



## CULTURE AND COSMOS

Vol. 18 no 1 Spring/Summer 2014

Published by Culture and Cosmos  
and the Sophia Centre Press,  
in partnership with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David.  
in association with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology  
in Culture,  
University of Wales Trinity Saint David,  
Faculty of Humanities and the Performing Arts  
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, SA48 7ED, UK.

[www.cultureandcosmos.org](http://www.cultureandcosmos.org)

Cite this paper as: Ronald Hutton, 'Prehistoric British Astronomy: Whatever Happened to the Earth and Sun?', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 18 no 1, Spring/Summer 2014, pp. 21-35.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue card for this book is available from the British Library

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ISSN 1368-6534
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Printed in Great Britain by Lightning Source

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# Prehistoric British Astronomy: Whatever Happened to the Earth and Sun?

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**Ronald Hutton**

**Abstract:** During the first half of the twentieth century, it was an orthodoxy among British archaeologists that the New Stone Age peoples of the island had worshipped an Earth Goddess, in chambered tombs, and then been conquered by foreigners who ushered in a Bronze Age, characterised by circular temples dedicated to a new religion focused on the heavens. In the second half of the century, belief in this sequence collapsed, and experts more or less abandoned attempts to reconstruct religion during this period of prehistory. At the same time it remains true that many of its monuments have clear alignments on heavenly bodies. What now, then, can be done to bring together this evidence with prevailing scholarly attitudes?

Anybody with only a passing acquaintance with the prehistoric monuments of the British Isles will know that many of them are aligned, often with great accuracy, upon heavenly bodies. Indeed, the very greatest and most famous of all are, in each one of the three historic realms of the British Isles. The most celebrated ancient site in Ireland is Newgrange, the huge Neolithic passage tomb in the Boyne Valley, the entrance of which is designed to face the midwinter sunrise. A small aperture above it admits a ray of light from the rising sun which travels down a passage behind to strike a carved stone at the back of the main chamber. It is a magnificent feat of engineering from around 3200 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The same effect is found at the single most famous and sophisticated Neolithic structure in Scotland, the Neolithic passage tomb at Maes Howe in Orkney. Built a couple of centuries later than Newgrange, it admits the midwinter sunset down its passage to light up the main chamber.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, it is generally known that the entrance to the greatest prehistoric monument in England, which is the most famous in the entire world, is aligned on the midsummer sunrise. This is of course

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Ashmore, *Maes Howe* (Edinburgh: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2002).

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Stonehenge, which was built in its present form between 2600 and 2400 BCE: still a very long time ago, and contemporary with the earliest of the Egyptian pyramids. What is less well known, although it is becoming more so, is that Stonehenge once embodied a still more dramatic alignment upon the midwinter sunset, just as Maes Howe had done. The largest of all the freestanding three-stone settings in the centre, the Great Trilithon, was positioned so that the sun at midwinter set directly behind it. This caused the red light of the dying sun to pour through the narrow gap between the two uprights. It is not, I think, too fanciful to compare what would have been the effect with that of birth or menstrual blood flowing from between the legs of a giant female figure. I also concede, of course, that this is only one possible reading of it. The effect itself is long lost, because the builders made a tragic error in its construction. They found a single enormous stone to provide one of the uprights, which could be planted deep enough in the earth to secure it completely. It is actually the tallest prehistoric standing stone in the British Isles. They could not, however, find one to match it which was of equal length. So they cheated, by finding a stone of the right shape which was much shorter but had a piece projecting out horizontally from its end, like a shoe. They hoped that if the stone were put upright, with this projection sticking out under the topsoil, and jammed a big stone lintel on top to join it to the genuinely long stone next to it, all would be well. The shoe-like effect would provide some sort of anchor, while the lintel would push the stone down and fasten it to the stable one beside it, making the whole structure safe. This proved mistaken. At some unknown date, the shorter stone toppled over and broke, shedding its lintel, burying the altar stone, and rendering the centre of the monument unusable. It also, of course, ruined the whole effect of the midwinter sunset. At any rate, that effect was planned into the heart of Stonehenge's design and purpose, and was one of scores of alignments on the movements of the sun found in Britain's megalithic monuments.<sup>3</sup>

In the twentieth century, astronomers claimed to detect many more alignments focussed upon the moon and stars, though these have proved more controversial. It should be emphasised also that the undoubted solar connections are of various different kinds, and that most megaliths, even in the same district, were not given any. This is not surprising, and should

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<sup>3</sup> It is discussed in most of the many recent books on Stonehenge, but my personal favourite among the references is from Julian Richards, *The Amazing Pop-Up Stonehenge* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2005), pp. 14-15, where it can be seen recreated in cardboard!

not be worrying, because it fits in with the usual pattern in Neolithic monuments of intense local diversity and creativity. Repeatedly a similar basic language of ceremonial architecture, found across the whole of the British Isles and often across Western Europe, was interpreted at local level in a very wide range of different forms.<sup>4</sup> I would emphasise here that I have no expertise in astronomy and my concern here is not with the question of how its relationship with prehistoric monuments *should be* interpreted. Instead, as a cultural historian, I am interested in *how* it has been interpreted; and that is a concern which fits well into those of this collection of essays. In a predecessor to it, I have considered the problem of why British archaeologists have not been more interested in the astronomical aspects of ancient sites, especially in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Here I am going to address a different aspect of the subject altogether: the manner in which they have written about the cosmological aspects of those sites. In other words, I am interested in the implications that they have drawn from their form, including their orientation on the sky. Those conclusions have altered significantly during my own lifetime, and the alterations concerned can in my opinion provide some very interesting insights into changes in modern British culture.

What should be emphasised here is that the three great monuments which I have discussed above - Newgrange, Maes Howe and Stonehenge - were all concentrated in the heyday of solar alignments for British and Irish monuments: between 3200 and 2400 BCE. Before and after that period, those interested in archaeoastronomy have found much less evidence of interest in the sun. Furthermore, the appearance of apparent intense interest in it is part of a much bigger change in British and Irish prehistory. It was no less than a revolution in attitudes to sacred space in the minds of prehistoric people. Put simply, the classic monument of the fourth millennium BCE, 4000 to 3000, is what I call the tomb-shrine. Local British names for it include long barrow, long cairn, dolmen, passage grave and cromlech. It is found all the way around Western Europe from Spain to Sweden. It consists of a stone or wooden chamber, usually containing human remains and often contained within a mound of earth or stones, much larger than was necessary merely to cover the chamber. These structures were intended to make impressive statements in the landscape: they are indeed the first widely distributed form of

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<sup>4</sup> For this see Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hutton, 'The Strange History of British Archaeoastronomy', *Journal of the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7, no. 4 (2013): pp. 376-396.

monument in the story of humanity. Most of them have no clear alignments on the movements of heavenly bodies. Even within the same district, they face in more directions than are covered by the movements of the sun. Most would fall within those of the moon, but not all, and stars move around too much, and the dating of the monuments is too imprecise, for stellar alignments to be proved. The mounds and chambers are also of many different shapes, but forms of rectangle are the most common for both.<sup>6</sup>

In the years around 3000, however, the peoples of the British Isles became fascinated by round shapes for the first time, and the standard sacred unit of space became the circle for at least one and a half thousand years. At the same time, monuments began sometimes to be orientated, with great precision, on the movements of the sun, especially at the solstices. These changes took two different forms, however, in different halves of the archipelago. In Ireland, West Wales and Northern Scotland, it was grafted onto the older tradition of the tomb-shrine. The result was to take this tradition to its greatest achievements, in structures like Newgrange and Maes Howe: huge round mounds containing long passages leading to chambers with those alignments on the midwinter sun. In most of Britain, however, the tomb-shrines were abandoned, with no more being built and those still in use being blocked up. Instead, people took to holding ceremonies in open-air, circular enclosures, the materials of which depended on what the local geology provided. In areas of soft soil, they were made of earth, consisting of banks piled up around ditches: archaeologists call these structures henge monuments. In regions with plentiful timber, rings of wooden posts were erected, and where large stones were abundant, they were put up on end to form circles of megaliths. Stone circles are the classic surviving monuments of the third millennium BCE in Britain, after the earthen henges have been ploughed down and the timber rings rotted away. Many of the greatest of the new ceremonial landscapes, like those around Avebury and Stonehenge in Wiltshire, combined all of these forms: stone circles inside banks and ditches, often succeeding wooden structures or having those nearby. As said, some of them incorporated the new alignments on the sun. The dead were no longer put into the tomb-shrines, where their remains were a major part of religious rites. Instead, they were sealed under smaller circular mounds, called round barrows in England. Increasingly, they

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<sup>6</sup> See Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 16-51, revised and enlarged in Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, Chapter 2.

were cremated before burial. Once buried, their bodies were cut off from the world of the living, but often accompanied by valuable goods, as they had not been in the tomb-shrines. These may have been for use in the next world, or gifts made to honour the dead, or possessions of the deceased, too strongly associated with them for others to feel safe using.<sup>7</sup> All this is undoubted archaeological fact. It represents a revolutionary change in the nature of the religious monuments of the British Isles, hinging on the transition between the fourth and third millennia before the Common or Christian Era. This calls out for explanation. Explanations have indeed been provided, and they are, as I have suggested, revealing of changes in modern British culture. The one that was dominant during my own adolescence, and throughout the mid-twentieth century, had many virtues. One of these was simply unanimity: it was accepted by all the leading experts in British prehistory, in alliance with colleagues who specialised in all other parts of Europe. Another virtue was its longevity and consistency: that it had been developing for one and a half centuries, before reaching its apogee in the 1950s and early 1960s. It portrayed the tomb-shrines as having been the temples of a religion dedicated to a single Great Goddess, who represented the earth and the generative powers of nature. It held that this had first arisen in the Near East, and been brought to Western Europe by missionaries, until it covered the entire continent, and the whole Mediterranean basin. The tomb-shrines were often thought to represent her body, in which the dead were laid to await rebirth, and in which they acted as mediators between the human and divine worlds. In this traditional view, the Goddess's worship was brought to an end by invaders from the steppe country which bordered Eastern Europe. These introduced a new religion, focused on the sky and above all on the sun, and on the element of fire which was associated with it. It was they who established the new circular temples, mirroring the solar orb, the new round burial mounds, and the rite of cremation, by which the dead were committed to the sacred fire.<sup>8</sup>

The newcomers also brought a fire-based technology consisting of metalworking, in gold, copper and bronze, replacing the stone tools and weapons of the tomb-shrine era. This gave them the military superiority which enabled them to conquer and absorb the tomb-shrine builders. They were, moreover, of a different race to those whom they subdued,

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<sup>7</sup> For all this see Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, pp. 52-87, and subsequently Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, Chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Hutton, 'The Neolithic Great Goddess', *Antiquity* 71 (1997): pp. 91-9.

being taller, blonder and with blue eyes, whereas the Stone Age folk of the tomb-shrines were small and dark. They therefore had the edge in physical as well as technological prowess. The sense of who these invaders were changed over the course of the twentieth century. In the late Victorian period they were regarded as the Celts, but over the next generation these were shifted to the Iron Age, as the last great wave of prehistoric newcomers to Britain. Instead the bringers of the solar religion of circles and fire became the Indo-Europeans, given the specific form in Western Europe of the Beaker People. These were named after the distinctive drinking vessels found in graves beneath the early round barrows. The beakers were one component of a complete assemblage of newly appeared weapons, tools and ornaments which archaeologists interpreted as the trappings of a warrior society.<sup>9</sup>

This model of change was deeply satisfying to a range of personality types and interest groups in modern British (and European) society. For one thing, it provided a dramatic and lucid story that appeared to fit the archaeological evidence. For another, it could be retold with a number of different infusions of sympathy. For those emerging into a post-Christian society, and experiencing a need to engage imaginatively with the divine feminine, the concept of a primordial Great Goddess was deeply attractive. It could be given a deeper feminist hue by suggesting that the small, dark people of the Neolithic, who worshipped her, also had a woman-centred society, more pacific and ecologically friendly than those after it. This had the effect of making the arrival of the Beaker People all the more tragic, as it could be made to represent not only the replacement of a matriarchal with a patriarchal religion, but an equivalent change in society. In this view, it took the form of the destruction of a peaceful, consensual, responsible and feminist order by violent, patriarchal brutes, who introduced a system based on inequality and exploitation, which glorified war and masculinity and had a polluting and extractive technology. The converse interpretation was to glorify the coming of the Beaker People and the solar religion as a great forward step in the progress of humanity. This characterised the Neolithic, with or without a woman-centred society, as having been more ignorant and savage than

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, Jacquetta Hawkes, *Early Britain* (London: Collins, 1945), pp. 18-23; Jacquetta Hawkes and Christopher Hawkes, *Prehistoric Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1949), pp. 66-71; Stuart Piggott, *The Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 270; D. L. Clarke, *Beaker Pottery of Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 276-80.

the succeeding Bronze Age. It glorified, or at least respected, the Beaker People as bringing a more sophisticated society, as well as a much more superior technology. Their arrival, in this vision, was one of the first great steps taken by European humanity in its long march towards the benefits of modernity. It is not difficult to see that, between them, these two different approaches to the same basic story summed up the two opposing attitudes of modern Westerners to their age and to their society.

Both of the components of the story - the Great Goddess and the Beaker People - had deep roots, and had converged from separate points of origin. The concept of a universal goddess, identified with the natural world, drew upon ancient ideas but had become dominant in the Western literary imagination with the coming of the Romantic Movement. As such, it was explored by poets and novelists all through the nineteenth century, and in 1849 it was back-projected by a German classicist, Eduard Gerhard, into the ancient past. He became the first scholar to propose that such a goddess had been worshipped by all the peoples of the prehistoric Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. In his reading, her figure had subsequently fragmented into the many goddesses and gods found in actual ancient pantheons when history began. This idea was gradually taken up by other German and French scholars in the rest of the century, and adopted by their Britain colleagues in the early twentieth. Subsequent archaeological discoveries were promptly interpreted in harmony with it, creating a larger and larger structure of apparent evidence.<sup>10</sup> The concept of invasions as the motor for prehistoric change was also a development of the mid-nineteenth century, which spread from the Continent to Britain. This time it was the Danes who proposed it, in the 1840s, but its adoption was far more rapid than the idea of the Great Goddess. It was an orthodoxy of British scholarship by the 1860s, and fully elaborated by the 1880s. The reason for its instant appeal is very clear. What it outlined was a story of British prehistory in which technological and social change was introduced by successive waves of aggressive newcomers, each more advanced than the last.<sup>11</sup>

What clearly underlay this picture was the reality of European imperialism in the same period, during which European or Europe-derived states were spreading their rule across ever-larger areas of

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald Hutton, 'The Discovery of the Modern Goddess', in Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel (eds), *Nature Religion Today* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 89-100.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 299-303.



America, Africa, Asia and Australia. English-speaking nations in particular were sending large bodies of settlers into these lands, which were dispossessing and sometimes destroying the native peoples who had occupied them. This experience explicitly underlay the developing Victorian view of British prehistory. An explicitly racist element was injected into this view by the belief that each successive wave of incomers had been taller, blonder and stronger than the last. The greatest single replacement had been of the small dark people of the Neolithic, with their preoccupation with earth, by the tall fair people of the Bronze Age, with their sights set on the sky. The argument that remnants of the older, inferior, race were still found among the modern population of the islands enabled the Victorian British elite to present pseudo-scientific reasons for despising particular subsets of it. The Irish were the main victims, but sections of the British working class were also targeted. The scholar responsible for the idea of this genetic replacement was a medical doctor, John Thurnham, who made two major contributions to the study of British prehistory. One was to point out that the tomb-shrines and the round barrows actually belonged to different millennia, instead of, as assumed hitherto, being built by the same people. This was a real, and permanent, advance in knowledge. He also, however, added the assertion that they were made by different races. This was unsupported even by his own data.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent addition to his ideas, that the tomb-shrine people were small and dark and the stone circle people tall and blonde, was absurd. Their skeletons are actually of the same size, and you can't tell a person's complexion from bones. None the less, these Victorian beliefs lasted until the mid twentieth century, largely because so many other Victorian structures did: empire, great power status, racism, gender polarity, and an economic dependence on heavy industry, reliant on extracted minerals. A further component in the invasion model also endured: the notion of Britain as an island threatened by foreign attack. This repeatedly surfaces in accounts of its prehistory, and actually strengthened through the early twentieth century, because of two World Wars and then the beginning of the Cold War.<sup>13</sup>

The whole traditional vision of Neolithic and Bronze Age British prehistory unravelled during the 1960s and 1970s, and by 1980 it was gone, although it still has echoes in popular works, both of fiction and

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<sup>12</sup> John Thurnam, 'On Ancient British Barrows', *Archaeologia* 42 (1869): pp. 161-244; and *Archaeologia* 43 (1871): pp. 285-544.

<sup>13</sup> For examples, see Hawkes and Hawkes, *Prehistoric Britain*, p. 13.

non-fiction, to this day. I was myself a witness of the whole process of disintegration, at close quarters, and so I can speak about both the public and the largely unspoken factors involved in it. The greatest was simply that the two decades concerned witnessed the end of Victorian Britain, in all the aspects described above: the empire, Great Power status, a fear of invasion by land forces (as opposed to missiles), an economic dependence on heavy industry, and an official tolerance of racism and sexism. A Victorian model of prehistory now became vulnerable. Another factor working for change was the great expansion of higher education in the same period, creating many new experts in prehistory. Linked to the general disrespect for traditional ideas which was also a feature of the age, this prompted a wholesale questioning of received models.

The final major development relevant to our subject was the improvement in dating techniques for ancient sites, based on the analysis of radiocarbon, which became available around 1970. Combined with improved statistical analyses of data, these have permitted more and more precise dates to be achieved for prehistoric material. In itself, this single scientific innovation rendered the old model untenable. It shattered the presumed chain of transmission for the religion of the Great Goddess from the Near East to Western Europe. Much of the evidence provided for it in the Mediterranean basin turned out to be younger, not older, than that on the Atlantic seaboard. The dating revolution was even more lethal to the idea of Beaker People invasions. All of the innovations that had been associated with those—circular monuments, cremation, metalworking, and the range of specific prestige goods—were proved to have arrived, slowly, at different times in the period between 3200 and 2200 BCE. They were not part of a single cultural package.<sup>14</sup> Advances in genetics, especially in the analysis of DNA, proved that there had been no significant arrival of a new racial group in the whole of the period concerned.<sup>15</sup> A much enlarged body of excavated material showed that the earlier Neolithic, the time of the tomb-shrines, was actually more warlike than the later Neolithic and Bronze Age, the time of the stone

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<sup>14</sup> Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, pp. 16-138.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2006), pp. 210-370; Brian Sykes, *Blood of the Isles* (London: Bantam, 2006), *passim*.

circles.<sup>16</sup> The question of whether women or men led prehistoric societies has become pointless because we completely lack any decisive evidence for the nature of social structures in earlier British prehistory. From the same data, you can visualise matriarchy, patriarchy, theocracy, democracy or tribal chieftainship, as you please.

There is no better evidence for the nature of the deities worshipped in the British Neolithic or Bronze Age: you can imagine what you want. The concept of a universal Great Goddess was abandoned by all British, and most European and American, archaeologists because there was nothing solid to sustain it. It remains possible, and it must be emphasised that it is pretty well certain that the prehistoric British believed in goddesses, or at least in powerful female spirits. Traditional peoples always do. This is, however, a very different thing from believing in one single all-powerful deity, associated with the earth, across the entire ancient Eurasian world: that looks very much like a modern construct. Only towards the very end of the ancient pagan world did such monist or monotheistic religious ideas begin to be articulated, and these were never embraced by the majority of pagans even then.<sup>17</sup> To my own generation of scholars the idea of the Neolithic Great Goddess had three features which made it especially unappealing. The first was that it seemed so clearly a post-Christian construct: of a single, universal, primeval religion, of a single deity, which later degenerated into the polytheism of the historic ancient world. The second was that it seemed to present such an essentialist concept of femininity: of the female as mother, nurturer, representative of fertility and regeneration. Many of the historic pagan goddesses, as patronesses of rulership, science, crafts and wisdom, seemed much more attractive as role models for modern feminism. The third drawback was that it embodied a sharply polarised view of masculine and feminine. Anthropology was now furnishing us with huge quantities of new information about the ways in which gender relations had been constructed in non-European societies. It showed us the great range of possibilities which were actually open to us. By 1975 one British anthropologist, Shirley Ardener, could pose the exciting question of

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<sup>16</sup> A sample of a large literature on this is Roger Mercer, 'The Origin of Warfare in the British Isles', in John Carman and Anthony Harding (eds), *Ancient Warfare* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), pp. 143-56.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

whether our Western categories of 'woman' and 'man' might not disappear altogether.<sup>18</sup>

To many British prehistorians, therefore, it was a shock when the old ideas came back to Britain from America in the 1980s, but this time as part of radical feminism. American writers had taken up the old idea of an essential female nature and simply attached a positive value to those aspects of it which had often been treated as negative. This movement attracted the support of one distinguished archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas, the leading Western expert in eastern European prehistory. She reasserted the whole traditional idea of a Goddess-centred, pacific and creative Neolithic Europe, destroyed by Indo-European warriors worshipping sky-gods. She simply gave it a new liberationist message.<sup>19</sup> In other words, British and American radicals had dealt with the shortcomings of the old model in opposite ways. The former had deconstructed it; the latter had appropriated and reshaped it. Both are excellent strategies for dealing with an inconvenient intellectual construction. The problem is that they are completely mutually incompatible. As a result, the very British academics who had supported the demolition of the Great Goddess construct in the name of socialism, feminism and gay liberation now found themselves being abused as patriarchs and reactionaries by followers of the new American Goddess movement. My concern here, however, is with what those same British academics put in place of the Goddess and the patriarchal invaders. What they provided, in brief, was Marxism, the most dynamic intellectual movement in the years around 1970 in which many of them were educated. In one aspect, this produced a secularisation of prehistory, depriving religious belief of any status as a force in itself and grounding all ideology ultimately in economic needs and the power politics that they generated. The tomb shrines were therefore now interpreted as territorial markers, built by people who were taking on the new Neolithic farming lifestyle. This involved settling down on the land and dividing it up, and the new monuments served to warn strangers that particular plots were already taken. The human bones inside them were interpreted as those of the first people to occupy that farm, who were then revered as ancestors by their successors. This was part of a continuing process of affirmation of group identity and rights of possession. The transition to the age of the circles was seen as marking a shift from a society based mainly on those

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<sup>18</sup> Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women* (London: Malaby, 1975), p. xviii.

<sup>19</sup> Hutton, 'The Neolithic Great Goddess', pp. 97-8.

group identities to one in which individuals were more prominent. In the tomb-shrines the bones had been mixed together in large monuments requiring considerable collective effort. In the round barrows people were buried individually, and the most important had personal possessions interred with them. This model certainly seemed to explain why the British in the third and second millennia BCE were apparently so fond of consumer goods - weapons, tools, pottery and ornaments - in increasing numbers and variety. With equal certainty, it suited British society in the 1970s and 1980s, both in its secularism and in its stress on the individual. After all, the British in the mid-twentieth century had themselves passed from modes of behaviour which had largely been based on collective and conformist models to a rampant individualism based largely on new and rapidly-changing fashion accessories.<sup>20</sup>

The Marxist system of explanation, however, always left major parts of the evidence unexplained. One was the new interest in the circle as the vital unit of sacred space. Another was why people moving towards the new individualism should still engage in huge collective building works such as Stonehenge, Avebury, Maes Howe and Newgrange, which dwarfed that needed for the tomb-shrines. It foundered completely when more was discovered about the early Neolithic way of life. This was not in fact based on an agrarian economy of farms and fields, but on a pastoral one of people migrating with flocks and herds along seasonal routes. The clusters of tomb shrines could not, therefore, have marked out family plots. Furthermore, the bones in them were added at successive intervals, and so could not have commemorated founding ancestors. They do seem to indicate a religion mediated at least partly through the dead.<sup>21</sup> The model of British prehistory based on religion and race had developed and flourished for a hundred and fifty years. The Marxist one founded after less than thirty. In the twenty-first century, none has appeared to take the place of either. Instead we have a range of individual suggestions from different experts. One is that the very process of constructing huge monuments, needing as it did project leaders, helped to create a new elite class of individuals.<sup>22</sup> Another is that a sense of the sacred which was traditionally focused on places, and hence on monuments, became

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<sup>20</sup> E.g., Richard Bradley, *The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain* (London: Longman, 1984); Julian Thomas, 'Reading the Body', in P. Garwood et al. (eds), *Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 33-42.

<sup>21</sup> For this see Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, Chapters 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> John Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 27-32.

refocused on humanity, and so on prestige goods.<sup>23</sup> A third is that people passed from honouring multiple ancestors to a single ancestor, so that the dead were remembered by their goods rather than by their bones.<sup>24</sup>

It must be obvious that none of these explains the change in the form of monuments - from tomb-shrines to circles - around 3000 BCE. A couple of other recent analyses have acknowledged the important point that a shift to single burials, with prestige goods, under round mounds, was not just a British phenomenon but a Europe-wide one in the third millennium BCE. It seems to have spread from east to west across the continent, and Richard Harrison and Volker Heyd, of the Bristol Archaeology Department, have credited it to a new ideology. This emphasised material objects as the basis for personal identity and social position, and venerated the sun as the focus of religion.<sup>25</sup> Another prominent British archaeologist, Timothy Darvill, has also found evidence for enhanced sun worship in the new interest in circles and orientation of monuments on solstices. He has identified solar imagery in designs on stones and pottery at the same time.<sup>26</sup> Some place is therefore now being made again for religious factors in analyses of the changes around 3000 BCE, but only by a minority among experts. This, and the lack of any prevailing theory of explanation for the changes concerned, clearly suits our contemporary social world, of a dominant secularism and a celebration of individualism and diversity. I would suggest that it is both important and necessary to note what is missing in it.

Race is obviously gone as an explanatory force, for perfectly obvious and good reasons, but so have invasion and migration. Instead the new fashions which spread across Europe, and took such dramatic forms in Britain, are credited to individuals, who arrived as salespeople, traders, marital partners and migrant workers, bringing the relevant fresh ideas and technologies. This is, of course, a perfect projection, onto prehistory, of the world of the current European Union and the global economic order. It certainly can fit the archaeological and genetic evidence: but there is a problem with it. This is that invasions, and migrations of ethnic

<sup>23</sup> Jan Harding, *Henge Monuments of the British Isles* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), pp. 112-21.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Jones, 'How the Dead Live', in Joshua Pollard (ed.), *Prehistoric Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 177-201.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Harrison and Volker Heyd, *The Transformation of Europe in the Third Millennium BC* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), passim.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain* (London: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2010), pp. 132-200.

groups, are a major theme of recorded ancient history. As soon as Britain emerges into the historical record, parts of it were occupied successively by Roman, Anglo-Saxons, Irish, Vikings and Normans. The Roman Republic was at times attacked and endangered by warlike people from the north, and the Western Roman Empire of course succumbed to them. Phoenicians and Greeks established maritime colonies across the Mediterranean. Further back, in the second millennium BCE, one group of invaders, the Hyksos, brought down the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, and another, the Sea Peoples, fatally weakened the succeeding Egyptian New Empire. In the same period waves of predatory incomers - Amorites, Kassites and Arameneans - destroyed successive states and civilisations in Mesopotamia. Experts in British prehistory, however, will not admit to one single significant military incursion or migration into Britain in the whole of the last four millennia BCE. The DNA evidence may actually not be very helpful here, if people on both sides of the North Sea and English Channel already had quite similar genes by the Neolithic. Perhaps everything did change dramatically, and all hell did break out as soon as history began, but if it did then such a remarkable phenomenon deserves more discussion than it is receiving. After the collapse of Marxist scholarship, ideology is now once more being given more recognition than before as a force in its own right, but there is still reluctance among most British archaeologists to accord this to religious ideology. Even when explanations are permitted in religious terms, they tend to be in the form of heavenly bodies - for example 'the sun' - rather than in terms of the deities to whom such bodies are commonly related in traditional societies. The study of the British Neolithic and Early Bronze Age matters, because this period produced some of the most spectacular prehistoric monuments on earth. They include between them three World Heritage Sites. It is currently involving more specialist scholars, with more students and a more sophisticated range of technological and intellectual aids at their disposal than ever before. It would be both impudent and reckless of me, therefore, to suggest that it is currently largely neglecting no less than three of the most important areas of human experience. They are the sky, on which I have offered a paper in a previous volume of the present series; invasions and migrations; and the worship of goddesses and gods, or at least of potent spiritual beings.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald Hutton, 'The Strange History of British Archaeoastronomy'.