
A Life Less Ordinary: the Ritualization of the Domestic Sphere in Later Prehistoric Europe

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This article, which is based on the fourteenth McDonald Lecture, considers two tensions in contemporary archaeology. One is between interpretations of specific structures, monuments and deposits as the result of either 'ritual' or 'practical' activities in the past, and the other is between an archaeology that focuses on subsistence and adaptation and one that emphasizes cognition, meaning, and agency. It suggests that these tensions arise from an inadequate conception of ritual itself. Drawing on recent studies of ritualization, it suggests that it might be more helpful to consider how aspects of domestic life took on special qualities in later prehistoric Europe. The discussion is based mainly on Neolithic enclosures and other monuments, Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement sites and the Viereckschanzen of central Europe. It may have implications for field archaeology as well as social archaeology, and also for those who study the formation of the archaeological record.

Words gain a terrible power over the concepts they describe. They can be technical terms, like hillfort or chambered tomb, or they may convey more complex notions. What usually happens is that they develop in one tradition of scholarship and remain the same as everything around them changes. They are like the rocks that punctuate the course of a fast-flowing river. And, like those rocks, they are dangerous.

Archaeologists have a professional fondness for relics, but all too often this extends to the very language they use. They can change the definitions of terms like Neolithic or Bronze Age, sanctuary or metal hoard, but find it difficult to communicate with one another unless they continue to employ them. Every one of those terms carries associations from which they distance themselves, and yet their very language affects how they think about the past.

That is a real problem, but it becomes still more serious when those terms are associated with abstract ideas. It would be hard to conduct a discussion of prehistory that did not refer to culture, nature, adaptation or landscape, and yet these are all words whose past connotations can easily lead to confusion. Archaeologists discuss the lives of the dead in

a language that is dying too. That is how words have gained their ascendancy over the ideas they impart. One of those words is 'ritual'.

The use of this term has a special importance in the history of archaeology, and also in the ways in which the subject is practised now. Ritual has been treated as a particular kind of communication, a way of acting out fundamental propositions about the world. It occupies a specialized arena in which the sacred penetrates the mundane. From this perspective, ritual is often equated with the expression of religious belief and is marked by a high degree of formality (Turner 1969; Bloch 1989; Rappaport 1999). It is performed using prescribed movements, gestures and utterances and is often conducted through particular media such as music or dance. It can happen at special places and times, and it may involve restricted groups of people and unusual kinds of artefacts. To that extent at least it is cut off from everyday activity. These assumptions are most prevalent in field archaeology, and I shall discuss some examples later on.

A second level of analysis grows out of this conception of ritual. It relates to the changing iden-

tity of archaeology and to its position among the social sciences. There has been a striking oscillation in the dominant interests of scholars (Kristiansen 1996; Sherratt 1997, 1–6). On the one hand, there are periods in the history of archaeology which are characterized by a quest for general principles. This kind of research considers extensive geographical areas and long periods of time. In practice, it places a considerable emphasis on population, environment, subsistence and human ecology. That is not to deny that social factors have played a significant role as well, but this tradition has certainly emphasized the importance of universal processes rather than the local and particular. As Edmund Leach pointed out in 1973, archaeology of this kind is influenced by functionalist anthropology.

In that same paper, Leach predicted a rapprochement with structural anthropology, and this new alliance represents the opposite pole in the cycle. It may have developed in ways that Leach could not have foreseen, but it is often concerned with the local and small scale and it places considerable emphasis on symbolism, meaning and agency (Barrett 1994; Hodder 1999a, ch. 4; Tilley 1999; Dobres 2000). For some scholars this approach is currently in the ascendant but, for others, a middle ground remains. This is perhaps the situation of cognitive archaeology.

Colin Renfrew (1994a) was right to say that the archaeologists of the 1960s and 70s were reluctant to investigate the roles of ritual and religion: a position that echoes the stance taken by Gordon Childe in his studies of European prehistory (Renfrew 1994b, 125). Ritual was either rationalized as adaptive or dismissed as epiphenomenal. That view might seem natural to a Marxist like Childe, yet for different reasons the Cambridge school of ‘palaeoeconomists’ took an equally hard line. Ritual, they said, was not important in the past and not worth studying in the present. Most activities that might be described by this term played a role in human adaptation. As Higgs & Jarman put it, ‘the soul leaves no skeleton’ (1975, 1).

If there has been a change of emphasis, it has been towards a greater concern with those areas that were declared out of bounds by an earlier generation of archaeologists. To some extent this has resulted from the very process that Leach had anticipated. After a prolonged period in which the two fields had drifted apart, there is more common ground today between archaeology and anthropology. To a large extent it is due to a new emphasis on material culture. This can be illustrated by recent research on ancient art, mortuary practices, landscape and architecture. The irony is that these had

formed part of a more traditional set of studies fifty years before. The main difference is not one of subject matter, but approach.

Some of these changes register the play of fashion in academic archaeology, but rather more is involved. Two points are important here. There remains a fundamental disagreement over the feasibility of conducting any kind of cognitive archaeology (Renfrew 1994a), and there is confusion among those engaged in fieldwork as to the right ways of distinguishing between the residues of daily life and those of ritual activity. For the most part the specialists who study excavated material offer little assistance. They seem to be more concerned with the formation of the archaeological record than they are with its interpretation (Schiffer 1996). This contribution considers each of these points in turn. But those issues are closely intertwined. Paradoxical as it may seem, I shall make the claim that it is the very existence of rituals in the past that makes much of prehistoric archaeology possible.

Ritual is one of those words which have survived from an older archaeology and continue to haunt the discipline today. It is impossible to avoid taking it into the vocabulary of modern research and yet it is difficult to do so without inheriting a legacy of confusion. That confusion affects both the study of prehistory and its changing identity among the disciplines that investigate the past. Without a clearer notion of what they mean by ritual it will be difficult for field archaeologists to interpret their observations. In the same way, archaeological theory will continue to drift between an obsession with adaptation and a search for meaning that will leave the subject as divided as it was before.

I can illustrate this dilemma in concrete terms. I would like to consider two kinds of earthwork monument which were supposedly used for rituals during prehistory: the henges of the British Isles and the *Viereckschanzen* of central Europe.

Let us begin with Durrington Walls, in southern England (Fig. 1). This is a large henge monument which consists of a circular earthwork, defined by an external bank and an internal ditch, and encloses the head of a dry valley. Inside the enclosure there were at least two timber circles, one of them approached by an ‘avenue’ of paired posts which passed through a wooden screen in front of the building. All these features date from the later third millennium BC (Wainwright & Longworth 1971).

The excavation produced an enormous number of artefacts, especially decorated pottery. Worked flint was also common and included some pieces of

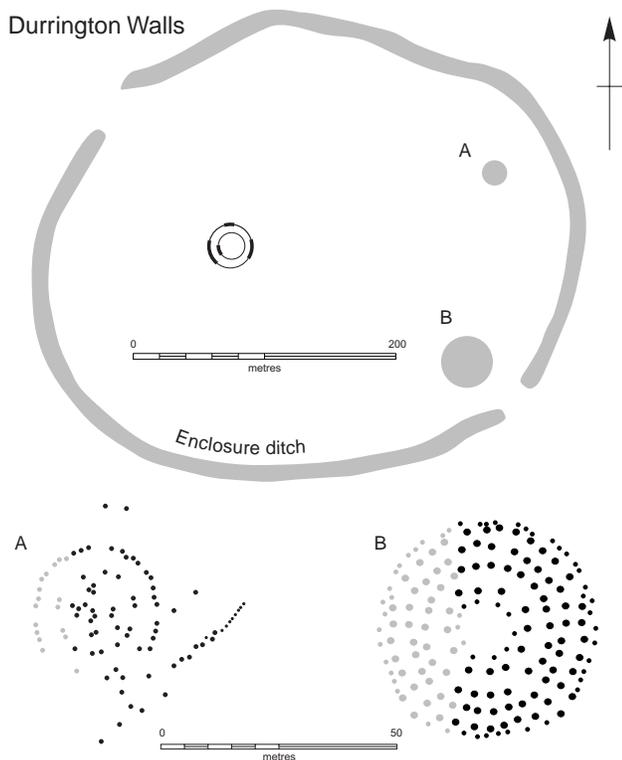


Figure 1. Outline plan of the henge monument at Durrington Walls, showing the positions of the two excavated timber circles and the location of a small circular enclosure which probably contained a third example. Excavated post holes are shown in black and the lighter tone suggests the extent of these buildings beyond the area investigated. Information from Wainwright & Longworth (1971) and Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (1979).

exceptional quality. Finds of faunal remains were abundant too, and they were dominated by pig bones, as they usually are on sites of this kind (Albarella & Serjeantson 2002). Certain other items were rare or absent. Flint and stone axes appeared in unexpectedly low numbers and there were few wild animal bones.

The excavation report focused on several important aspects of the site. The henge had been built on a massive scale and the construction of the perimeter may have taken half a million worker hours. The timber structures inside the excavated area were also large and it was uncertain whether they could have been roofed. The rich assemblage of food remains suggested that feasts had taken place within the earthwork. Like the other activities happening inside that enclosure, these may not have been open to everyone, and the characteristic structure of the

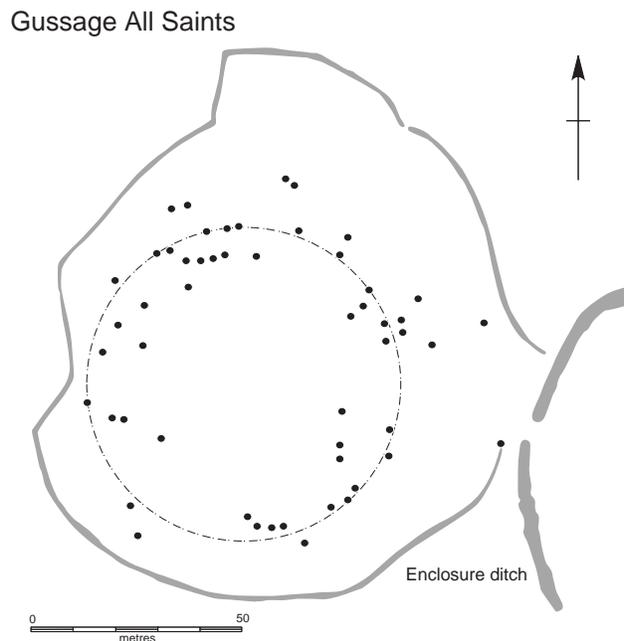


Figure 2. Outline plan of the enclosed Iron Age settlement of Gussage All Saints during its first phase of occupation, showing the locations of storage pits with deposits of specialized artefacts. Information from Wainwright (1979) and Hill (1995). Note how the pits containing structured deposits are ranged around the perimeter of a circle which does not conform to the layout of the enclosure ditch.

monument might have meant that more people could gather on the enclosure bank and observe what was happening in the interior (Bradley 1998a, ch. 8).

Taking these elements together, it seemed legitimate to suggest that Durrington Walls played a specialized role. It was probably a ceremonial centre and it was interpreted in this way in the project report. Only four years later, however, the excavator, Geoffrey Wainwright, offered a new interpretation and suggested that the enclosure had really been a major settlement (Wainwright 1975). What accounts for this change?

Soon after the excavation of Durrington Walls, he investigated an Iron Age enclosure at Gussage All Saints, in southern England (Wainwright 1979). This was two thousand years later in date than the henge but it had some of the same characteristics. Again it possessed an earthwork boundary, inside which there were timber structures, although it differed from the other site as it also enclosed numerous pits (Fig. 2). Wainwright's excavation identified many finds of artefacts and food remains. Like the

henge monument, some of those pits contained unusual deposits within their filling, but in this case they included human and animal burials.

These pits are of particular interest, for it has been shown by experiment that features of this type can keep corn during the winter. This interpretation is confirmed by the deposits of carbonized grain which were left behind when the pits were cleaned. The human and animal remains, together with deposits of artefacts, were placed inside the pits once the primary use of these containers was over. Similar deposits are not unusual in the Iron Age storage pits of southern England and the near-Continent and seem to have conformed to a few fairly well-defined conventions (Hill 1995). Certain combinations of animal bones or bird bones are often found in these deposits; there are recurrent associations between different types of artefacts; the human burials normally shared a common orientation (Whimster 1981, 5–18); and separate kinds of material might be associated with different stages in the filling of these features (Hill 1995). Further conventions seem to have governed the placing of artefacts and bones in the enclosure ditch at Gussage All Saints. It even seems possible that much of the material initially interpreted as occupation debris had been carefully selected for deposition in the ground. An unknown proportion of the waste generated during the use of this site could have been removed and spread on cultivated land.

As I have suggested, the assemblage from Durrington Walls is exceptional, and the same applies to the configuration of the site itself. That is not true of Gussage All Saints, for the distinctive deposits that have been found here have their counterparts at many other Iron Age settlements. Moreover, there is evidence that this particular site played an important part in the production of food and not just in its consumption. There are grain storage pits but there are also what may have been raised granaries. The evidence for houses at Gussage All Saints is much more limited, but this may be due to the effects of modern ploughing (Wainwright 1979).

In fact the comparison between the relatively modest enclosures at Gussage All Saints and Iron Age sites elsewhere has played a significant part in discussions of the hillforts in southern England. For a long time it appeared likely that these would have been high-status settlements and it even seemed as if it was from such places that food production was managed by an élite (Cunliffe 1991, ch. 14). But recent work has questioned both these assumptions by showing that there were few differences between

the archaeological evidence from the excavation of hillforts and that from other Iron Age settlements (Hill 1996). The artefact assemblages were much the same, but three features did distinguish the evidence of the defended sites. They were defined by more elaborate earthworks; they contained a higher density of storage structures; and, it was claimed, they provided significantly greater evidence of 'ritual'.

Oddly enough, such changes in the interpretation of Iron Age hillforts were influenced by developments in Neolithic studies. There is a certain irony here. Wainwright reinterpreted the henge monument that he had excavated in the light of his own work at Gussage All Saints. Now it seems that Iron Age hillforts might have been ceremonial centres because they share so many features with henges.

An important influence on this debate was a new analysis of the finds from Durrington Walls (Richards & Thomas 1984). It investigated the ways in which different assemblages had entered the archaeological record, placing a special emphasis on what has become known as 'structured deposition'. It seemed as if certain items had been carefully placed at the foot of individual uprights in the main post circle. There were specific patterns of association or avoidance between the contents of different components of the site. For example, in that same timber setting pieces of pottery were deposited separately from flint artefacts, and across the site as a whole pots sherds with more complex decoration had different associations from those with simpler designs. It seemed as if the placing of cultural material within the henge was governed by a number of conventions. That suggests a certain degree of formality, and Richards & Thomas argued that this is a defining feature of ritual.

That was not the end of this particular debate. Fourteen years after he had published his reinterpretation of Durrington Walls, the excavator returned to the subject as part of a more general account of henge monuments. By now he had gone back to his original view that they were ceremonial centres (Wainwright 1989). He quoted the paper by Richards & Thomas, but this does not seem to have been a decisive influence on his thinking. In fact the problem may not be resolved by the fine detail of the field record. It needs to be thought about in a different way.

It would be wrong to suppose that such confusion is peculiar to the archaeology of the British Isles, or even to the monuments of the Neolithic period. Similar issues are just as apparent in the Iron Age of central Europe.

The German word *Viereckschanze* describes the form of a rectangular enclosure, but the application of this term is usually restricted to a distinctive group of earthworks in central Europe dating from the late first millennium BC. Sometimes it extends to rather similar monuments in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, but it is with the sites in southern Germany and Bohemia that this account is concerned (Buchsenschutz & Olivier 1989; Bittel *et al.* 1990; Wieland 1999).

These monuments are quite small and have just one entrance, which is to the south, east or west. The earthworks are slight, and some enclosures were formed simply by a palisade (Fig. 3). These sites can never have been defended and they rarely occupy conspicuous positions. In Bavaria, they are often located on poor soils, but there are other cases in which they can be associated with large Iron Age settlements. *Viereckschanzen* may be found in isolation or can occur close together in small groups. A number of these sites are near to burial mounds (Fig. 4).

Their interpretation has been controversial. They were originally considered as specialized ritual monuments or shrines. As so often in archaeology, this view was strongly influenced by the results of the first large-scale excavation at one of these earthworks. This was at Holzhausen, where the work revealed a timber building and two deep shafts or wells, one of which contained an upright post towards its base (Schwartz 1962; 1975). It was thought to preserve traces of blood, and so it seemed logical to suppose that this feature had been used for offerings. The building was exceptional too, and had an unusual ground plan which was compared with that of temples in the Classical world.

As so often happens, later fieldwork modified this outline. It became clear that some *Viereckschanzen*

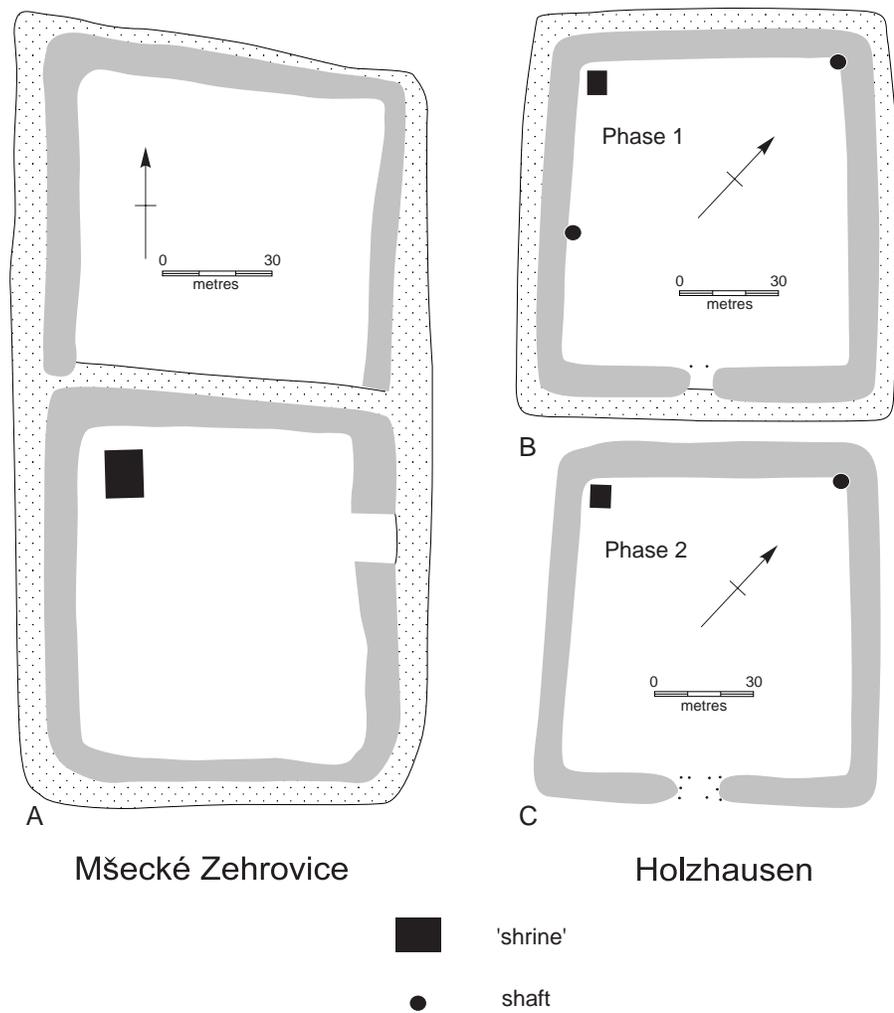


Figure 3. Outline plans of the *Viereckschanzen* at Mšecké Zehrovice and Holzhausen, showing the positions of the internal shafts and 'shrines'. Information from Schwartz (1962; 1975) and Venclová (1998).

did not include any shafts and that other kinds of building could be found which were of similar character to those recorded in settlements. Moreover, buildings very like the 'shrine' identified at Holzhausen came to light amidst the structures on occupation sites of the same period (Venclová 1993; 1997; Murray 1995). How far was it appropriate to distinguish between these earthworks and the remaining components of the Iron Age landscape?

For a while it seemed as if a clearer distinction might be made on the basis of the excavated artefacts, but they were limited in quantity and in many cases their original contexts were poorly defined. For example, a number of *Viereckschanzen* were built on the sites of open settlements (Fig. 4) and part of the artefact assemblage might predate these

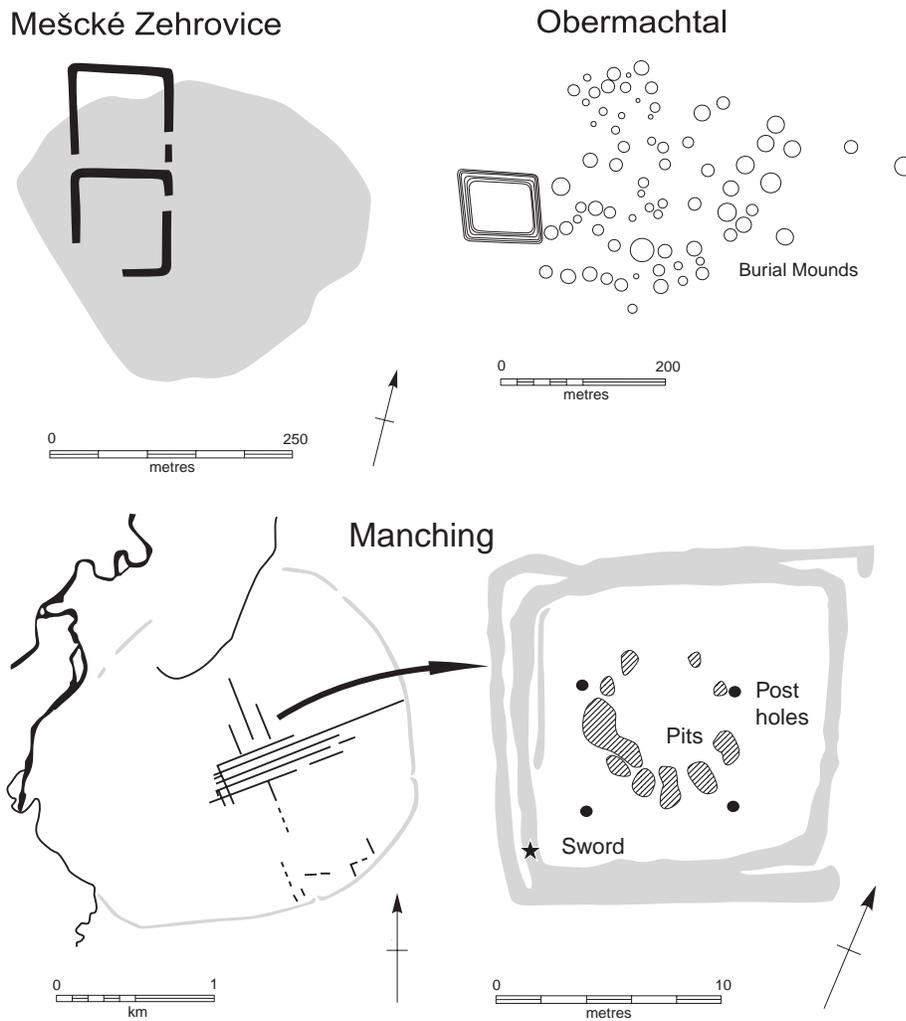


Figure 4. The locations of Viereckschanzen. The outline plan of Mšecké Zehrovice is shown in relation to an area of open settlement indicated by light tone. The example at Obermachtal is situated on the edge of a barrow cemetery and that at Manching in the centre of the famous oppidum. A detail shows the latter monument in detail and indicates the find-spot of an Iron Age sword fragment. Information from Venclová (1997), Wieland (1999), Gerdson (1982) and Sievers (1991).

earthworks altogether. In certain cases this applies to the structural evidence too, and at Dornstadt-Tomerdingen it is clear that even the excavated shaft predated the enclosure bank (Zürn & Fischer 1991). *Viereckschanzen* contain deposits of burnt bone, but there is little to show that they were different from those at nearby settlements. In the same way, Murray (1995) has suggested that the ceramic assemblages from a number of the sites had an unusual composition and might provide evidence of feasting, but a more recent study (Venclová 1997) has cast doubt on

those on other sites. There are also cases in which these earthworks were located within a larger area of domestic activity so that the distribution of timber buildings extends well beyond the enclosure itself (Venclová 1997). A related monument, with part of an Iron Age sword in its ditch, was found within the famous oppidum at Manching (Fig. 4; Gerdson 1982; Sievers 1991), whilst Waldhauser (1989) has shown that some of the Bohemian *Viereckschanzen* were placed towards the outer edges of more extensive settlements.

even this claim. Other distinctive finds are rare. There are very few human remains and the occasional hoards of iron artefacts are similar to deposits associated with settlements of the same period.

Over the years the interpretation of *Viereckschanzen* has become more contentious, perhaps because the evidence from Holzhausen has so rarely been repeated. Venclová (1993) suggests several possible interpretations of these sites. They may have played a specialized role as places where ceremonial was performed. That is the traditional position. Alternatively, they might have been used for food storage and redistribution. This idea is based on the remains of granaries within some of these earthworks, but it also bears the influence of work on Iron Age hillforts. Another possibility is that *Viereckschanzen* were simply small farms, which archaeologists had distinguished from the others by paying too much attention to the perimeter earthwork.

Again the difficulty arises because prehistorians have been looking for an absolute separation between sacred sites and the settlements of the same period and have failed to find one. There is a certain overlap between the buildings inside *Viereckschanzen* and

If there is a spatial overlap between *Viereckschanzen* and occupation sites, there was also a certain fluidity in the evolution of these places over time. Venclová (1993; 1998) has investigated the important site of Mšecké Zehrovice where a stone sculpture was found many years ago. Her work shows that rectangular earthwork enclosures played an important role during just three of the six periods of activity that she identified in excavation. Indeed, in her view the one convincing shrine was confined to a single phase. The site began as an open settlement during the Early Iron Age and was associated with houses, pits and metalworking. There may have been burials nearby. The first enclosure was entirely empty. It was built alongside the settlement and their periods of use may even have overlapped. Then a second enclosure was constructed and, after that, a third. In her view this was the only earthwork to be associated with a ritual building, and it dates from the second century BC. In the final period of use, one of the older enclosures provided the site for yet another settlement associated with houses and storage pits. It may have been then that the sculpture was buried, and it certainly seems as if this final phase saw a renewal of industrial activity. Venclová claims that the use of this site oscillated between the sacred and the profane.

That does not seem likely. It is certainly possible to qualify the sharp distinction between the ritual and everyday use of such places, but any attempt to rationalize all the features of *Viereckschanzen* seems to go too far. It is possible that the shafts were wells, but that hardly explains why those on a single site like Holzhausen were dug to such different depths. Nor does it account for the upright posts in the filling of these features. In the same way, this class of earthwork enclosure may have played a variety of different roles but that does not account for the strict conventions in the placing of their entrances, some of which were very elaborate structures. They were aligned on three of the cardinal points but never to the north.

Venclová (1993) has suggested strict criteria for distinguishing between sacred sites and ordinary settlements in central Europe. These are very revealing. According to her account, shrines should occupy prominent positions apart from any domestic structures. They should contain what she calls 'votive objects', and domestic artefacts must not be present. The buildings associated with ritual activity should be quite different from those on occupation sites, and in her study she identifies Iron Age shrines through their resemblance to Classical buildings.

This scheme is entirely a product of modern assumptions about the past in which ritual and religious belief are separated from the everyday. As the settlements of the British Iron Age show, that need not be the case. There seems no reason to insist that shrines should have been set apart from domestic buildings or that they should have been located at conspicuous points in the landscape.

Her second criterion raises even more difficulties, for it is not clear how we are to identify 'votive objects' as a class of artefact, nor how they should be distinguished from those used in daily life. Archaeologists can only work with those elements of material culture that have survived, and it seems clear that this sometimes happened because they had been deposited intentionally and with some formality (Bradley 1998b). If we follow that line of argument, virtually any kind of object could have been used as an offering. There is no sound basis for inferring that exceptional pieces like the stone sculpture, a flesh hook or a carving of stags belonged to a special class of votive objects, whilst apparently mundane artefacts found in similar contexts were somehow different in kind. These included metalworking tools, iron axes and a ploughshare. All played a vital role in the transformation of nature, and to ignore this simply imposes modern values on the past.

Lastly, it may be correct to isolate certain types of timber building as being different from those ordinarily found in settlements and even to compare them with temples in the Mediterranean, but that is no reason to suppose that other kinds of structure might not have been imbued with a special significance. To suppose otherwise is to prejudge the issue. Archaeologists should accept that there was a certain overlap between the contents of *Viereckschanzen* and those of domestic sites, but they must study that relationship in its own terms.

At the heart of these discussions there is a particular conception of ritual. It seems to be something set apart from daily life, protected from scrutiny by its specialized procedures and connected with religious belief and the supernatural. It is this combination of formality and separation that has been looked for by archaeologists. As these examples show, that approach has ended in confusion.

Few, if any, of these features are invariable characteristics of ritual, and anthropologists, working with living populations, have found it increasingly difficult to maintain this approach. For some, ritual is a universal characteristic of human societies: so much so, in fact, that it has lost any value as an analytical category (Goody 1977). For others, it is a

specialized method of communication, shielded from critical appraisal by its own conventions (Bloch 1989). This may be true in certain cases, but rituals do not necessarily refer to deeply-held or widely-shared beliefs, and they are more easily identified as actions of a specialized kind than they are as propositions about the world (Bell 1992; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994).

In any case it is not true that all rituals are connected with religious beliefs or, indeed, with relations to the supernatural. For some time it has been accepted that there are secular rituals as well and that the two really merge into one another. Nor are the procedures of ritual as formal as they may appear, for there are often important divergences in the ways in which they are conducted. What matters is not to adhere exactly to a strict set of procedures but that they should work (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994). This may override the need to believe in the literal message of any specific ritual. It is participation and commitment that count far more.

Once it is accepted that ritual is a kind of practice — a performance which is defined by its own conventions — it becomes easier to understand how it can occur in so many settings and why it may be attached to so many different concerns. Once we reject the idea that the only function of ritual is to communicate religious beliefs, it becomes unnecessary to separate this kind of activity from the patterns of daily life. In fact, rituals extend from the local, informal and ephemeral to the public and highly organized, and their social contexts vary accordingly.

That is why anthropologists have begun to place less emphasis on ritual as a thing in itself and more on the practice of *ritualization* (Bell 1992; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994). This is an important development for it acknowledges the range of behaviour that is actually observed. Once ritual is seen as a form of action rather than a specialized kind of communication, it becomes easier to understand how it operates, for it is a social strategy of a distinctive kind. That makes it possible to consider the contexts in which particular rituals are created and performed, and the consequences of such actions, whether they had been intended or not. In short, it allows archaeologists to consider the development of individual rituals over time and to trace the social and political history of those practices.

Ritualization is both a way of acting which reveals some of the dominant concerns of society, and a process by which certain parts of life are selected and provided with an added emphasis. Again that

process is essentially historical, for it is unlikely to develop instantaneously. In principle, that means that it can be traced over time and studied in its wider setting. By following the development of rituals in this way it should be possible to identify a few of the ideas that they were meant to express.

Ritualization has another significance as well. If it is really a process by which certain actions gain an added emphasis through particular kinds of performance, that means that at any one time the investment of ritual in particular domains will be largely a matter of degree: certain transactions may be attended by a greater degree of formality than others. For that reason rituals can extend from the private to the public domains and from the local, even personal, to those which involve larger numbers of participants.

As a result of such processes, rituals form a continuum: they are not set apart from other areas of life, as prehistorians have often supposed. But that statement introduces problems of its own. How far will it be possible to trace such practices back to their points of origin? Do rituals need to follow clear conventions before their very existence can be recognized by archaeologists? It may be that certain practices became established more rapidly than others. This is particularly true in the state, where changes could be executed through an administrative infrastructure.

At the same time, it is important to distinguish between rituals that depend on successful performance, with all the scope which that allows for innovation, and those that follow a prescribed liturgy where there will be less room for manoeuvre (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, ch. 7). Much depends on the ways in which such rituals are transmitted (Bradley 2002a, ch. 1). In traditional societies this process may well depend on the operation of social memory, but practices can also be governed by written texts. Although the interpretation of those writings may change from one period to another, they provide an added constraint on the direction in which particular rituals can develop. Christianity is a 'religion of the book' and this feature may have coloured modern Western perceptions of the nature of ritual in the past. In later prehistoric Europe — and especially in the regions discussed so far — there is probably more evidence for rituals based on performance than those constrained by a specific liturgy.

How do archaeologists distinguish between ritual and the everyday? In prehistoric Europe, where literary sources are absent, they have done so on a largely intuitive basis, influenced by their experi-

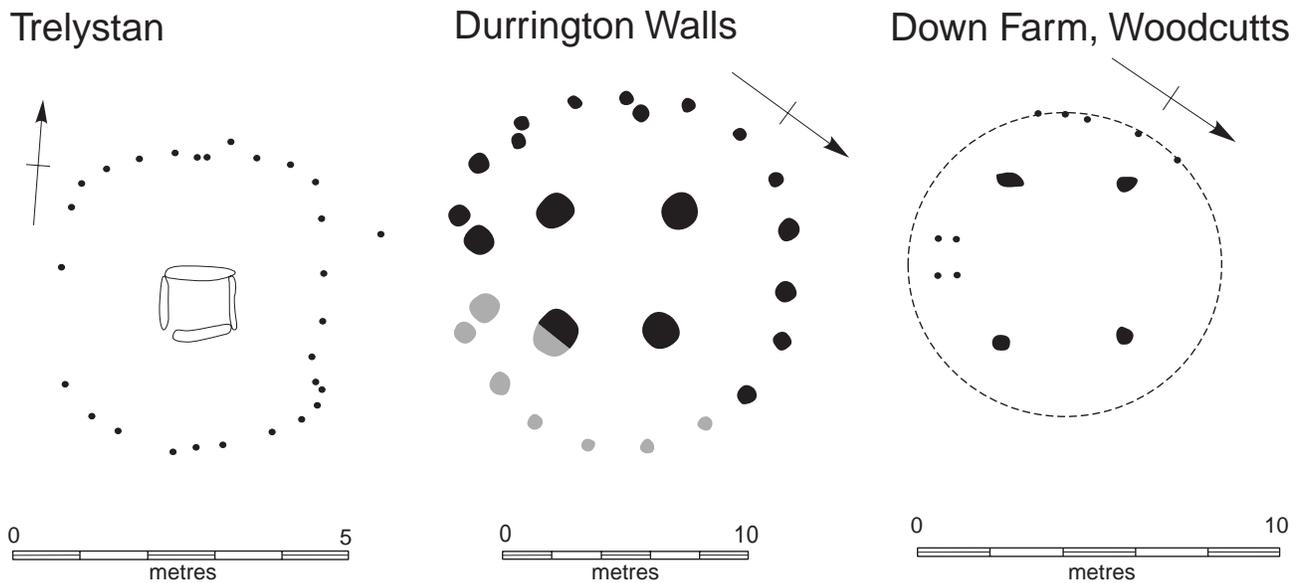


Figure 5. The organization of space inside the Northern Circle at Durrington Walls and two Late Neolithic structures interpreted as stake-built houses. The diagram emphasizes how the building inside the henge monument is an enlarged version of the other structures. The example at Down Farm was built near to two henges. Information from Wainwright & Longworth (1971), Britnell (1982) and Green (2000).

ence in an increasingly secular world. It is a world in which ritual and religious belief have been pushed to the margins. That has had two consequences, neither of which has been good for the discipline. They have seen ritual as something that involved special people, special places and a distinctive range of material culture. They have also assumed that ritual was quite separate from the concerns of daily life. That may not have been true.

The examples considered so far have certain features in common. In each case confusion arises for two reasons. On one level, there are problems because it seems impossible to make a clear distinction between the evidence for domestic settlement and that of ritual activity. The henge monument at Durrington Walls contained huge timber buildings, but these show exactly the same organization of space as the houses of the same period; the difference is simply one of scale (Fig. 5). The Iron Age examples raise more or less the same problem. In one case human bodies, animal remains and artefacts were all arranged in the ground with some formality, but they were placed in reused storage pits. In the same way, the central European *Viereckschanzen* have many characteristics that overlap with those of settlement sites, but they seem to have been imbued with a greater formality, whether this extends to the presence of deep shafts, to the orientation of their gate-

ways or even to the occasional finds of special objects. It is evident that in none of these cases was there a clear division between domestic sites and more specialized monuments.

That raises another point. Even the contexts that do provide evidence of specialized activity contain the kinds of artefacts associated with daily life. By depositing them with such formality people imbued them with a greater significance. This is not a new idea. The ritual importance of the house is familiar from Ian Hodder's work at Çatalhöyük (Hodder 1999b) and, in a very different way, from Colin Renfrew's discussion of domestic ritual in his study of Phylakopi (1985, ch. 1). The same concerns were expressed in the simpler settlements and monuments of northern and western Europe. That is not to suggest that every component of prehistoric ritual referred, even obliquely, to domestic life, for that would not be true, but this relationship is so widespread and so persistent that it should not be ignored.

To illustrate these points it is worth returning to some of the examples used earlier. This discussion employs a different frame of reference.

Among the commonest monuments in Neolithic Europe are large earthwork enclosures. They seem to have originated in the Late Linearbandkeramik when they contained groups of longhouses, but they

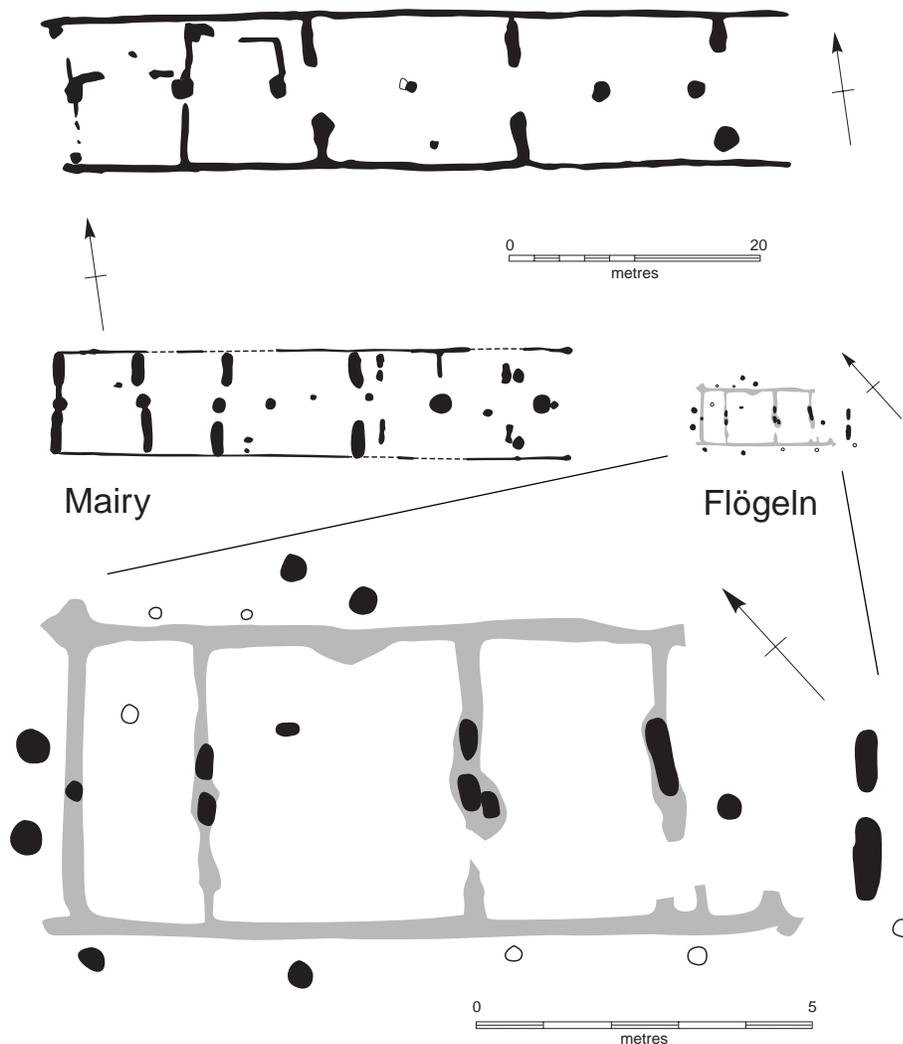


Figure 6. The upper part of the figure depicts two of the large timber buildings at Mairy, compared with the Neolithic house at Flögeln. All three plans are drawn at the same scale, emphasizing the monumental scale of the structures at Mairy. In the lower part of the figure the house plan at Flögeln is drawn at a larger scale. Information from Marolle (1989) and Zimmerman (1979).

continued to be built well after the settlement pattern had changed. By this time, it seems as if the enclosures were no longer inhabited, and some of them were placed on the margins of the settled landscape (Bradley 1998a, ch. 5). The earlier of these enclosures were defined by interrupted ditches, but they could take other forms. In Britain and Ireland they were eventually replaced by henges like Durrington Walls. In central Europe rather similar monuments may have been constructed throughout the Neolithic period (Modderman 1986; Trnka 1991).

For many years one question dominated the agenda: were they settlements? The question was

especially important in the archaeology of the fourth and third millennia as the remains of houses became more difficult to find. At first, it seemed as though an obvious answer would be supplied by these monuments, for they contained nearly all the trappings of daily life: pottery, stone artefacts and deposits of food remains. There were domestic animal bones, but there were also cereals; there was evidence of craft production, but there were also objects that had been imported from a distance. Only the evidence of residential buildings continued to elude the archaeologist. Either the structures found in these places were vanishingly slight, as they were in the later causewayed enclosures of Continental Europe, or they were represented on an almost overpowering scale, as happened with the timber circles inside henges.

A good example of these problems comes from a site in the Ardennes (Marolle 1989). Like the other examples, Mairy was enclosed by an earthwork and possibly by a palisade, but they did not form a continuous barrier. In that respect they contrast with their prototypes which had marked the limits of agricultural settlements. Inside the enclosure at Mairy there were pits that could be compared with those on living sites, but they had been filled with a sequence of deposits which included meat joints, cattle skulls, complete pots and artefacts of exceptional quality. The enclosure is unusual because it also contains the remains of several timber buildings, but again these have a quite exceptional character. In plan they resemble houses of the same period, but they represent enormously enlarged versions of that prototype (Fig. 6). Their closest counterpart is known from a settlement at Flögeln in northern Germany (Zimmerman 1979), but the separate structures at Mairy are between three and six

times as large and it could have been difficult to roof them. This is comparable to the way in which the pit deposits had been treated. In each case, normal domestic transactions gained an enhanced significance because of the ways in which they were deployed. Everyday objects were placed ceremoniously in the ground; timber buildings were erected which were greatly enlarged versions of normal dwellings. People were not so much living domestic life as performing it.

Similar practices can be recognized at many other sites, and again they are liable to be misunderstood. The causewayed enclosure at Sarup in Denmark provides a good example, for here the excavator, Nils Anderson, has tried to distinguish between the ritual and domestic aspects of the site (Anderson 1997). Again that procedure has proved unsatisfactory. In this case he was prepared to countenance the existence of specialized deposits associated with the earthwork perimeter. These included decorated ceramics, axes, animal bones and human remains which may have been displayed in the ditch where they could be inspected by people visiting the site. In many cases individual segments of that ditch had been surrounded by a fence cutting them off from the remainder of the monument. In no sense was the earthwork conceived as a continuous barrier.

Anderson had more difficulty in analyzing the pits inside the enclosure. He attempted to distinguish between those connected with domestic occupation and what he called 'ritual' features (Fig. 7). The first group he thought of in purely utilitarian terms. These were abandoned storage pits that contained artefacts in their filling, whilst the other pits

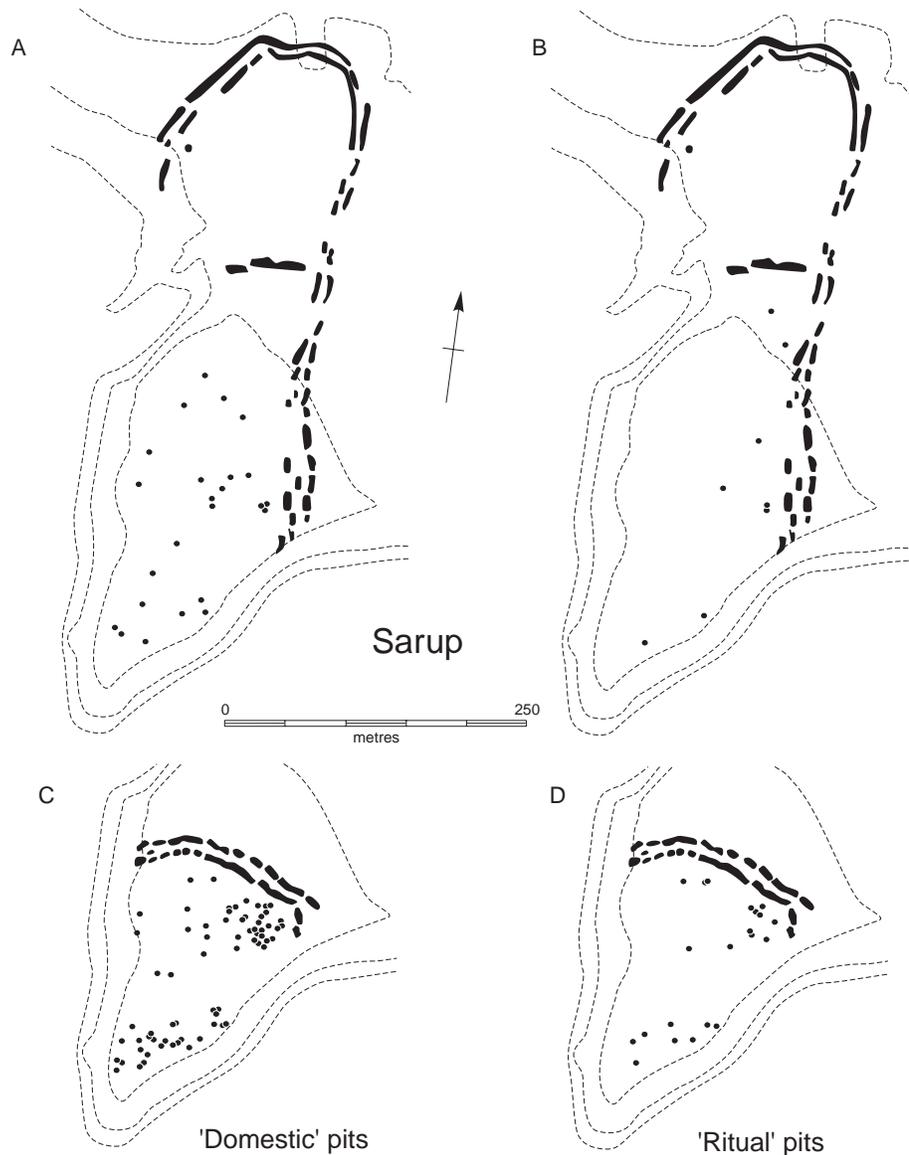


Figure 7. Plan of the causewayed enclosure at Sarup, showing the pit deposits distinguished by the excavator as either 'domestic' or 'ritual'. A and B show the first phase of the enclosure and C and D depict the enclosure in its second phase. Information from Anderson (1997).

had been dug specifically to receive offerings, mainly of ceramics and axe heads. The proportions of these two deposits changed during the sequence at Sarup. Whilst the earthworks were still in use, 30 per cent of the pits were associated with ritual and 70 per cent with domestic occupation, but after that time the number of specialized deposits fell, suggesting that the site had become an ordinary settlement.

That analysis makes some unwarranted assumptions, for once again it depends on a simple

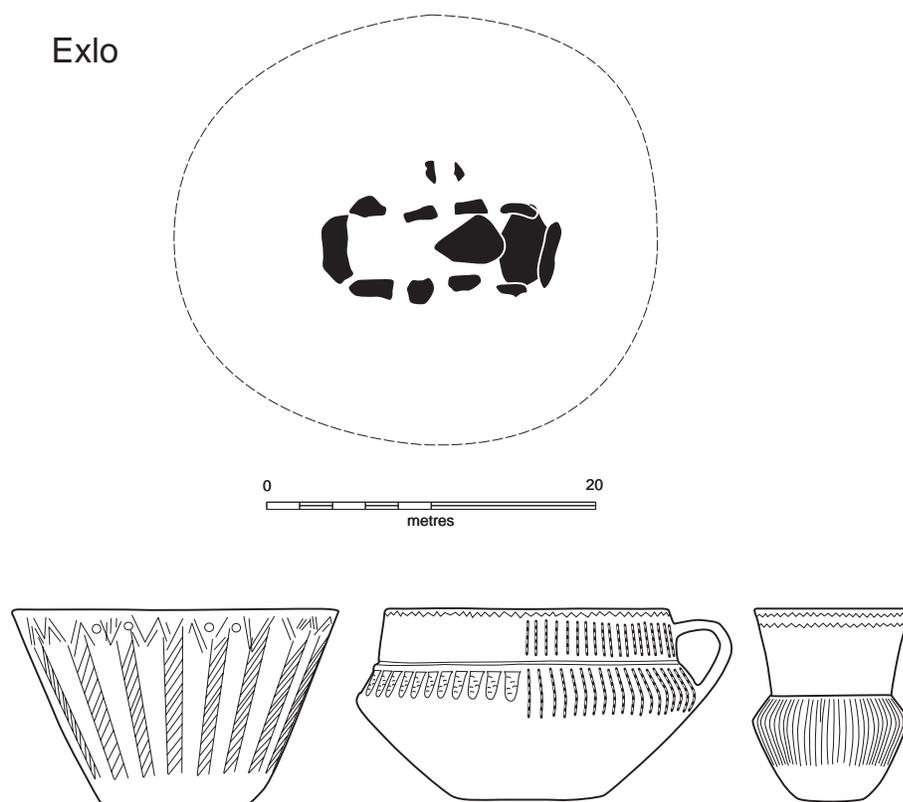


Figure 8. Outline plan of the chambered tomb at Exlo, with a detail of three of the decorated pots deposited on the site. Information from Brindley & Lanting (1992).

dichotomy between the practical and the non-utilitarian. A small selection of artefacts are identified as special and ritually-charged and the others are treated as refuse that was casually discarded. This is a curiously arbitrary scheme. Collections of tools or raw materials are interpreted as occupation debris, even though they would be thought of as special deposits if they were found in isolation. In the same way, axes are accorded a particular significance in his account, but this is denied to the quernstones that played a role in preparing food.

There were deposits of human bones at Sarup. These occur widely at Neolithic enclosures and suggest important links with other kinds of monument. There were megalithic tombs near to the site, and throughout northern Europe similar monuments are associated with deposits of artefacts, most of them placed just outside the entrance (Midgley 1992, ch. 9; Bakker 1992). Ceramics are particularly common here (Fig. 8). Although the settlements of this period are poorly known, the great accumulations of pottery devoted to the dead have a rather similar composition to the collections from these sites (Hulthén 1977,

ch. 4; Tilley 1996, ch. 6). There are some variations, and a few highly decorated vessels may be specifically associated with chambered tombs, but what is really striking is how far this material refers to the domestic domain. Perhaps these vessels once held offerings of food, making their link with the word of the living even more explicit.

Similar concerns pervade Late Neolithic society too and were expressed in the forms of henges like Durrington Walls. Here a variety of artefacts associated with domestic life had been deposited — and perhaps displayed — with some formality. Like the finds from causewayed enclosures, these deposits placed an emphasis on the bones of domesticated animals, even though numerous antler picks had been used to build the earthwork (Albarella & Serjeantson 2002). As happened at the chambered tombs in northern Europe, a restricted range of

artefacts was organized in relation to the architecture of the monument (Richards & Thomas 1984). Again the timber circles associated with the henge were enlarged versions of the normal dwellings of this period (Fig. 5). It seems as though people ritualized particular aspects of social life and provided them with an added meaning.

We have already considered the distinctive deposits associated with Iron Age settlements and the curious enclosures known as *Viereckschanzen*. In one case it was impossible to overlook the evidence for specialized rituals taking place on occupation sites; in the other, it was just as difficult to distinguish those sites from sanctuaries. The final example will consider the distinctive practices associated with houses and storage pits.

The best way of illustrating the ritualization of the domestic sphere is to compare the sequence in two regions of Europe between about 1000 and 100 BC. One region extends through southern Scandinavia to the Netherlands, and the other includes parts of the Rhineland, Belgium, northern France and southern England (Bradley 2002b). In both regions

similar material was included in a series of structured deposits: pottery, animal bones, human remains and agricultural tools (Schirren 1995; Brunaux & Méniel 1997; Debiak *et al.* 1998; Méniel 1998, ch. 8). But there is an important contrast. Away from the domestic arena these different kinds of material were deposited in rather similar contexts, whereas practices were much more varied in the settlements themselves.

To take these points in turn, the Iron Age of northern Europe is well known for a series of well-preserved deposits found in bogs. These bear a striking resemblance to the kinds of material that had been placed there during the Neolithic period, but in the intervening phase a different system seems to have prevailed: one which placed a greater emphasis on offerings of metalwork (Bradley 1998b). The Iron Age deposits, however, refer more directly to the domestic domain and are particularly characterized by pots containing food (Becker 1971). These are often supplemented by deposits of animal bones and also by finds of agricultural implements including ploughs (Glob 1951). Similar material is known in lesser abundance in western Europe, although conditions are less favourable for its survival. The famous bog bodies probably form part of this tradition, and it is clear that examples have been found in Britain and Ireland to match the better-known cases from North Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia (Turner & Scaife 1995; Van der Sanden 1996). This is of particular interest in the light of literary evidence that some of them might have been sacrifices to Nerthus, the goddess of fertility (Todd 1987, 166–7).

The settlement finds, however, show a series of

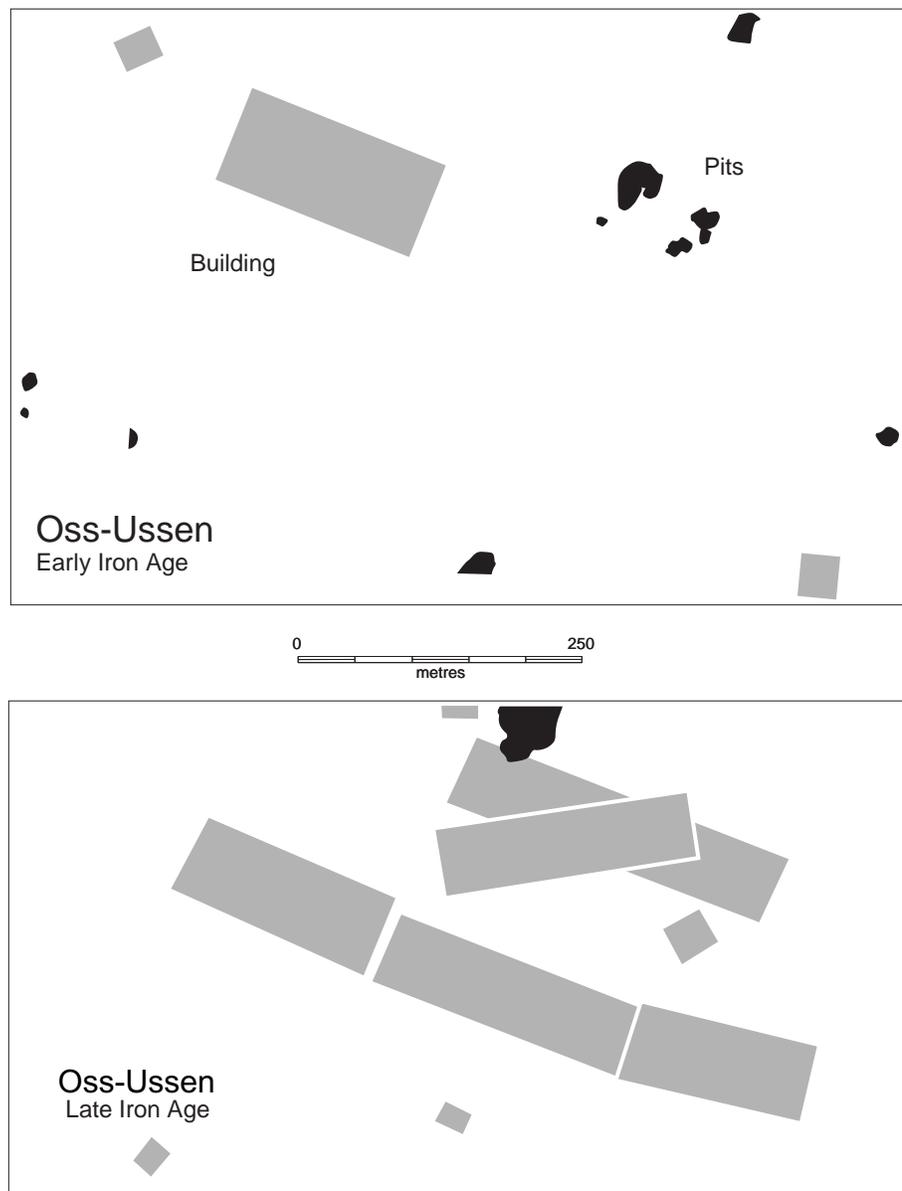


Figure 9. Parts of the excavated area at Oss-Ussen showing the wide spacing of different buildings in the Early Iron Age (upper plan) and their superimposition in the Late Iron Age (lower plan). Information from Fokkens (1998).

striking contrasts which cannot be attributed to the vagaries of preservation. This is where those two geographical traditions move apart. In the first of these regions, there was a preference for longhouses which were widely distributed across the later pre-historic landscape. Before the Late Iron Age these were rarely replaced in the same positions, so they are generally described as the remains of 'wandering settlements' (Fig. 9). For a long time it seemed as if they had moved as the local soils became exhausted,

Pryssgården

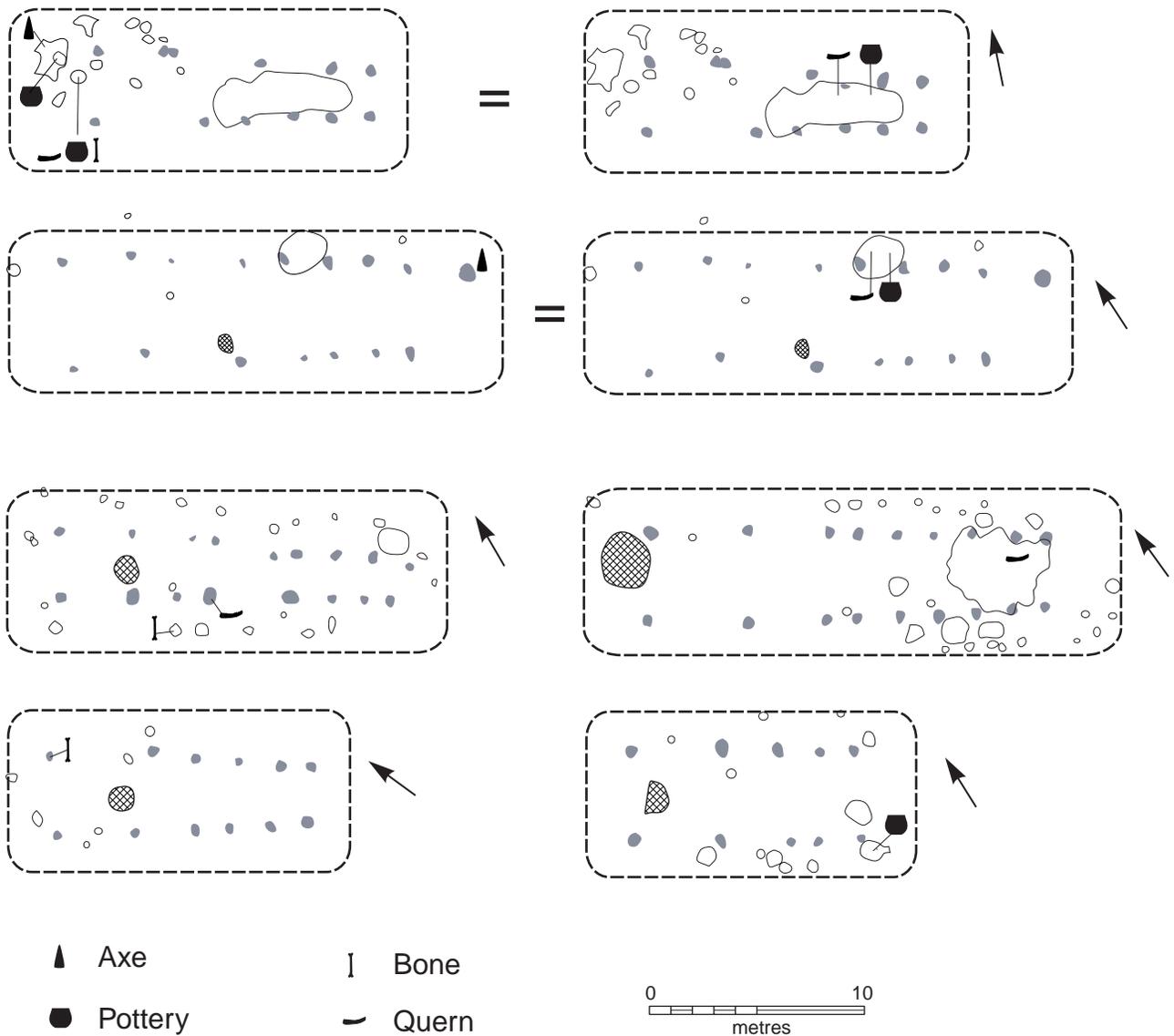


Figure 10. The locations of placed deposits of artefacts and bones in the Late Bronze Age settlement at Pryssgården. The plans on the left of the drawing show the deposits apparently associated with the creation of the building. Those on the right are perhaps connected with its use and/or abandonment. Note that the first two of the drawings may show successive deposits within the same houses. Information from Borna-Ahlvist (2002).

but now there is some reason to doubt this view, and in any case many of these structures were abandoned quite rapidly, whilst they were structurally sound. Gerritsen (1999; 2000) has suggested that it might be better to consider this evidence in relation to the domestic cycle. Perhaps buildings had to be replaced when the circumstances of the occupants changed; an example would be if one of them had

died. In that case the sequence would reflect the life of the household as a social unit rather than the condition of the building.

This might be connected with the deposition of offerings in these houses (Capelle 1987; Therkorn 1987; Ullen 1994; 1996; Stålbom 1997). Some of these were clearly put there when the building was erected, for they were placed in the foundations. Others are

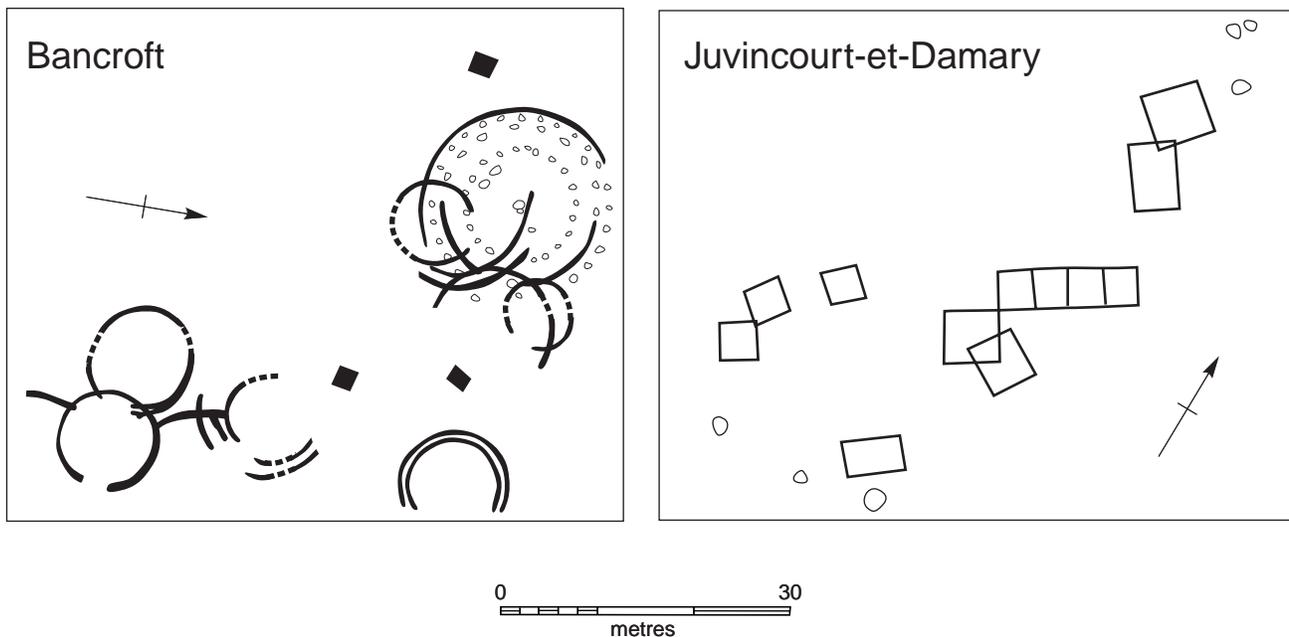


Figure 11. Superimposed or overlapping Iron Age buildings at Bancroft, England, and Juvincourt-et-Damary, France. Information from Williams & Zeevat (1994) and Pion (1996).

equally obviously associated with its occupation or abandonment. Where detailed evidence is available, it is clear that these two groups of finds may have distributions distinct from one another, adding weight to the suggestion that they were connected with separate stages in the history of the structure. There are also cases in which these events were marked by offerings of different kinds of material. This sometimes happened on a recently excavated settlement of the Late Bronze Age at Pryssgården in Sweden (Fig. 10; Stålbom 1997; Borna-Ahlvist 2002). At other sites similar deposits might be associated with the construction and abandonment of granaries or even of whole farmyards. In such cases it seems as if major events in the history of the household were marked by the deposition of cultural material very similar to that used as votive offerings in the wider landscape.

The other tradition is marked by the special attention that was paid to storage pits, but again the offerings that were made there may have been closely associated with the history of individual houses (Brück 1999). In this region there is less to suggest that these buildings changed their locations according to a regular cycle. In some cases their positions overlapped or were even superimposed, thus adding to the difficulty of telling them apart in excavation (Fig. 11). This can hardly have been fortuitous, especially on large sites where space was not at a

premium. There seems to have been a deliberate emphasis on maintaining the positions of settlements, and those of individual buildings, from one generation to another. Although specialized deposits were sometimes associated with these structures, these are not so obviously related to key points in their history. Instead they emphasize important thresholds within the house.

This distinctive pattern is more common in the region in which storage pits are a regular feature, and these seem to have provided an alternative focus for deposits of artefacts, animal bones and even of human burials (Fig. 12). It is usually supposed that this practice is specific to southern Britain (Hill 1995), but that is not the case, and very similar deposits occur on the near-Continent and are increasingly often interpreted in the same terms (Müller 1991; Jeunesse & Ehrestsman 1988; Delattre 2000). Their distribution extends from the Rhineland to Normandy and from the Channel coast into central France (Bradley 2002b). I have already commented on the kinds of material associated with reused silos and the ways in which they were organized, but it would be wrong to overlook a still more basic point. These features had been intimately associated with the keeping of seed corn which could be stored underground for long periods before it was sown. This would provide a potent metaphor for human fertility and also for the continuity of life, and it is surely

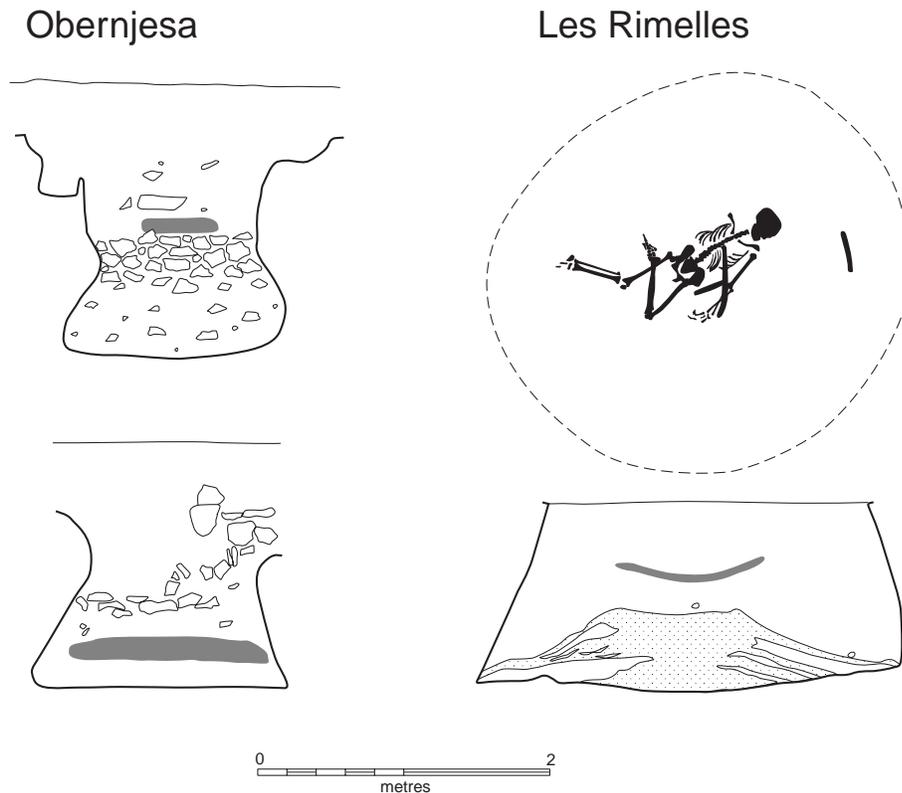


Figure 12. Iron Age storage pits containing human burials at Obernjesa, Germany, and Les Rimelles, France. The shaded areas in the section drawings indicate the position of the human remains. Information from Müller (1991) and Delattre (2000).

why these features assumed so much significance in the ritual practices of the Iron Age. That is particularly true if we couple this distinctive evidence with the histories of the houses associated with them. Unlike their counterparts in the Netherlands and northern Europe, these were sometimes replaced on the same sites, and it means that certain dwellings exhibit a sequence extending over many years — far longer than the individual human life. Where the deposits made in northern European houses emphasized the distinct processes involved in building, using and abandoning these dwellings, here there were fewer breaks and very much the same range of material was deployed in a different way. In this case the agricultural cycle itself provided an image of continuity that was acknowledged through the provision of offerings in storage pits. Again, some of the basic concerns of domestic life became ritualized by this procedure. It is impossible to separate Iron Age farming from the symbolic system that sustained it.

Why was domestic life such an important focus for ritual? There are perhaps two answers, each re-

flecting the concerns of a different kind of archaeology. Economic archaeologists would emphasize the vital importance of food production throughout the prehistoric period but especially when domesticates were first adopted in the Neolithic and when farming was reorganised during the first millennium BC (Barker 1985). Both involved irreversible changes in human experience of the world. Social archaeologists would take the argument even further by pointing out that it was in precisely these periods that the accumulation and distribution of foodstuffs became central to the political economy. Thus the animal bones found at Neolithic monuments have been interpreted in terms of large communal feasts (Albarella & Serjeantson 2002), and so have some of the deposits at Iron Age settlements (Hill 1995). The defended sites of lowland Britain and the

northern Netherlands have been identified as communal food stores (Waterbolk 1977; Hill 1996) and the same interpretation has extended to some of the *Viereckschanzen* in Central Europe (Venclová 1993). In each case rituals emphasized key transactions in ancient social life.

That could almost provide a conclusion to this article, but it would leave a more important point unresolved. I have argued that the conventional opposition between ritual and the everyday has little application in the study of later prehistoric Europe. Many of the problems that have afflicted archaeologists have been of their own making. Rather than working with an inflexible conception of ritual — a notion whose origins lie far back in the past — it would be better to think in terms of *ritualization*. That was a process that affected many of the components of domestic life. This is not to claim that it was the only source of ritual practices in prehistory, even in those regions considered here. Rather, it was one domain in which everyday acts could take on special qualities until they assumed the character of a thea-

trical performance. It is shown by the ways in which artefacts and foodstuffs could be deployed with a particular formality. The same applies to the organization of settlements and monuments.

That raises another question. Why has it been so much easier writing a social archaeology of the period from the Neolithic to the Iron Age than it has in Mesolithic studies? The conventional answer would be that the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition marks the meeting point between the different kinds of archaeology mentioned earlier (Thomas 1988). One is concerned with adaptation and the other with what Hodder (1991) has termed ‘the meanings of things’. That comparison would be unfair. A number of writers have tried very hard to study the social archaeology of late hunter-gatherers, but often without much success. This is not just because the evidence is imperfectly preserved. Another factor could be at work. It may be that until the adoption of farming, domestic life did not undergo the same amount of symbolic elaboration as it did during later periods. No doubt many practices were ritualized in Mesolithic society, but perhaps fewer of these took place at the occupation sites where so much fieldwork has been concentrated. This makes it harder to conduct the fine-grained analyses that are familiar from later prehistory and for that reason interpretations may be hard to extend beyond questions of mobility and food procurement.

What does this imply for the archaeology of later periods? Earlier, I made the comment that some of those who are most reluctant to contemplate a cognitive archaeology prefer to study the evidence for subsistence and settlement. An essential preliminary to such work is to investigate the formation of the archaeological record, for without some understanding of how particular deposits came into being it would be hard for them to take their researches further. In principle, the residues of past human conduct should be completely disordered, and yet it is rarely the case. Why is this? If domestic life really had been ritualized in the ways suggested here, it might mean that some of the deposits investigated in a traditional manner had already been modified through social practices of which prehistorians are just becoming aware. Perhaps ritual itself was one of the formation processes that gave their raw material the coherence that allows it to be interpreted at all. If so, the antipathy between economic and social archaeologies has no basis. Even the most orthodox approaches would be difficult to follow without the ritualization of the domestic sphere. It is a sobering prospect, and yet it is also an encouraging one.

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Note

1. *A Life Less Ordinary* is a film which came out in 1997. I am intrigued by its title but do not recommend its contents.

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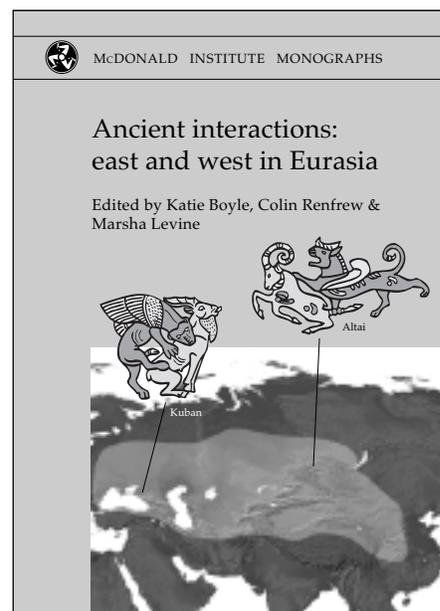
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