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Prehistoric Western Europe

Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? These are three of the most universal existential questions people ask themselves. They are about time—past, present, and future—as well as about the nature of the human condition.

Works of art help us to define ourselves in time and

space. The more we know about our past, the better we understand our present. We shall begin our exploration of art by going back in time to the early history of the human race—to prehistory. Prehistory

refers to the time before people learned to write and therefore before the existence of written records. In one sense, the term prehistory is a misnomer, because objects and images are actually documents of a sort. The challenge, for us, lies in discovering how to "read" the nonverbal information accurately.

Stone Age

The Stone Age is divided into three general phases: the Paleolithic (from the Greek *palaios*, meaning "old" and *lithos*, meaning "stone"), c. 40,000 to 10,000 B.C.E.; the Mesolithic ("middle stone"), c. 10,000 to 8000 B.C.E.; and the Neolithic ("new stone"), c. 8000 to 3000 B.C.E. (and continuing somewhat later in northwestern Europe). The designation of these early periods as Stone Age derives from the use of tools and weapons made of stone. Metals had not yet been discovered.

Paleolithic Era (c. 40,000-10,000 B.C.E.)

By the beginning of the Paleolithic era our own sub-species, *Homo sapiens*, had supplanted the earlier Neanderthal people, who left no traces of any works of art. It is clear that complex cultures had already developed but, because ideas cannot be fossilized, there is much that will never be known about Paleolithic society.

Very little is known about its religion, but inferences have been drawn from certain ritual burial practices. For example, red ocher—presumably symbolizing blood—was sprinkled on corpses, and various objects of personal adornment (such as necklaces) were buried with them. The bodies were arranged in the fetal position, often oriented toward the east and the rising sun, which must have seemed reborn with every new day. Each of these practices has been interpreted as a sign of belief in life after death. They provide some insight into the way Paleolithic people might have answered the third question at the start of this chapter: Where are we going?

Paleolithic society was a culture of gatherers and hunters, who lived communally. They built shelters at cave entrances, under rocky overhangs. Their tents were made of animal skins and their huts of mud, stone, and bone. Fire had already been used for some 600,000 years, and there is evidence of hearths in Paleolithic homes.

Although the invention of writing was still far off, people had learned to make marks on hard surfaces, such as bone and stone,



Bison, Tuc d'Audoubert, c. 13,000 – 8000 BCE. Unbaked clay, each about 2' long. Ariège, France.

Categories of Sculpture

Sculpture in the round and relief sculpture are the two most basic categories of sculpture. Sculpture in the round is completely detached from its original material—one can go all the way around it. The [Goddess] of Willendorf is an example, while the [Goddess] of Laussel is a relief sculpture. It remains part of, or partly attached to, its original material—in this case limestone—so that there is at least one angle from which the image cannot be seen. Relief sculpture is more pictorial than sculpture in the round because the original material remains and forms a background plane.

There are different degrees of relief. In high relief, the image stands out farther from the background plane. In low relief, also called bas-relief, the image is closer to the background plane. When light strikes the image from an angle, it casts a larger shadow on high relief than on low relief and thus emphasizes the three-dimensional quality of the image more. Relief sculpture can also be sunken (incised), as in much ancient Egyptian carving (fig. 5.25), in which case the image or its outline is slightly recessed into the surface plane.

which suggests that they were keeping track of time. Language had been developed—the ability to communicate with words and tell stories—which in itself requires a sense of sequence and time.

The earliest examples of western art that have been preserved correspond roughly with the final stages of the Ice Age in Europe. As the huge glaciers that had covered the continent receded, it seems that people began making art, and some of it has survived. The first evidence dates back to about 30,000 B.C.E., which marks the beginning of the Late or Upper Paleolithic period. Before that time, the making of objects probably had a utilitarian, rather than artistic, purpose. It is important to remember, however, that our modern concept of art would have been alien to many of these earlier civilizations.

Sculpture Perhaps the most famous Paleolithic sculpture is the small limestone statue of a woman, the [Goddess] of Willendorf (fig. 3.1), variously dated from 30,000 B.C.E. to 15,000 B.C.E. Although this figure can be held in the palm of one's hand, it is a monumental object with a sense of organic, if not entirely naturalistic, form. As a work of art, it is evidence of a well-developed esthetic sensibility and was probably carved by a trained artist. The rhythmic arrangement of bulbous oval shapes emphasizes the head, breasts, torso, and thighs. The scale of these parts of the body in relation to the whole is quite large, while the facial features, neck, and lower legs are virtually eliminated. The arms, resting on the breasts, are so undeveloped as to be hardly noticeable. The [Goddess] of Willendorf is a strikingly expressive figure. But what does it "mean" and what were the intentions of the artist who carved it?

There are only partial answers to such questions. The artist apparently did not envisage a naturalistic representation of an obese woman, or the figure would have had fat arms as well as a

fat body. Furthermore, comparison of the front with the side and back shows that, although it is a sculpture in the round, the most attention has been lavished on the front. This suggests that it was intended to be seen frontally. Since the artist has emphasized those parts of the body related to reproduction and nursing, most scholars agree that the [Goddess] of Willendorf is a fertility figure. But even so, the sculpture is symbolic. A literal representation of a pregnant woman



3.1 [Goddess] of Willendorf, from Willendorf, Austria. c. 30,000 -15,000 B.C.E. Limestone, 4 1/2 in high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.



3.2 [Goddess] of Laussel, from Laussel (Dordogne), France. c. 30,000 -15,000 B.C.E. Limestone, 17 3/8 in high. Fouilles Lalanne, Musee d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux.

would have had larger arms, some facial features, and a neck.

Many [similar goddess figures] have been discovered throughout the European regions that were inhabited by family groups during the Stone Age. All of these figures exaggerate the breasts and pelvis, suggesting a cultural preoccupation with fertility and survival.

Most of the prehistoric [goddess figures] are sculptures in the round, but Paleolithic artists also made relief sculpture. A good example of low relief is the so-called [Goddess] of Laussel (fig. 3.2). Traces of red color on it may have represented the blood of childbirth, an association reinforced by the form itself. The pelvis and breasts are exaggerated and the face is featureless, although the arms are slightly more prominent than those of the [Goddess] of Willendorf. In her right hand, the [Goddess] of Laussel holds an object, perhaps a cornucopia, or horn of plenty. The gesture of the left hand is unexplained but is remarkably similar to the gesture of later [female nudes] in western art.



3.3 Bison with turned head, from La Madeleine (Tarn), France. c. 11,000-9000 B.C.E. Reindeer horn, 4 1/8 in long. Musee des Antiquites Nationales, St. Germain-en-Laye. The finely incised lines of the bison's mane and the sharp turn of the head reveal a keen observation of detail as well as the capacity to render the illusion of turning in space.

In addition to female fertility sculptures and paintings of men either hunting, dancing, or wearing animal skins, Paleolithic artists produced many representations of animals. This reflects how vital success in hunting was to their survival. The animals

most often represented are horses, bison, and oxen. Less frequently found are deer, mammoth, antelope, boar, rhinoceroses, foxes, wolves, and bears, plus a few fish and birds. A bison carved from reindeer horn (fig. 3.3) illustrates the naturalism of Paleolithic animal art in contrast with the stylization and abstraction of human figures.

Cave Art Carved and incised objects dating from the Late (or Upper) Paleolithic period have been found in an area extending from southern Europe to the former Soviet Union. Most extant Paleolithic art, however, is cave painting, which is largely confined to the limestone areas of southwest Europe. Particular concentrations are located in northern Spain, the Pyrenees, and the Perigord and Dordogne regions of France. The good state of their preservation is due mainly to the fact that the caves had been sealed up until their discovery in the past century. After exposure to the modern atmosphere, the rate of deterioration has been so great that some caves have been closed to the public.

Cave paintings are found primarily deep within cave systems, whose interiors are difficult to reach and uninhabitable. These areas seem to have served as religious sanctuaries where fertility and hunting rituals were performed. The proliferation of works of art in the inner sanctuaries of the caves points to an intimate relationship between art and religion. This persists in the western world until the seventeenth century C.E. and, to a lesser degree, to the present.

3.4 (below) Hall of Running Bulls, Lascaux (Dordogne), France. c. 14,000-10,000 B.C. Paint on limestone rock, individual bulls 13-16 ft long. Note that the white bulls are superimposed over other animals. The cave artist did not cover up previous representations before applying new ones to the wall's surface, nor was a frame or outline used around the picture.

Carving

Carving is a subtractive technique in which the sculptor uses a sharp instrument, such as a knife, gouge, or chisel, to remove material from a hard substance such as bone, wood, or stone to make an image. When the image is complete, it can be sanded, filed, or polished to create a smooth or shiny surface. The [Goddess] of Willendorf was not polished, although other Paleolithic sculptures were. However, it was made of limestone, a substance that does not polish very well in comparison with other types of stone.

Modeling

Modeling, unlike carving, is an additive process, and its original materials, such as clay, are pliable rather than hard. The primary tools are the artist's hands—especially the thumbs—although various other tools can be used. Until the material dries and hardens, the work can still be revised. In later periods of western history, artists learned to fire clay (to heat it in a kiln or oven). Eventually they mastered the craft of casting, or reproducing, models in more durable materials such as bronze.



The most famous examples of cave art are the murals, or wall paintings (from the Latin *murus*, meaning "wall"), at Lascaux in the Dordogne (figs. 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6). They represent a wide range of animal species and a few human stick-figures.

Pigment (from the Italian *pingere*, meaning "to paint") is the basis of color, which is the most striking or eye-catching aspect of most painting. Pigments are colored powders made from organic substances, such as plant and animal matter, or inorganic substances, such as minerals and semi-precious stones. Cave artists either applied colored minerals directly to the wall, or mixed the pigments with a liquid—the medium or binder—before applying them.

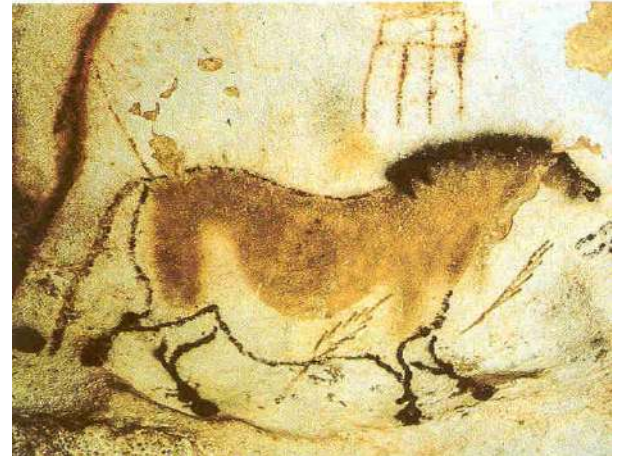
Technically, a medium is a liquid in which pigments are suspended (but not dissolved). The term vehicle is often used interchangeably with "medium." If the liquid binds the pigment particles, it can be referred to as the binder or binding medium. Binders help paint to adhere to a surface, which increases the durability of the image. The cave painters used fats and oils as their binding media.

Pigment is applied to the surface of a painting, called its support. Supports vary widely in western art—paper, canvas, pottery, even faces. For the cave artist, the wall of the cave was the support.

Earth-colored pigments at Lascaux include brown, black, yellow, and red. They were ground from minerals such as ocher, hematite, and manganese, and applied to the natural white limestone surface of the wall. The Lascaux artists created their figures by first drawing the outline and then filling it in with pigment. The pigment itself was stored in hollow bones plugged at one end, which may also have been used to blow the pigment onto the wall. Actual bone tubes, still bearing traces of pigment, have been found in the caves. These finds provide a good example of the way in which deductions about the use of objects in a prehistoric society are made. Perhaps if the bones containing pigment had been found out of context, far from the paintings, different conclusions about their use would have been drawn.

The Lascaux animals are among the best examples of the Paleolithic artists' ability to create the illusion of motion and capture the essence of each species by slightly exaggerating characteristic features. The diagonal plane of the long white bull (fig. 3.4) and its outstretched legs create the impression that it is running downhill. One Lascaux

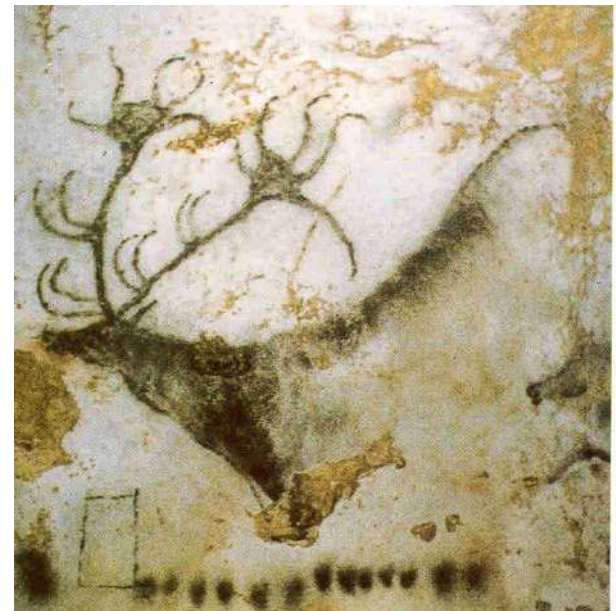
painting that has given rise to various interpretations is the so-called Chinese Horse (fig. 3.5), whose sagging body



3.5 (above) Chinese Horse, Lascaux, c. 14,000-10,000 B.C.E. Paint on limestone rock, horse c.5 ft. long.

suggests pregnancy and even imminent delivery of the foal. In this detail the two diagonal forms, one almost parallel to the horse's neck and the other overlapping its lower outline, have been variously identified. Some scholars think they are arrows, while others have identified them as phallic symbols related to a male-female polarity in the worldview of Paleolithic society, or plant and branch forms associated with the seasonal cycles of animal reproduction. The rectangular sign above the horse has been interpreted as having female significance, and the same is true of the rectangle below the stag (fig. 3.6). The prominent curve of its back enhances the impression that it is moving downward. The curious black dots may have been used to mark a sequence of time, and are also associated with male character. It is not known why these signs were juxtaposed with the animals, but the elusive character of such images illustrates the ability of Paleolithic artists to produce complex symbolic imagery as well as emphasizing our own difficulty in reading it.

Scholars generally do agree that the inaccessible location and ritual associations of cave art indicate a religious and symbolic purpose. The fact that animals are painted on top of one another reinforces this view, for it suggests that the act of making the image was an end in itself, and that the artist was not primarily concerned with decoration. The traditional view is that cave paintings were a kind of picture magic in which capturing the image on a surface and immobilizing it stood for killing or capturing the real animal. Given the importance of successful hunting in Paleolithic society, it would not be surprising if magic rituals had surrounded such an essential activity.



3.6 Reindeer, Lascaux. c. 14,000-10,000 B.C.E. Paint on limestone rock.

Mesolithic Era (c. 10,000-8000 B.C.E.)

The Mesolithic era in western Europe was a period of transition more noteworthy for its important cultural and environmental changes than for its artistic legacy. It coincided with the end of the Ice Age and the development of a more temperate climate in about 8000 H.C. Animals that had been hunted in the Paleolithic era died out or migrated. Communities started to settle around bodies of water, where fishing became a major source of food. Instead of gathering fruit and other forms of food, people began to cultivate cereals and vegetables. A more stable, communal existence gradually supplanted the nomadic life of the Paleolithic era.

Neolithic Era (c. 8000-2000 B.C.E.)

In western Europe, the change from gathering and hunting to agriculture—and hence a less nomadic existence—contributed to the development of a new art form: monumental stone architecture. As was true of earlier art, the character of Neolithic stone structures was largely determined by religious beliefs. These buildings, or monuments, are referred to as **megaliths** (from the Greek *me-gas*, meaning "big") and are made of huge stones, assembled without the use of mortar.

Northern Europe (especially Britain and France), Spain, and Italy contain some of the most impressive megalithic architecture. Three distinctive stone structures regularly occur in these regions: **menhirs**, **dolmens**, and **cromlechs** (the terms are Celtic in origin). They are not only visually impressive and mysterious reminders of our ancient past, but are also imbued with fascinating symbolic associations. For megalithic builders, stone as a material was an integral part of an ancestral cult of the dead. Whereas Neolithic dwellings in western Europe were made of impermanent

material such as wood, the "houses of the dead," or tombs, were erected in stone so that they would outlast mortal time. Even today we associate these qualities of durability and stability with stone. For example, we speak of things being "written in stone" when we mean that they are immutable and enduring, and to "stonewall" means to make a proceeding last as long as possible. One who is "stoned" is unable to move because of an excess of drugs or alcohol.

Menhirs Menhirs (from two Celtic words, *men*, meaning "stone," and *hir*, meaning "long") are single, unhewn or slightly shaped single stones (monoliths), usually standing upright on the ground. They were erected individually, in clusters, or in rows as at Carnac in Brittany (fig. 3.7). Carnac was probably an important Neolithic religious center in what is now northern France. Menhirs apparently symbolized the "body" or dwelling of the dead, and were endowed with a phallic character as fertilizers of the earth.

Dolmens Dolmens (from the Celtic *dol*, meaning "table") are chambers or enclosures consisting of two or more vertical stones that support a large single stone, much as legs support a table (fig. 3.8). The earliest dolmens were built as tombs—each enclosed a dead body. Later additions turned them into corridors or passageways. Some interior dolmen walls were decorated with sculptures and others were painted. Occasionally, a pillar stood in the center of the burial chamber. Dolmens, like menhirs, were imbued by Neolithic people with symbolic associations. Evidently this symbolism linked eternity with the durability of stone as material for the houses of the dead, in contrast to the impermanence of houses built for the living.



3.7 Alignment of menhirs, Carnac, France. c.3000 B.C. Stone, 6-15 ft high. A small village has grown up around the Carnac menhirs. They are arranged in parallel rows nearly 13,000 feet long, and the menhirs themselves number almost three thousand.



3.8 Dolmen, Crucuno, north of Carnac. Stone.

Cromlechs: Stonehenge Cromlechs (from the Celtic *crom*, meaning "circle," and *lech*, meaning "place") are megalithic structures in which groups of menhirs are arranged to form circles or semicircles. Britain has by far the greatest number of Neolithic stone circles. Even though the meaning of the circular shape in the Neolithic era is not definitively known, Neolithic builders evidently attributed a sacred quality to it.



3.9 (above) Stonehenge. Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England. c.3000 - 1800 B.C.E. Stone, diameter of circle 97 ft, height c. 13 ft 6 in. Interpretations of this remarkable monument have ranged from the possible—a kind of giant sundial, or a Druid ritual site—to the purely fanciful—a form of architectural magic conjured by Merlin, King Arthur's magician.

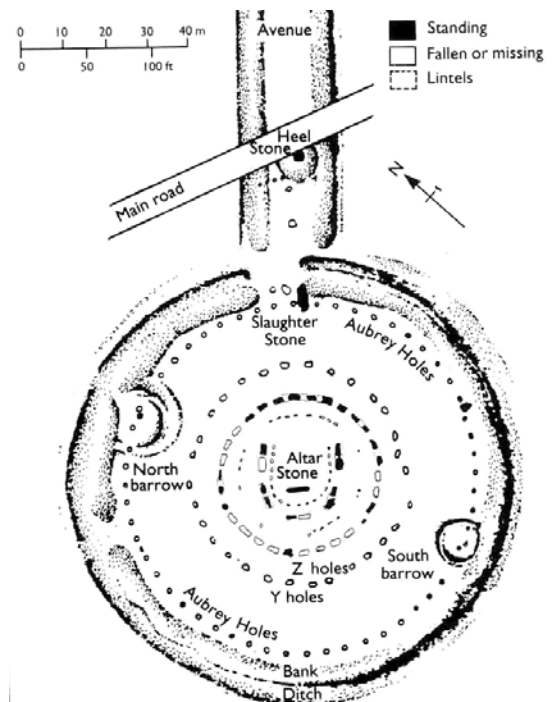
The Celts were a group of peoples first identified in the basin of the upper Danube and southern Germany in the second millennium B.C.E. Although of mixed origins, they spoke related Indo-European languages. From around the beginning of the ninth century B.C.E., the Celts began to migrate throughout western Europe, occupying France, Spain, Portugal, northern Italy (they sacked Rome in 390 B.C.E.), the British Isles, and Greece. Gaelic-speaking Celts settled in Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales. Celtic dialects are still spoken in parts of Britain and northern France.

The Celts had a rigidly organized social structure under the ultimate rule of a chief. They worshiped many gods and believed in the immortality of the soul. Celtic priests, called Druids, supervised education, religion, and the administration of justice. The rich Celtic oral tradition forms the basis of many European folk and fairy tales.

The most famous Neolithic cromlech in western Europe is Stonehenge (fig. 3.9), which was built in several stages, from roughly 3000 to 1800 B.C.E. Rising dramatically from Salisbury Plain in southern England, Stonehenge has fascinated its visitors for centuries. The plan in figure 3.10 includes all stages of construction, with the dark sections showing the megalithic circles as they stand today. Many of the original stones have now fallen down. The aerial view in figure 3.9 shows the present disposition of the remaining stones—the inner circles—and the modern highway nearby.

This circular area of land (see diagram, right) on a gradually sloping ridge had been a sacred site before 3000 B.C.E. Originally, barrows containing individual burials were surrounded by a ditch roughly 350 feet in diameter. A mile-long "avenue" was hollowed out of the earth and ran in an east-west direction. Fifty-six pits (known as Aubrey Holes after their seventeenth-century discoverer) were added inside the circular ditch and filled with rubble or cremated human bones in about 2800 B.C.E. Around the same period, the Heel Stone was set in place outside the ditch in the entrance causeway to the northeast—this is a block of **sarsen** (a local sandstone) 16 feet high. The first stone circle, consisting of smaller stones called bluestones and imported from Wales (over 100 miles away), was constructed in about 2500 B.C.E.

Over the next four hundred years, a new group of people settled in western Europe and was assimilated into the native population. The origins of these Beaker People, so-called after their beaker-shaped pottery, are still a matter of debate. They brought with them new building techniques, pottery, and a knowledge of metalworking. Partly as a consequence of these developments, the Stone Age gave way to the Bronze Age. Nevertheless, before the total disappearance of the Stone Age in western Europe, its most famous architectural monument was completed, apparently by the Beaker People themselves. In the final stages of the construction of Stonehenge, big sarsen blocks were brought to the site from Marlborough Downs, a distance of some twenty miles. From these larger monoliths, the outer circle and inner U-shape were constructed.

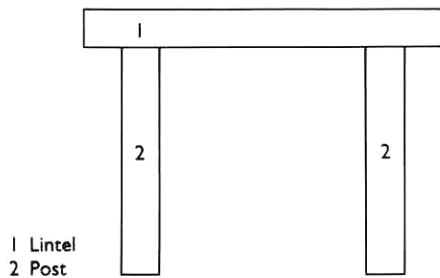


The final monument at Stonehenge is a series of concentric circles and horseshoe, or U-shaped, curves (fig. 3.10). The outer circle is made of connected posts and lintels. Each post is a sarsen block 13 feet (3.96 m) high, and is rougher on the outside than on the inside, bulging at its center and then gradually tapering at the top. Projecting above the posts were tenons which fitted into holes carved out of the lintels (fig. 3.12). The lintels were slightly curved to create a circle when attached end-to-end. They were more leveled and smoother than the posts, thereby creating a unified, circular plane of movement.

Post and Lintel Construction

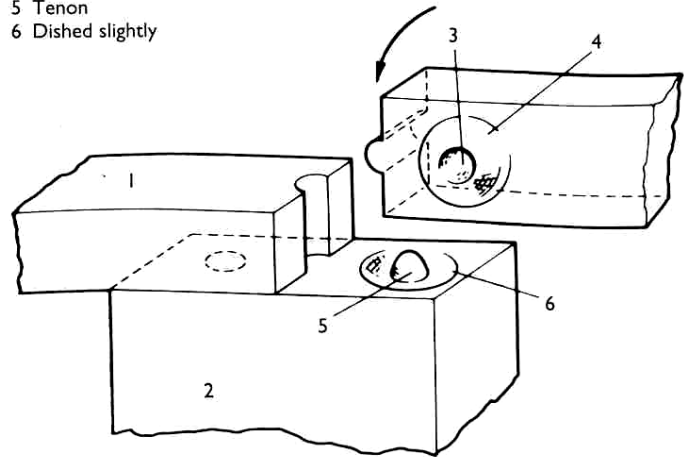
Post and lintel construction is a system in which vertical uprights (posts) support a horizontal (the lintel). The most basic, single post and lintel form is the **trilithon** (fig. 3.11).

In later eras, this simple post and lintel system was elaborated into highly complex structures (see p.114).



3.11 Post and lintel construction.

- 1 Lintel
- 2 Upright
- 3 Mortice
- 4 Raised to fit hollow in top of upright
- 5 Tenon
- 6 Dished slightly



3.12 Lintel and tenon.

From inside the ring (fig. 3.13) one can see part of the outer ring (on the left) and an individual post and lintel (on the right). The second, inner circle consists entirely of single upright bluestones. Inside these are five gigantic trilithons (in which a pair of sarsen posts supports a single lintel) arranged in a U shape. An even smaller U shape of bluestones parallels the arrangement of the five posts and lintels. We do not know how the bluestones, weighing up to 40 tons (40,640 kg), and the sarsens, weighing up to 50 tons (50,800 kg), were transported, or how the lintels were raised above the posts. Within the U of bluestones one stone lies horizontally on the ground. This is referred to as the altar stone, although there is no evidence that it was ever used for sacrifice.

While continuing archeological activity steadily increases our knowledge of Stonehenge, we still cannot identify its purpose with certainty. Clearly the presence of circular stone rings throughout western Europe points to a common purpose. Some scholars think that rites, processions, and sacred dances were held in and around the megalithic structures. It is possible that such rites celebrated the resurgence of life with each coming of spring and summer. These practices correlate with what we know of early agricultural society—the timing of seasonal change was of crucial importance for survival. Also consistent with agricultural preoccupations are the interpretations of Stonehenge and other megalithic structures as astronomical observatories, used to predict lunar eclipses and to keep track of seasonal change. Carnac (fig. 3.7) has



3.13 The inside ring of Stonehenge.

been described as an observatory in which each stone functions as a point on a landscape graph. Elsewhere, direct evidence of astronomical markings on carved stones has been found. The circular monuments, in particular, are aligned according to the positions of the sun and moon at critical times of year. Earlier cromlechs were oriented toward sunrise at the winter solstice, and later the orientation was changed to summer. At Stonehenge, the avenue is aligned with the rising summer sun. An observer standing in the middle of the circle in about 1800 B.C.E. would have seen the sun rise over the Heel Stone on June 21, the summer solstice. Other stones are aligned with the northernmost and southernmost points of moonrise.

The greatest megalithic monument of the Neolithic era in western Europe was also the last. Around 2000 B.C.E., as the use of metal increased, the construction of large stone monuments declined. It is likely that there were also climatic reasons for this change. Stonehenge and the other megaliths of western Europe are roofless open-air structures, with the ground itself as the floor. The absence of a roof reinforces the relationship of the buildings with the sky and celestial phenomena. But this degree of openness required temperate conditions. By about 1500 B.C.E., the climate of northern and western Europe had changed to produce the damp, cool, cloudy weather we know today.

