

# British & Irish prehistory in their European context

## Background and scope of the project

Britain and Ireland are islands with ready access to the Continent. For many years prehistorians attempted to date the artefacts and monuments in these two islands by comparing them with their equivalents on the mainland, but with the development of radiocarbon dating this approach largely lapsed. That tendency was reinforced by the rise of 'post-processual' archaeology, with its emphasis on the local and the contingent, and on the internal workings of individual communities. Ironically, there is now a danger of viewing the evidence at too small a scale and of stressing local insularity over long-distance connections in a way that reflects the politics of the recent past more than the realities of prehistoric life (Haselgrove & Moore 2007).

At the same time, there has been a massive increase in excavations undertaken under the Valletta (Malta) Convention in Britain, Ireland and the countries of the near Continent (cf Figs 1–4). The sheer scale of this activity means that it has recorded ancient settlements and landscapes in a way that had rarely happened until recently. However, in some parts of the region at least, many excavations have not come to full publication and much of the evidence remains buried in national or regional archives. The greatly increased volume of research has thus not produced a proportionate increase in our knowledge of the past. Because much Malta-related work is little disseminated, researchers now find themselves discussing British and Irish prehistory and its Continental background on the basis of published sources which are often seriously out of date.

The current project will address this problem. The primary research method will be consultation of unpublished reports ('grey literature') held by organisations and archives across a region encompassing northern France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, north-western Germany and western Denmark. In this respect, the work complements an earlier project which used a systematic survey of grey literature as the basis for a new synthesis of British and Irish prehistory (Bradley 2007; see figs 1–4). However, it should be stressed that the current project is *not* intended to provide a comparable synthesis of Continental European prehistory *per se*, but rather to contextualize the prehistory of Britain and Ireland.

Bradley's earlier work on insular prehistory suggested that a significant amount of the variation in the available data arises from different administrative and technical practices in modern archaeological fieldwork, rather than human behaviour in the past (Bradley 2007). It will also be important to investigate these issues during the current project. This dimension is particularly crucial given recent and ongoing changes in legislation and codes of practice in different countries within the region.



## References

- Bradley, R. 2007. *The prehistory of Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haselgrove, C. & T. Moore (eds) 2007. *The later Iron Age in Britain and beyond*. Oxford: Oxbow.