shaped bowls and jars (of varying sizes and shapes), but also featuring uncarinated, roughly hemispherical bowls and cups and collared jars (Fig. 9.4). Surfaces are generally carefully smoothed and sometimes buffed to a low sheen or burnished to a high sheen; the only decoration, which is rare, is fingertip fluting (usually on the neck and sometimes on the rim) or – more rarely – ripple burnishing. This author has proposed the use of the term ‘traditional CB’ pottery to distinguish this earliest,
Fig. 9.4. The Carinated Bowl tradition ceramic repertoire: top: carinated and S-profiled bowls; bottom: uncarinated bowls (1) and collared jars (2). Keys: 4.1: 1. Claish, Stirling; 2. Biggar Common, South Lanarkshire; 3. Newbridge, Midlothian; 4. Carzield, Dumfries and Galloway; 5. Auchategan, Argyll and Bute. 4.2: examples with blacked-in sections from Claish; others Biggar Common. Most illustrations are by Marion O’Neil.
and markedly homogeneous, version of CB pottery from the various regionally divergent variants (‘modified CB’) that emerged through ‘style drift’ – in some cases, at a very early stage (as with the ‘North East style’ that is found mainly in northeast Scotland).

2. New stone artefact forms (e.g. leaf-shaped arrowheads and plano-convex knives; ground stone axeheads were also a novelty for most of Britain) and a tradition of procuring, working and depositing stone artefacts that markedly differs from Late Mesolithic traditions. (See Warren 2005 for details regarding small lithics in Scotland, and Waddington and Passmore 2004 for Northumberland. The question of the extent to which the working techniques differed in southern England needs to be investigated further.) The movement of various lithic materials – in unworked, partly worked and fully worked states – is well-documented (e.g. Ballin 2009 on pitchstone) and attests to the rapid creation of networks of contacts among the various communities who used CB pottery. Procurement strategies included the opening of flint mines in southern England (Barber et al. 1999, 69; Topping 2004) and of quarries – often on mountains – in highland zones (see, for example, Edmonds 2004). The choice of remote or otherwise liminal sources of stone for manufacturing axeheads is likely to have been driven by the ideology surrounding the precious and sacred axeheads made of Alpine rock which the CB users brought with them from the continent as treasured ancestral artefacts (Pétrequin et al. 2008).

3. The construction of various non-funerary timber structures (Fig. 9.5). These range from the long rectangular structures up to 24 m long and 11 m wide with convex or straight ends found in Scotland (i.e. the so-called ‘halls’: Brophy 2007; Murray et al. 2009) and southern England (Hey and Barclay 2007) through smaller rectangular, square and oval structures (see Grogan 2004 and Smyth 2007 for reviews of Irish houses, and Kenney and Davidson 2006 for a recently discovered house at Llandygai, Wales) to more slightly constructed buildings, perhaps for less permanent use (e.g. Bolam Lake, Northumberland: Waddington and Davies 2002). There is a marked tendency to construct all but the flimsiest structures on what would have been prime agricultural land. The largest structures relate to the earliest appearance of the CB Neolithic, and much discussion has revolved around their use, with the Scottish ‘halls’ being regarded by some as being non-residential in nature (see Brophy 2007). In this author’s opinion, however, a more plausible explanation is that they were the communal residences of the first generation or two of settlers, built to offer security while their communities became established. (Part of this security included the keeping of large amounts of seed corn, as discovered in the burnt-down remains of the large structure at Balbridie, Aberdeenshire:

Fig. 9.5. Aerial photograph of the Early Neolithic timber ‘hall’ (c. 20 × 9m) at Warren Field, Crathes, Aberdeenshire, by Moira Greig, courtesy of Aberdeenshire Archaeology.
Fairweather and Ralston 1993.) These structures would also have constituted powerful statements of identity and presence in the landscape, as would these communities’ funerary monuments. Thereafter, individual residential groups were able to “bud off” to build smaller houses for themselves—a process visible in Aberdeenshire (Murray et al. 2009; Sheridan 2007). While these substantial post- or post-and-plank-built structures imply a significant degree of sedentism (which at Crathes Warren Field is borne out by palaeoenvironmental evidence for cereal cultivation in the immediate vicinity: Lancaster 2009; Tipping et al. 2009), the flimsier structures suggest that transhumance may have taken place.

4. The keeping of domesticated cattle, sheep (and possibly goats) and pigs; the cultivation of wheat (including the environmentally demanding bread wheat), barley, flax, field bean and probably brassicas, all imported; and the exploitation of a range of wild plant and animal resources (see, e.g., Fairweather and Ralston 1993 and Murray et al. 2009).

The discovery of an Early Neolithic yew flatbow—which must have been imported from either northwest England or Ireland—in the Moffat Hills at Rotten Bottom, Dumfries and Galloway, strongly points towards the hunting of deer (Sheridan 2007). As with the settlement evidence, the subsistence strategy implies a significant degree of sedentism (necessary for the tilling of crops: see Monk 2000 and Rowley-Conwy 2004), while including some activities that required a more extensive use of the landscape: transhumance, hunting and gathering.

5. At least one CB community seems to have constructed a causewayed enclosure at, or shortly after, the time of arrival (at Magheraboy, Co. Sligo: Danaher 2007). As with the construction of the large communal houses, this implies the presence of a critical mass of people in the area. (The apparent absence of large enclosures from most other areas where CB pottery was used need not indicate failure to reach a critical mass; there would have been other considerations at play in a group’s decision over whether or not to build an enclosure.)

6. Funerary practices featuring the use of various non-megalithic monuments, namely: a) rectangular ‘linear zone’ mortuary structures featuring split oak trunks (some associated with timber façades and long rectangular or trapezoidal post enclosures), many of which were burnt before being covered with long or round mounds (e.g. Eweford West and Pencraig Hill, East Lothian: MacGregor and McLellan 2008); b) cremation sites covered with round or ring cairns (as at Boghead, Moray: Burl 1984); c) a plank-lined rectangular grave (from Yabsley Street, Blackwall, London: Coles et al. 2008); d) rectangular mortuary enclosures. Burial in caves was also practised by CB users, as demonstrated at Kilgreany Cave, Co. Waterford (Dowd 2008). Traditional CB pottery has also been associated with simple megalithic structures in Scotland and northern England that appear to represent the translation into stone of timber monuments (as at Cairnholy 1, Dumfries and Galloway, for example). In southeast England, a megalithic tomb at Coldrum, Kent—part of a small, isolated group of megalithic tombs around the Medway estuary—has produced human remains radiocarbon dated to c. 4000 BC (Bayliss et al. 2008; Holgate 1981). While no demonstrably CB pottery is known from this tomb (Holgate 1981), the Yabsley Street grave demonstrates that CB pottery was in use in the Thames Valley at a comparable date.

While it is clear that the CB Neolithic is found widely—albeit irregularly—over much of Britain and Ireland, and while its distribution in Scotland and northern England is well documented (Manby et al. 2003; Passmore and Waddington 2009; Sheridan 2007), the absence of an overall distribution map hampers our understanding. It appears that parts of eastern and northern Britain (such as Aberdeenshire, Yorkshire and the Milfield Basin in Northumberland) have particular concentrations, while in Wales it has a relatively restricted distribution, mostly in the northwest (Lynch 2000; Peterson 2003); in England, it seems to “thin out” the further southwest one goes. The southwesterly limit of its distribution is a matter for debate, for while the bowls found beside the wooden trackway, the Sweet Track, in the Somerset Levels (Coles et al. 1984, fig. 56) are of forms and fabrics well attested among the CB repertoire, the presence of a black coating on the surface is not a CB feature, and invites comparisons with pottery of similar date (to the 3807/3806 BC of the Sweet Track) further to the southwest (at Penhale Round, Cornwall: J. Nowakowski pers. comm.).

The dating of the CB Neolithic has been, and remains, a matter for debate among those concerned with establishing a firm chronology for the British and Irish Neolithic in general. The number of reliable radiocarbon dates has recently risen steeply in Scotland, northeast England and Ireland (with the Scottish dates being presented in Sheridan 2007 and some of the dates for northeast England published in Passmore and Waddington 2009). These and other dates for Britain and Ireland have recently been Bayesian-modelled by Bayliss et al. (and will be published in Whittle et al. forthcoming). It appears that there is a very small cluster of dates around 4000 BC from sites in southeast England—note that Bayliss et al. are now expressing reservations (A. Bayliss and A. Whittle pers. comm.) about whether the Magheraboy causewayed enclosure in northwest Ireland was also constructed at this time—and then a large number of 39th century BC dates from CB-associated sites around Britain and Ireland. While Bayliss et al. interpret this in terms of an initial colonization of southeast England, followed by a spread northwards and westwards from there, it is equally if not more likely that the dates reflect an initial, small-scale emigration to southeast England (with the Magheraboy evidence remaining anomalous) followed by a larger-scale and rapid “diaspora” from northern France to large parts of Britain and Ireland. Alternatively, it could be that the apparent gap of up to 200 years between the “first appearance” dates in different areas is partly a function of the Bayesian modelling process, since it requires one to define an end date to the phenomenon being modelled. As
noted above, ‘traditional CB’ pottery developed into its various ‘modified’ variants at different times in different areas, so defining a meaningful and consistent end point is problematical. It may be that the arbitrary definition of an end point serves to skew the model, and that we are not really dealing with a two-phase CB colonization. No doubt the interpretation of the radiocarbon dates will continue to be debated for some time yet.

The question of the precise area of origin for the CB Neolithic has long been a topic of debate; while Piggott (1954) argued for the far north of France, subsequent commentators (e.g. Kinnes 1988; 2004) have pointed out the absence of exact matches for the pottery, for the use of leaf-shaped arrowheads and for the funerary and non-funerary structures. That this may, however, be a product of an incomplete archaeological record for early 4th-millennium material culture and structures on the far side of the Channel is suggested by the significant advances recently made in Belgium by the work of Bart Vanmontfort (e.g. 2001): here, an entire new regional ‘facies’ of Middle Neolithic activity has been recognized at and around Spiere, including a possible non-megalithic long barrow at Ottenburg (Vanmontfort 2004, 243). If one entirely ‘new’ regional group has recently emerged, there is every possibility that others will too. As argued in detail elsewhere (Sheridan 2007, 468–9), CB pottery has many elements in common with northern Chassey and early Michelsberg pottery, and leaf-shaped arrowheads – albeit not identical to CB examples – are a regular feature of Michelsburg assemblages. Furthermore, the past emphasis on highlighting differences between the CB Neolithic and that of the near Continent has masked more significant points of similarity, such as the shared practices of flint mining; of causewayed enclosure use; and, importantly, of establishing and using networks of contacts across which materials, ideas and doubtless people flowed. It seems to this author that the most likely area of origin for the CB Neolithic is the Nord-Pas de Calais region of northern France (possibly extending into northern Picardie), and that it represents one of a number of small regional groups (analogous to Vanmontfort’s ‘Spiere’ group) that emerged at a time of significant social and economic change at the end of the 5th millennium and beginning of the 4th (e.g. Crombé and Sergant 2008; Jeunesse 1998; and Louwe Kooijmans 2007). This view is in accord with Pierre Pétrequin’s judgement about the likely proximate source area for Alpine axeheads (Pétrequin et al. 2008). Fresh fieldwork, new discoveries and the careful review of existing archive collections should clarify the matter.

4. The ‘trans-Manche west’ strand

This strand (Fig. 9.1.4), found in southwest and parts of southern England, involves some elements – closed chambers and simple passage tombs – that are superficially similar to the megalithic monuments that formed part of the Atlantic, ‘Breton’ Neolithic although, as will be argued below, they relate to a different, and slightly later, set of movements. These movements were arguably between Normandy (and perhaps the Channel Islands and parts of northern Brittany) and southern/southwest England during the first quarter of the 4th millennium, and thus involved shorter distances than those involved in the Atlantic, ‘Breton’ Neolithic strand. The evidence for this ‘trans-Manche west’ strand(s) of Neolithization comprises three main elements: a) the simple, largely drystone-built passage tomb at Broadsands in Devon; b) the drystone-built rotundae (closed chambers and simple passage tombs under low round cairns) in the Severn–Cotswold area; and c) several pottery assemblages from southwest and southern England that may, along with the Broadsands pottery, constitute the precursor to the ‘Hembury’, or ‘South-West’, style of pottery (Whittle 1977, 77–82). As for possible reasons for this hypothetical immigration(s) from northwest France, the record on the other side of the Channel is not entirely clear although it has been noted that, in Normandy, the second half of the 5th millennium and the early 4th millennium saw a significant expansion in agricultural settlement (including the construction of enclosures) followed, from c. 3800 BC, by a period of change when ‘les traces archéologiques sont de plus en plus
rares voire inexistantes pour une bonne partie de la Basse-Normandie ... Regroupement des populations, période de trouble, épidémie, problème de reconnaissance des sites ...’ (Marcigny et al. 2007, 93). Emigration to England may well have formed part of these changes.

The Broadsands passage tomb

This simple passage tomb (Fig. 9.6) on the coast near Paignton, excavated by Courtney Raleigh Radford in 1958 (Radford 1958), has recently been the subject of fresh research by Rick Schulting, this author, Henrietta Quinnell and Roger Taylor (Sheridan et al. 2008). It is notable for being unique within the southwestern peninsula, and for its strong affinities, in design and construction, with small drystone-built passage tombs found in Normandy, north Brittany and the Channel Islands (e.g. at Vierville, Normandy; Carn, Brittany; and La Sergenté, Jersey: Verron 1986; 2000; Giot et al. 1996; Patton 1993). Broadsands differs from these only in the fact that it had been roofed using capstones, rather than drystone corbelling. Radiocarbon dates recently obtained by Schulting for the human remains indicate that the primary interments were probably deposited between 3845 and 3726 cal BC (at 68 per cent probability, using Bayesian modelling: see Sheridan et al. 2008 for details). These provide a terminus ante quem for the construction of the tomb. Isotopic analysis indicated that the individuals, like those from similarly dated cave deposits in Devon, had had a terrestrial diet. Sherds from two thin-walled, fine-textured carinated bowls from the tomb (Fig. 9.7) invite comparison not only with other fineware carinated bowls from southwest England (see below), but also with Middle Neolithic II pottery from Normandy, the Channel Islands and northern Brittany (most notably at the simple passage tomb of La Sergenté, Jersey: Patton 1993, fig. iv.3). In terms of northwest French ceramic traditions, we are dealing with pottery that falls within the umbrella term ‘Néolithique moyen de l’Ouest’ (Marcigny et al. 2007, 92; see also Cassen and François 2006).

The fact that the Broadsands tomb is geographically isolated within the southwest peninsula invites the question of whether we are dealing with single episode of contact – a small group from across the Channel, who lived in Devon and constructed a monument to their dead in the traditional manner – or part of a more extensive (but still probably small-scale) phenomenon of immigration. The evidence reviewed below indicates that the latter may be the case.

‘Rotundae’ in the Severn–Cotswold region

These small drystone-built monuments, featuring closed chambers and simple passage tombs within low round cairns, have been the subject of much debate as regards their dating and significance (Darvill 2004; Smith and Brickley 2006; Pailler and Sheridan 2009; Whittle 2007, 382–3). To cut a long story short, they pre-date Cotswold–Severn megalithic tombs and, in this author’s opinion, they should be considered as candidates for further evidence of early 4th-millennium connections with Normandy/the Channel Islands/north Brittany, analogous to the Broadsands tomb. Whittle’s argument that they represent ‘some kind of monumentalization of those middens which underlie some lateral chambered Cotswold monuments’ (2007, 383) is unconvincing. Unfortunately, only a very little pottery has been found in association, and the sherds are too small to be diagnostic. Furthermore, as is the case with Broadsands, there are no known settlements associated with the builders of these tombs; targeted fieldwork may help to remedy this.

The ceramic precursors of ‘Hembury’/‘South-Western style’ pottery

Rosamund Cleal’s review (2004) of the earliest pottery
in southern and southwestern England was invaluable in drawing attention to the existence, in this part of Britain, of early 4th-millennium pottery that fits neither within the Carinated Bowl canon (as defined by the current author, e.g. Sheridan 2007) nor within the ‘standard’ ‘Hembury’/‘South-Western style’ pottery repertoire (as defined by Whittle 1977, 77–82, and Smith 1981). While one may quibble with some of Cleal’s claims – Frances Healy (pers. comm.) has argued, for instance, that the assemblage from Flagstones, Dorset, is actually a standard ‘Hembury’/‘South-Western style’ assemblage and that its date of 4960±80 BP (on bulk oak charcoal, HAR-9161, 3950–3640 cal BC) can only be regarded as a terminus post quem – the pottery from Coneybury Anomaly, Wiltshire, does nevertheless seem to be genuinely early, and does have elements in common with Middle Neolithic II pottery assemblages across the Channel (such as the vertically perforated lugs on Pot 7: cf. pottery from Louviers in the Eure valley, Normandy: Giligny 2005, fig. 180).

In addition to the Coneybury Anomaly and Broadsands pottery, there are other assemblages that merit reconsideration (see Sheridan et al. 2008), not only as potentially having links with French Middle Neolithic pottery in Normandy, the Channel Islands and northern Brittany, but also as constituting the likely precursor for the ‘Hembury’/‘South-Western style’ ceramic tradition (which we know from finds such as Ports catho, Cornwall, to have been in use by the 37th century BC, if not earlier: Jones and Reed 2006, and cf. Whittle et al. forthcoming). These include the assemblage from Penhale Round, Cornwall, associated with a fairly substantial sub-rectangular post-built (and presumably roofed) structure, from which short-lived species material produced dates of 5001±75 BP (WK-9839, 3950–3660 cal BC) and 4951±61 BP (WK-9840, 3940–3640 cal BC: J. Nowakowski pers. comm.).

These assemblages are characterized by the presence of thin-walled fineware carinated bowls, whose resemblance to vessels in the Carinated Bowl tradition has caused terminological and conceptual confusion in the past (e.g. Thomas 2004), and indeed still occasions uncertainty in the attribution of individual assemblages (e.g. from the Sweet Track, as mentioned above: Coles et al. 1984, fig. 56). Their similarity to carinated bowls in the CB tradition is due to the fact that they share the same ultimate origin in/influence from the northern variant of the widespread Chasséen tradition in the Paris Basin (Cassen and François 2006), whose influence extended westwards into Normandy and Armorica and northeastwards into northern France and beyond. However, this author would argue that their appearance in southwest (and parts of southern) England is not due to the CB strand of immigration, but to the ‘trans-Manche west’ strand, which arrived at roughly the same time or perhaps slightly later. One distinctive characteristic of some of this pottery – the presence of a deliberate black coating – has also been noted on ‘Hembury’/‘South-Western style’ pottery (e.g. at Carn Brea: Smith 1981) and this is one of several reasons for regarding it as the precursor to that tradition. (The fact that the Sweet Track bowls have this feature makes it possible that they belong to this family of pottery, rather than to the CB tradition, contra Sheridan 2007.) Whether this feature is also present on French Middle Neolithic II pottery will require consultation with French ceramic specialists.

Space precludes further discussion of the ‘Hembury’/‘South-Western style’ ceramic tradition, and of its users; suffice it to note that it is recognizable a British regional tradition, albeit one arguably derived from French Middle Neolithic pottery, and whose design was informed by the renewed (or continuing) links with northwest France during the second quarter of the 4th millennium. Its French origins are revealed in the vessel forms discussed above and also in the overall repertoire of shapes (including deep lugged vessels and, at Carn Brea, a flat plat à pain: Smith 1981, fig. 74, P153). The subsequent cross-Channel links are manifested by (inter alia) the adoption (and adaptation) of the trumpet lug and by the importation of axeheads made of dolerite from Plussulien (Le Roux 1979).

Conclusions

This attempt to sketch a ‘big picture’ narrative of the Neolithization of Britain and Ireland – and, importantly, to situate it within the context of cross-Channel developments, in all their diversity – has demonstrated the complexity and potential time depth of the phenomenon, and has highlighted areas where we need to find out much more about the individual processes involved. Common to all of the strands is the question of post-colonization relations between incomers and indigenes: is the seemingly rapid disappearance of a lifestyle based solely on hunting, gathering and fishing a genuine phenomenon, and was it (as seems likely) due to ready acculturation to a novel lifestyle that was perceived to promise greater year-round subsistence security (even though this may not have been the case in practice)? And was the disappearance of the ‘Mesolithic lifestyle’ so rapid? As is suggested by the recent re-calibration of the Oronsay Late Mesolithic human bone dates in the light of new insights into the marine effect on radiocarbon dates (Milner, this volume), it is possible that there was a period of up to several centuries when small groups of indigenous fisher-hunter-gatherers lived not far from, but possibly in unawareness of, small groups of immigrant farmers in the west of Scotland.

The ways in which the various early farming communities adjusted to their environments is also a topic that deserves closer attention (of the kind shown by Sturt’s and Garrow’s contributions to this volume). Some indication of the trajectories of regional diversification within Scotland, and around the Irish Sea, have already been proposed by this author (Sheridan 1985; 2004; 2006).

It is clear that advances in our understanding will be made only if we frame future research both in terms of ‘big picture’ issues – and here the big picture encompasses the
near continent, not just the British and Irish archipelago – and of fine-grained regional and local studies. There is much to be done (not least in improving our knowledge of the information that is already available to us), but the work will be rewarding.

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