

Shining Land

The Ancient Sites
of West Penwith, Cornwall
and what they tell us about megalithic civilisation

Penwith's Prehistory

Supplementary material to the book

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For maps, pictures, appendices, notes and links:

www.palden.co.uk/shiningland

This material was written as part of *Shining Land – the ancient sites of West Penwith and what they say about megalithic civilisation*. It was removed from the book for printing economics reasons. Some ideas introduced here are more fully explained in the book.

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Penwith's Prehistory

1. Before the Megalithic Era

The megalithic era spans the Neolithic and much of the Bronze Age, during which time the great stone constructions of West Penwith were built. However, the customary threefold division of the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages tends to obscure the true shape and sequentiality of the megalithic period and the evolving culture behind it. Some principles and traditions of this 2,500-year period carried over into later times, as far as the late medieval period – a further 2,500ish years. So this involves a five-millennium cultural thread.

Megalithic culture spans large chunks of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, though not all of either. There is a problem: these two archaeological periods do not fit well with the shape of the megalithic period. There is a big difference between the early Neolithic of the late 4000s, the mid-Neolithic of the 3000s (when the quoits of Penwith were built), and the late Neolithic of the early 2000s when, according to the archaeological record, little activity seemingly took place in Penwith. However, there was greater similarity between the late Neolithic and the early Bronze Age, since they had a certain continuity and sequence to them. The arrival of bronze made a big difference, just as computers have done today, though it represented a step-change in developments already started rather than a discontinuity and a new start.

So there is a problem with archaeological ages. Similarly, there was a big difference between the early/mid-Bronze Age, when the menhirs and stone circles were built, and the late Bronze Age. This post-megalithic period, beginning around 1200 BCE, represented a great divide in British history. The late Bronze Age morphed into

the Iron Age around 800ish BCE, acting as a prelude to it, so these can be regarded as a kind of continuity.

The usual archaeological ages don't necessarily serve us well from a megalithic perspective, though they are well embedded. We need, for our purposes, to de-emphasise the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, and to think in terms of *earlier* and *later megalithic periods*. It's worth thinking of a 'true Neolithic' in the 3000s, a 'big Bronze Age' from 2800ish to 1200ish BCE, and a 'big Iron Age' from 1200ish to, in Cornwall, around CE 300. The Roman invasion only indirectly affected Cornwall, so the Iron Age lasted later here and in Ireland and Highland Scotland, transitioning gradually into early medieval times. In some respects, these three 'big' periods more accurately reflect the real-life chapters of Cornish prehistory.

The customary Neolithic-Bronze-Iron nomenclature skews public and academic perceptions. Archaeologists call the early stages of sites such as Avebury and Stonehenge 'late Neolithic' when really they are Bronze Age precursors. The bank-and-ditch henge at Stonehenge, built around 3000 BCE, is characteristically Neolithic while the erection of the sarsen stones around 2500, after the site had been abandoned for a century, is characteristically Bronze Age, and Stonehenge's final form came 200-300 years later at the peak of the Bronze Age. Categorising sites such as Avebury and Stonehenge as Neolithic, when most of their architecture relates to the Bronze Age, detracts from understanding the 'true Neolithic' of the 3000s. The 'true Neolithic' is the period when the astronomical, geomantic and mathematical ideas and principles used in the Bronze Age had first been thought up and established.

The drama and scale of some Bronze Age sites overshadows the fact that most of the pioneering innovations of the megalithic period were conceived in the Neolithic 3000s, mainly in the west and north of Britain, particularly in Orkney and the Hebrides where, together with the Boyne valley in Ireland, the earliest *advanced* megalithic sites were built. However, they came a few centuries after the quoits and tor enclosures of Penwith, and other sites around Britain.

There's an extra issue too: the timing of the beginning of the Bronze Age, based on the adoption of bronze, is loosely assumed to be contemporaneous with the megalithic boom driving the construction of sites such as Avebury and Stonehenge, or the stone circle building period in Penwith, but this is questionable since the start of the megalithic boom *preceded* the Beaker influx and the adoption of bronze. The Beaker influx gave it new energy and nuance but megalith building had already started a century and more earlier.

The archaeological ages are distinguished on the basis of tool technologies, not psycho-spiritual, social and cultural fundamentals. The arrival of copper and bronze made an enormous difference in terms of human capability, particularly in enabling clearance of wildwood and tilling of land, but it was not a key element in megalithic geoengineering and neither did it greatly alter the course of megalithic development. If we compare the Neolithic 3000s with the late Neolithic in the early 2000s BCE, there was a continuity of core knowledge – astronomy, geomancy and ancient principles – but there was a fundamental difference in architecture, project-scale, ambitions, population and available resources. There is thus a closer cultural continuity between late Neolithic and Bronze Age sites than between mid-Neolithic and late Neolithic sites.

Ages and Transitions

The three archaeological ages – Neolithic, Bronze and Iron – are based on toolmaking materials. New technologies obviously do affect society, allowing expansion and development, but the biggest and most fundamental changes of cultural agenda and viewpoint happened at other times. We can break down the Neolithic and Bronze Ages into several socio-cultural periods, more accurately reflecting changing ideas, worldviews and culture.

The **Neolithic** divides into four phases (dates are approximate, pertaining to Cornwall):

- **4500-3800 pre-megalithic** – a gatherer-hunter-fisher phase with some cultivation;
- **3800-3200 tor enclosures, quoits and stones** – growing use of cultivation;
- **3200-2900 significant downturn** and a pause in megalithic development;
- **2900-2500 late Neolithic** and ‘proto-Bronze Age’.

The **Bronze Age** has five megalithic phases:

- **2500-2300 Neolithic-Bronze Age transition (NBA);**
- **2300-2000 megalithic ascendancy;**
- **2000-1800 megalithic zenith;**
- **1800-1500 megalithic culture as a settled tradition;**
- **1500-1200 decline and eventual fall.**

It was all over by 1200 BCE, by the beginning of the late Bronze Age. But it's helpful, from a megalithic viewpoint, to suspend thinking of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, and to divide the entire 2,500-year megalithic period into two main phases:

- **3700-3200 early megalithic** (500ish years);
- **2900-1200 late megalithic** (1,700ish years).

For people with a life-expectancy of 30-40 years, in a time when women gave birth in their teens and adults matured in their late twenties, a century is a long time. One nineteen year Metonic cycle signified one generation. In terms of the long sweep of Britain's history, the megalithic era was a lengthy phase with a very different flavour to all that followed afterwards. In some respects it was Britain's zenith, or one of two, the second being the relatively recent 250ish year colonial period and industrial revolution.

The megalithic era expired around 1200 BCE – and with it died a uniquely advanced culture. Whatever its faults and weaknesses – we must not be idealistic and starry-eyed – fundamentally it worked on a cooperative operational model. Our ancestors sought to change the world in ways that attempted to augment nature and the cosmos,

working in dialogue with its deeper forces, and they were more sophisticated than we moderns like to acknowledge. The heart of the matter rested in their advanced worldview and cosmology: it was a *deep-sustainable society and economy*. While it lasted.

After 1200, the psycho-social reality in Britain flipped quickly to one of warlords, clannishness and insecurity, shifting toward a more extractive, exploitative and stratified society and economy – though less so in Cornwall than



Carn Galva from Caer Brân

upcountry. Longterm, it evolved into something eventually more rapacious and destructive when the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans came along, all of whom came here to improve their wealth, power and fortunes, not to care for the locals. By the 1600s CE, historically bruised Britain turned the tables to assert its own power globally, in turn extracting wealth from the world and growing rich on it.

Life in the Mesolithic, 8300-4500 BCE

West Penwith was first properly occupied in the 8000s BCE as tundra conditions gradually gave way to warmer times. The period we're looking at here was the precursor to the Neolithic or New Stone Age: during the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age of the 5000s-4000s BCE, Cornwall was sparsely populated by nomads of archaic Atlantic European stock. In the early Mesolithic, West Penwith might have been home to just fifty people, though numbers would slowly grow, perhaps to a few hundred by 4500 BCE. They were gatherer-fisher-hunters, living in lowland forest in winter and, in summer, close to the coast or in open grasslands higher up.

They had no shortage of skills and knowledge in the use of flint, wooden and bone tools. They lived on wild foods and materials, collecting nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables, roots, tubers, shoots, leaves and fungi, fishing in rivers and the sea, hunting wild birds, hares, pine martens and larger animals such as deer, elk, boar and auroch (wild cattle). Seafood was a rich part of their diet. The Mesolithics also used species selection – wild gardening – to favour chosen nut trees, fruiting plants, fungi, wild roots and leafy vegetables, as well as elm leaves for use as animal fodder.

They made forest clearings, usually by slash-and-burn, for places to live and to create grazing to attract deer, aurochs or wild boar, which they fed and then culled for food and skins. They moved around, taking advantage of seasonal changes in the growth of plants and movements of animals. They lived in rock shelters, bivouacs, skin-covered lean-tos and tipis, or simply outside – the climate improved through the Mesolithic, allowing a comfortable life, and there was plenty of wood for fires. They didn't have to work long and hard to fulfil their needs.

Walking everywhere, they created path networks, worn-down haunts and camping places. A good ranging ground, Penwith had a variety of environments within a relatively walkable, clan-sized peninsula, large enough yet not too big. Communal and cooperative in lifestyle, they were dependent on the vagaries of nature and on collaborating with each other. Living lightweight lives, they left few traces and, since their possessions were made mostly of organic materials, there are few signs of them now. Finds of arrowheads, tools and middens show that they roamed the whole peninsula.¹

They would have honoured nature's enormity and power, enveloped as they were in its presence and directly reliant on it for survival. They lived into their thirties, forties or even fifties, some longer, having more varied wild diets, fewer infectious diseases and a

¹ Te Tigo, Rory, Hunter-Gatherer Stations in West Penwith, *Meyn Mamvro* 61, pp6-11. www.meynmamvro.co.uk/archive/mm61-autumn-2006.html

longer life-expectancy than later farming peoples, whose staple diet had reduced from twentyish to around ten main foodstuffs, while their daily workload had grown from around five to ten or so hours.

Sea levels at the beginning of the Mesolithic were around 20 metres (60ft) lower than today and slowly rising. This is important because the Mesolithics liked living close to the sea. The rise in sea levels caused the Cornish coast to shrink marginally (though not as much as other parts, especially Doggerland in the North Sea), presenting us with an archaeological problem since many Mesolithic settlements and quarry sites are now underwater. One example is a greenstone axe factory submerged off Penzance Lido at Gear Rock.

Around 6200 BCE the collapse of the Laurentian ice sheet in Canada's Hudson Bay, caused by post-glacial warming, quickly raised sea levels by nearly three metres (9ft), with slower rises following, temporarily disabling the Gulf Stream Drift and bringing a colder climate to Britain until the ocean current re-established itself. This will have affected communities based in locations such as estuaries, beaches and lower coastal lands. Many beaches will have disappeared for a while until they reappeared again at a new level. Britain became an island – the first Brexit.

Maritime contact continued along the Atlantic coast of Britain and Europe and with the riverine communities of the Low Countries, using curraghs made of skins stretched on a boat-shaped frame, or log boats and rafts. Thus it was that the early peopling of Cornwall derived mostly from Iberia and Atlantic France.

In Penwith, hilltops, coasts and headlands contributed space and openness in an otherwise rather enclosed, brambly, muddy and shady woodland world. Histories and mythologies accumulated around the tors, hilltops, carns, headlands, groves, springs, rocks and great trees, endowing them with significance – herein lie the roots of legends of giants living on St Michael's Mount, Trencrom Hill, Carn Galva and some cliff sanctuaries.



The areas around St Ives, Gurnard's Head and Zennor Hill have yielded signs of Mesolithic activity, together with Greb and Roskestal (south of Land's End), St Buryan and Carn Euny. Further east in Cornwall, headlands such as Penhale, Kelsey Head and Trevoze Head were Mesolithic centres of activity, as were the Lizard and places on Bodmin Moor and Dartmoor. There are traces of short-term Mesolithic occupation of Scilly.

But these are all simply places where evidence has been found. The locations that later became megalithic sites were surely known by the Mesolithics, simply because people got around and made full use of their landscape and its special places. They will have sensed

and become familiar with the power places of Penwith. They might have erected a pole, placed a stone or planted a tree there, cleared them or, through repeated visiting, trampled them down to make them look and feel a little different from their surrounds.

By the end of the Mesolithic the climate had warmed, with temperatures in Cornwall up to 2°C warmer than they are today – very favourable. Around year 4500 BCE, along came new migrants from Biscay in the south, in trickles over the decades, bringing the beginnings of farming and ushering in the Neolithic period. A further migration from Portugal, via France, eight centuries later around 3700 BCE, brought the people who initiated the megalithic era – the quoit-builders. They spoke an early source-variant of Euskara, Basque, one of the original root-languages of Europe.

With them came new ideas, ways of life, ideas and technologies. They drew influences from the Berbers of North Africa, inheritors of the people of the once green and fertile Sahara before it dried out during the Mesolithic as things warmed up. Others from the east – present-day Turkey, Syria and beyond – gradually migrated through the Mediterranean to settle in SW Iberia. Then there were the native Iberians. This melting-pot produced these migrants, who mingled with Mesolithic Britons, and these Neolithic peoples left traces in our ancestral genetics, this early root-stock being more strongly represented in Penwith than in most places.

Along the Atlantic coast an ongoing stream of contacts and trade continued through the millennia, with Cornwall being a well-placed staging post on that route. Go to parts of Portugal and you will see menhirs and cairns like those we know in Britain – and older. Go to Penzance and you'll see signs of late-medieval Corsair pirate raids from Tunisia and Algeria (such as the Turk's Head pub, founded 1233). Trade and influence went the other way too: during the Bronze Age Cornish tin reached the Middle East, and Britain was the most advanced megalithic region of the time.

2. Sanctifiers of Belerion

The Neolithic, 4500-2500 BCE

The early Neolithic saw a leap forward in farming, society, beliefs and life circumstances. It laid the ground for the dawn of the megalithic era around 3700 BCE, bringing with it the enclosure of hilltop tors, the building of quoits, placed stones and longbarrows. Here things start getting interesting for our megalithic purposes.

The Neolithic or New Stone Age spanned two millennia from around 4500 to 2500 BCE, going through a number of phases, with farming-gardening breakthroughs in Cornwall around 4000 and 3700. Up to then, people selected out healthy plants and husbanded animals to



Zennor Hill from Sperris Croft, with Neolithic placed stones

improve their food supplies, but largely they lived on wild foods and use of plant selection. With new seeds, breedstock, tools and techniques brought by incomers from Iberia and France, they began to graft and develop plants for foods, medicines and materials and to domesticate animals. Farming was smallholding-sized while wild foods and seafood remained the main food source. Life was alright and plentiful resources and space were available – though crises and harder times will no doubt have happened too.

Population slowly rose, boosted by new migrants and increasing to a peak of perhaps up to 2,000 across Penwith by 3500 BCE. The

latest incomers were a new kind of people, descended from Indo-Europeans first surfacing in Anatolia, though further back they probably originated further toward Central Asia. Step by step they spread to Greece around 7000 BCE, then to Sicily, Sardinia and Spain's Mediterranean coast, settling the Atlantic coast around 5400 BCE – the Algarve and the Tagus river area around Lisbon. Others went overland from the Med, through the Garonne and Loire valleys to Aquitaine and Brittany. Time passed, and they then crossed to Cornwall, Ireland, Wales and as far as the Hebrides and Orkney.

These were not Celts but early predecessors to them, acting as a root population to which many other strains and influences were added over time. 'Celts' were not a people but a cultural and language grouping that coagulated 3,000 years later, following the subsidence of the megalithic era. The origin of the Celts is multiplex and unclear. There are traces of archaic Europeans amongst Pictish, Gaelic, Brythonic and even Germanic British, and these archaic roots were overlaid though time by multiple cultural layers, migrations and waves of change. Celts were an agglomeration of tribes with common languages, beliefs and lifestyles, who became recognisable as a culture group only after 1000 BCE.

Neolithic Penwithians moved on an annual round of the landscape, using base camps and stopover places for fishing, egg-collection, herding and tending of herbs and crops. The landscape was their home and there was space enough for frictions with other people not to be a big issue – though some prehistorians argue that incomers occupied the best spots, including hilltops, tors and headlands, causing difficulties with the indigenals. But these places are likely already to have been important to the locals, who would surely have been using them already. There are no signs of a hostile takeover, but the immigrants might nevertheless have been astute settlers.

The uplands in the north stretching from Rosewall Hill near St Ives to Carn Kenidjack near St Just were cooler and less humid in summer than the woods lower down, and their grasslands were clearer of trees and undergrowth. Many people lived in the uplands

in the 3000s, the warmest period of ancient times – Cornwall was a bit like the Dordogne and Aquitaine in SW France today. People moved down to the forest in poor weather, where wood for fuel was plentiful, occupying bivouacs and huts, and hunting, trapping and foraging for food. Wintertime was for craftwork, repairs, clothes-making, timber felling, woodwork, making tools and implements, and a home life around the hearth. Penwith offered a fine ranging ground and a safe, productive and a homely place to live – at least when times were good.

Up until the early 2000s BCE Penwith was extensively wooded with only modest man-made clearings and open patches in the uplands. Much of the time people lived in a pretty endless wildwood environment, probably rather overwhelmed by it. Clearings would re-grow upon abandonment. On hilltops such as Chûn Castle, Zennor Hill, Carn Galva and Chapel Carn Brea, a wider area could be kept clear, providing vistas and making these the most central, humanised places of Penwith at that time. Tors, carns and cliff sanctuaries allowed people to emerge from the woods to gain a sense of the wider world and the dome of the starry heavens.

The Neolithics lived in a magical universe. A living world with dimension and depth, it wasn't just property and resource. Rocks, trees and weather systems were seen as *beings*, and everything in their environment said something meaningful. This wasn't a worldview or belief – it was a functional reality that *worked*. In a magical world, magical rules apply, and they are discovered experientially, instinctively and intuitively. An incoming weather system has character and it brings messages – a windy gust can have malintent and a rain shower can bring divine blessings. The timing of a bird flying overhead may answer a question. Permission would be asked of a tree before harvesting its fruit, nuts or branches. People would wait for the waxing moon before planting seeds.

The Neolithics lived in a different reality to ours, and this is faintly remembered in our deep memory, drawing us to ancient sites today. We seek something of the reality they lived in – perhaps a certain

simplicity, rootedness in the land, wraparound tribal security and a magical world that hasn't been exorcised by engines and dynamite.

Once I was in the mountains of Sápmi (Lapland), 90km from a road and 200km from a shop, and it was not at all difficult to feel the spirit-beings and sense how the magical narratives of the Sámi still enchant the land. It was a moving experience, even though the conditions were wild, the area was remote and this was not my home territory. An eagle watched closely, vetting us. I felt honoured to be there. No aircraft fly over and no mobile phones work. The reindeer are managed by the Sámi when they migrate from the mountains down to the forest for winter, until not long ago living a life not too unlike that of Neolithic Britons – albeit nowadays using snowmobiles, living in warm houses, exporting reindeer meat to Japan and live reindeer to re-stock the Scots Highlands.

The Neolithic Revolution

The Neolithic revolution, gaining momentum in Cornwall around 4000 BCE, arose from influxes of people and ideas that clearly fired up the locals. It involved the adoption of horticulture, wheat and barley growing, herding, husbandry and other life-improvements, together with the establishment of more settled and defined tribal territories than before. Population grew and life transitioned from nomadism – relatively rootless migration – toward transhumance – following a local, seasonal round in a more defined home patch.

There might have been five to ten such patches in Penwith, each of a few square miles – though boundaries were less important than heartlands, and competitive territoriality was not the issue it later became. Population was sparse, issues could be parlayed, and everyone had become loosely related, as locals and migrants had mingled and intermarried. Since walking was the only transport option and the lowlands were often wooded and enclosed, these ranging grounds would have seemed bigger than they do now.

Log and turf dwellings came to be used as winter residences, some family-sized and some communal, and in summer people would use tipis, bivouacs, caves and simple forms of shelter. The climate being equable, they would often sleep on skins around a fire. Wildwood clearings were created using slash-and-burn and tree-felling with not very durable stone tools. Moving on was a necessity because the Neolithics did not know how to maintain and improve soil fertility, though at that stage there was little need for it since moving on was not difficult and built into long-established routines. But they did organic waste composting and attracted grazing and snuffling animals to fertilise patches of land and dig the ground, as well as culling the animals for food.

Mostly being gatherers, fishers, growers and hunters, transhumance suited them well. Movement coincided with the fruiting of trees, sprouting of mushrooms or the swarming of pilchards. Gardened and herded produce became an add-on to an ample wild-sourced diet. Patches of land on the seasonal round would be weeded and tended. Around the 3700s BCE a more genuine form of farming developed, brought in by incomers who used hoes and ards (stone-tipped hand-drawn ploughs), clearing rocks from selected field plots and carrying out land, plant and livestock improvement.

Greenstone axes and tools from Mount's Bay have been found as far away as Essex and Yorkshire – long-distance commodity exchange took place even then, and such durable, high-value items were used as gifts in an economy where gifting and encouraging good relations within and between tribes were important.

The now-submerged Gear Rock, off Penzance, was one of the stone factories, as were Gurnard's Head and Carn Brea. Travel and trade were common in summer, using seagoing paddle and sailing boats like canoes and currachs to journey to France and up the Irish Sea, the Severn Sea, English Channel and to the Isle of Scilly. The coastal lands of the Irish and Celtic Seas formed an interlinked maritime region with Penwith at its southern end, acting as a stopover on voyages to France and southwards.

Though their lifestyles were simple by our standards, Neolithics understood the motions of the heavens and their connection with events in their lives. They erected large stone structures in the form of quoits, positioned to align with critical solar rising and setting points and to align



Trencrom Hill with Carn Brea behind – both Neolithic tor enclosures

terrestrially with other sites. These were the early, prototype days of megalithic science. Quoit building involved raising multi-ton capstones to at least head height. While metaphysically motivated, this involved sophisticated engineering. Megalithic principles were being established – principles of astronomy, geomancy and mathematics that were to outlast the Neolithic period.

The Neolithic Zenith

In the immigration period around 3700ish BCE from Biscay and Iberia, Cornwall was the first place migrants reached, and many passed further up the Irish Sea. These people built the quoits and tor enclosures, or at least they provided the ideas and impetus for it. While numbers arriving were a steady trickle, a few small boatloads at a time, a gradual cultural grafting took place. Perhaps these incomers were influential at an early stage, fulfilling a need by bringing valuable knowledge, resources and skills. Perhaps Britain was seen as a land of opportunity or it was experiencing an upswing that incomers were drawn to join.

Society, though tribal, became by degrees more specialised and stratified. Within tribes, those with skills, leadership and respect gained seniority, becoming elders, wisewomen, shamans, healers,

bards, artisans and builders. They held specialist expertise in plant knowledge, astronomy, language, history and genealogy, building, woodwork, midwifery, medicine and husbandry. Many of these talents were later associated with the druids of the Iron Age. Advanced thinking on time and tide, medicine, mathematics, science, husbandry and engineering was part of this evolution.

Life was communally based. The individualism we now cherish would then have been looked on as a bleak societal tragedy. Individuals would have taken on skills and roles to suit the tribe's needs. People would still have had personality issues and differing views, with soap-operas of their own. But in the end it was a matter of deferring to the priorities of the tribe – or leaving and striking out to create an offshoot. Tribal wealth took the form of land stewardship, animal pedigrees, seed stocks, tools, boats, dwellings, skills, community support systems and comforts such as furs, adornments, woven and felted woollens, even gold picked from the land, then beaten and fashioned into valuables. Ancestry and genetic stock in humans, domesticated or herded animals were assets, as were knowledge and psycho-spiritual attainment.

Humans gradually changed the face of the land: clearings and trackways multiplied and dedicated sacred sites were built – tor enclosures, quoits, longbarrows, placed stones and possibly wooden edifices or posts long gone. A big investment of energy and time was put into these sites, and Neolithics saw little difference between their sacred and practical purposes. The inner powers of nature and the presence of the ancestors were invoked to aid in harvests and culls, tool- and clothes-making and the birth of children. There were observances to conduct and propitious times for different activities.

In some localities such as Chûn, Bosporthenis and Zennor Hill, people impacted noticeably on nature, making clearings, building and moving things around, making a mark, moulding their reality and leaving lasting remains. Yet they still felt like guests in a world dominated by nature and these developments were modest. When an animal was hunted, the soul of that species would be asked to yield

an offering, which it might or might not do. With only spears, slingshots, bows and arrows, a hunter had far more chance of being hurt or killed than a modern gun-toting hunter of today – and in those days they had to get much closer to their prey.

The Neolithics had specialist skills and knowledge to help deal with life's challenges. An intuitive and dowsing ability was clearly used in the location, orientation and design of early sites, yet the signs are that it was also thought through and discussed carefully. One symptom is the coordinated astronomical siting of quoits. Orienting and aligning sacred sites was established as a principle, presumably by the incomers, and it is reasonable to assume that many of these ideas came over the sea from the south, with tweaks added.

These people accrued a growing sense of human distinctiveness, feeling a need to claim specific hills, tors, carns and headlands for gatherings and as human places. Enclosing some of the tors with rock walls and banks, they made tor enclosures – designating them as 'magic mountains'. Drawing a circle to distinguish inside from outside and higher from lower realms, they consecrated the tors as sacred space. The sky-spirits, ancestors and stars were close.

Tor enclosures represented the emergence of the idea of a temple, a dedicated place more holy or special than elsewhere. Perhaps mainly reserved for shamans and initiates, everyone will have gone there at special times, for rites, celebrations or learning. This culture was well capable of advanced thinking, as shown in the design of the quoits – not just neat piles of rocks. An understanding of astronomy, the patterns and cycles of nature, medicine, crafts, artisanry, husbandry and horticulture was a survival necessity.

New Stone Age Penwith

The 500 years from around 3700 to 3200 BCE saw the first phase of the megalithic period. Lift-off occurred around 3700-3500 and things seemingly cruised along from there for a few centuries. Penwithians had a sufficiently good life to be able to invest their

energies in longterm engineering projects. Though tor enclosures are unique to SW Britain, there are similar sites in the Preseli Mountains of Wales and the Pennine Peak District – though not built around granite tors. Since Preseli and Cornwall are maritime neighbours, this makes some sense, though it is a question whether or not the Pennine people independently thought up such enclosures. Hilltop causewayed enclosures upcountry in England worked on a similar principle.

The tors started out as much-visited hilltops, enabling a bird's-eye view over the wildwood – important for people's sanity and sense of geography.

These were meeting and ceremonial, not living places (though Trencrom Hill would be comfortable to stay on), though in summer

and at special times of year people would have overnighted there or nearby. The tors had been used since time began, though their enclosure around 3700 BCE marked a shift in the evolution of people's relationship with the landscape. It involved claiming and prioritising *human space*.

Certain landscape features and power points were important to the Neolithics simply because they gave a sense of standing *somewhere special*. Psychogeographically, everything revolved around these places. This notion of *here* was vital: the tor enclosures, quoits and carns were like gravity-centres or nodes from which the Neolithics' perceptual reality-fields radiated.

The cliff sanctuaries were more important than many people realise. The evidence for this comes from backbone alignments, which



Placed rock on Sperris Croft with Zennor Hill and Carn Galva behind

demonstrate how the cliff sanctuaries were counted as crucial in the formative geomancy of Penwith and the positioning of key sites.² Peripheral to the peninsula, they were crucial, acting like the anchor-points of a web. While cliff sanctuaries are normally dated to the Iron Age and regarded as defensive, reconsideration is overdue. The boundary ramparts by which archaeologists date 'cliff castles' to the Iron Age simply give a date for those banks, not for the first significant use of the cliff sanctuary, and this preoccupation with ramparts and castles has led archaeologists to believe these sites exist for defensive purposes. By the same logic we could say that city parks, locked up each night, are defensive too.

We need to think again about cliff sanctuaries, not only about their dating but also their purpose and characteristics. Recognising three types of cliff sanctuary³ and entertaining the idea of their being power places with a variety of functions and flavours is well worth a try. These were not just any old headland. They shared three key characteristics: they were natural power places, human-consecrated sites, and they played a key role in the alignments system.

They had their practical value too. As prominent coastal landmarks cliff sanctuaries were valued not only for their sense of space and enchantment, but also because the Cornish were fishers, sealers, whalers, egg-collectors and mariners. The sea speaks and people listened. When pilchard shoals or whales hove into view, out they went in boats with nets, harpoons and scoops. These headland interfaces between land, ocean and sky were numinous threshold places where worlds met and the veils of reality were thin. They were revered places – you can *feel* it when you visit.

The Neolithics had a somewhat high-tech approach to life by the standards of the time, as is demonstrated in the quoits – *energy chambers*, plugged into underground, landscape and astronomical energy-systems. In engineering terms, these were some of the

² This is explained in Part One of *Shining Land*.

³ See Chapter Seven of *Shining Land*, Peering over the Rolling Seas.

trickiest, most advanced constructions of the whole megalithic period in Penwith, involving quite advanced engineering concepts and the transport, raising and propping of multi-ton capstones. Keeping capstones intact would have been an enormous



Lanyon Quoit from Bosiliack Barrow (telephoto)

logistical challenge, and there might even be some broken capstones lying somewhere in the landscape that represent technical failures.

Often ascribed to the Iron Age, Chûn Castle is a Neolithic hill with an enclosure, much of which was obliterated when an Iron Age camp was later built on top – and the rest is concealed under the heather. It doesn't make sense that a quoit sat downhill from the hilltop without the hilltop also having been used in Neolithic times. Neolithic evidence was indeed found under the Iron Age remains – this was one of the late archaeologist Craig Weatherhill's many notable discoveries.⁴ The Neolithic enclosure would have been residential. In the Iron Age it was more industrial.

The Neolithic Crisis

Something went awry around 3200 BCE or not long after. Archaeologists are generally unclear about this, tending to gloss over or ignore the issue, portraying the whole of the Neolithic as a vague continuity.⁵ But 3200ish was a big turning-point.

⁴ Weatherhill, Craig, *The Promontory People: An Early History of the Cornish*, Francis Boutle Publishers, 2018.

⁵ An exception is *The Romance of the Stones*, by Robin Payne and Rosemary Lewsey, 1999, p6.

From around then to at least 2900 BCE, megalith-building in Cornwall stopped – or we have zero evidence of it. Archaeologist Aubrey Burl gives the 600-year period of 3250-2650 BCE as a dark age in prehistory, though the initial stages of building at Avebury, Callanish and other early sites took place around 2800 BCE onwards – but that was 400 years after the downturn started.

One theory is that the Neolithic crisis could have been caused by a sudden climatic deterioration called the Piora Oscillation, arising from volcanic or meteoric activity elsewhere in the world, filling the upper atmosphere with dust and shading the sun – the climate cooled critically for two or three centuries.⁶ Temperatures did decline around or after 3200 BCE, picking up only by 2900, but it is unclear how this affected Cornwall.

A related theory is that a cometary strike in the east Mediterranean caused a jolt in the earth's magnetic field around 3150 BCE.⁷ Since the magnetic field protects the planet from solar and stellar radiation, this would have caused a radiation spike, affecting the climate and plant, animal and human health.

Interestingly, the first advanced megalithic structures in Britain and Ireland were built around 3000 BCE in the Hebrides and Orkneys in the far north, and in the Boyne valley, the furthest parts of these islands from the Med. Were these the least affected areas?

Meanwhile, apart from climate, others speculate on a more general downturn arising from loss of land fertility or other social or ecological factors. A theory arising from genetic and population research suggests that people were struck around this time by a

⁶ *What on Earth Happened in 3200 BCE?* Stanford Univ. www-leland.stanford.edu/~meehan/donnely/paleo1.html and www-leland.stanford.edu/~meehan/donnely/3000ind.html; www.sis-group.org.uk/news/piora-oscillation.htm

⁷ Knight, Christopher & Lomas, Robert, *Uriel's Machine*, Random House, 1999, p72.

pandemic or genetic condition coming from central Europe and the east.⁸ It could have been a combination of some or all of them.

While there is no direct bearing between events in ancient America and Europe, the Long Count cycle of the Mayan calendar started in 3114 BCE (lasting 5,125 years until 2012), adding another possible element to the argument for a crisis or transition point at this time. Something exceptional will have made the Mayans choose such a date as the start of such a long age.

Whatever happened, there was a social-cultural and probably an environmental collapse, ending all that had gone on before. A one degree temperature difference and a period of devastating storms or drought or poor harvests could do it. This created a clear divide between the Neolithic 3000s and the late Neolithic of the first half of the 2000s. It might have been a disaster or simply a marginal yet critical downturn, and if a pandemic it might have been either catastrophic or slowly debilitating over a few generations. We do not know. But there is sufficient smoke here to suggest fire.

In Penwith it is likely that people were forced downhill, needing to focus on survival. There might have been a substantial drop in population by emigration, possibly even northwards. Population growth and forest clearance will have declined, and possibly forest growth too, though later on all of these will have grown again as climate and population revived. Clearance was a gradual process since one large tree could take a long time to fell, using up a few stone axes, each of which would take time to source and fashion.

Life had been alright and megalithic development had gone quite well for 500 years in the 'true Neolithic' of the mid-3000s, until the crisis came along. So it was a tragedy when Neolithic culture declined. This would have involved hardship and loss of life, or simply a difficult time and a long grind, and Neolithic Penwithians

⁸ An ancient strain of plague may have led to the decline of Neolithic Europeans, *Science Daily*, 6 December 2018.
www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/12/181206120035.htm

may have wondered what they had done to deserve this. There had been relative stability, the seas had been rich with fish, the climate had been good and the tor enclosures, cliff sanctuaries, quoits and placed stones had changed the landscape. But after the crisis the old days became a legend told around the fire. It must have felt as if everything had gone wrong, and this feeling possibly lasted generations, embedding itself in the folklore of the time.

As the early 2000s came along, things slowly regained momentum in Penwith and, from about 2500 onwards, new sacred sites were being built, in many cases in newly-cleared spaces – though dates and sequences are vague here. By 2300 or 2200, stone circles had become the centre of attention and, while the tors continued as heritage places, they lost centrality and primacy.

The Late Neolithic

The Neolithics had oriented and aligned quoits and stones to key astronomical and terrestrial points, but Bronze Age megalith builders took things further. They developed an advanced mathematics that included knowledge of the *phi* ratio, the Golden



Carn Kenidjack from Tregeseal stone circle

Mean, Euclidian and Pythagorean geometry, together with knowledge of the Saros and Metonic cycles, knowing the dimensions of the earth and understanding the precession of the equinoxes. They had skills in logistics, engineering, medicine, farming, land management and community life. Before this came along though, for a few centuries not a lot seemed to happen in Penwith. Or it hasn't been identified yet.

There was seemingly a quiet half-millennium at the beginning of the 2000s when no building of sacred sites is known in West Cornwall. Around 2500 BCE things began to change and a new class of sites appeared across Britain, including the stone circles. Archaeologists in Penwith tend not to date local sites earlier than 2500 BCE and they're probably largely correct, but some dating revisions might be necessary. Oriented stones, some chambered cairns and some but not many solid cairns might have been built before 2500.

This long gap in Penwith's prehistory is a bit spurious. Nothing happened? It raises questions: was this genuinely a quiet, under-populated and underdeveloped gap in human activity in Penwith, or are we yet to discover something that changes the picture? Or is there something wrong with interpretation and dating of sites? Here we have a period with multiple questions needing answers. What happened in Penwith in the late Neolithic? What suddenly sparked the subsequent Bronze Age revival?

Whatever is the case, new ideas and initiatives started gathering pace around the mid-2000s, giving rise to a wave of megalith-building with new styles, architecture, principles and scale. It all began with a transitional period, roughly 2500 to 2300 – the Neolithic-Bronze Age transition (NBA), or the Chalcolithic or Copper Age – during which ensuing Bronze Age ideas and prototypes took shape.

The ideas defining the Bronze Age started amongst indigenous people. This is a key point. It has often been assumed that, since the Beaker influx during the NBA period brought new innovations, cultural influences and people, it also brought most or all of the ideas that fuelled the megalithic period. Yet the core ideas and impulses of the megalithic era already existed in Britain, and early menhirs and stone circles in Britain and Ireland preceded the Beaker arrival by a century and more. The foundations and protocols of the Bronze Age were more likely mainly indigenous, though incomers could well have brought additional ideas, skills and impetus.

Thus it is likely that the stone circles and menhirs in Penwith were started *before* the Beaker influx gained definitive traction – the problem is that precise construction dates are difficult to pin down. Perhaps the incomers arrived *because* Britain was seen to be a vibrant and promising migrant destination. We simply do not know.

Incoming Beaker people seemed more interested in building cairns and barrows than intricate stone circle complexes. This was particularly the case for those Beaker folk coming from central Europe and landing in SE England, who were partially descended from Yamnaya or Kurgan people of Ukraine and Kazakhstan. They introduced the idea of whole-body burial of their chiefs and shamans, while Britons tended not to think so individualistically, seeming instead to build barrows and cairns for other reasons, such as geomantic ones.

For people to migrate, there must be push and pull factors, otherwise there is every good reason to stay at home. Push factors can include overpopulation, climatic and environmental change, social friction, invasion, oppression or poverty, and pull factors can include fertile or relatively empty territory, or a vibrant culture experiencing good times and attracting inward migration. Early megalithic developments in Britain could have drawn interest from Brittany, Iberia and Middle Europe. One thing seems to be true: the Beaker incomers appear to have been relatively amicable, with no sign of armed invasion or social friction and many signs of a welcome and positive interchange.

By the later 2000s the climate had warmed up. Evidence suggests that people in outlying areas of Britain such as Cornwall, Arran, the Hebrides and Orkneys were not poor crofters eking out a meagre living from a poor landscape, under harsh conditions. They did quite well, and though we don't know much about their boats, there are signs of trade, exchange and interdependency. Even remote St Kilda, way out in the Atlantic off the Hebrides, was occupied in the early 2000s – the leading part of Britain at that time was the Outer Hebrides and the Orkneys.

The late Neolithic saw the beginning of a different age and, by the late 2000s, Britain experienced several centuries of cultural florescence. One thing that changed was people's attitude toward nature and the world around them. Woodland clearings grew over the generations and started to join up, creating bigger open spaces that had not been there before. Around 20% of the land in Penwith was cleared by 2500 BCE, more in some parts than others, and clearance accelerated to 50% by 1800.

A new landscape emerged and people increasingly thought *this is ours – we made this*. They no longer felt quite like the guests in nature they had been before. Increasingly they were its shapers and movers, with an escalating urge to change the face of the earth and improve their lives. The impetus had built up during the late Neolithic and the NBA. By 1800 Britain was a noteworthy civilisation amongst those of the time, including in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Crete, Persia, Harappa (Pakistan), China, Mexico and the Andes. They were experts in astronomy and mathematics, and might even have taught the Egyptians a few things.

The Neolithic Mindset

One thing we cannot know is the Neolithic mindset. Looking at the thoughts of people from today's remaining first nations yields some value. Here is an illustrative quote from Chief Dan George (1899-1981) of the Tsleil-Waututh nation in British Columbia, Canada. It is loosely applicable to Neolithic Cornwall in spirit, though not in detail:



Chûn Quoit – the only fully intact quoit in Penwith

I was born into a culture that lived in communal houses. My grandfather's house was eighty feet long. It was called a smoke house, and it stood down by the beach along the inlet. All my grandfather's sons and their families lived in this dwelling. Their sleeping apartments were separated by blankets made of bull rush weeds, but one open fire in the middle served the cooking needs of all.

In houses like these people learned to live with one another; learned to respect the rights of one another. And children shared the thoughts of the adult world and found themselves surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins who loved them and did not threaten them. My father was born in such a house and learned from infancy how to love people and be at home with them.

Beyond this acceptance of one another there was a deep respect for everything in nature that surrounded them. My father loved the earth and all its creatures. The earth was his second mother. The earth and everything it contained was a gift from Great Spirit... and the way to thank this great spirit was to use its gifts with respect.

I remember, as a little boy, fishing with him up Indian River, and I can still see him as the sun rose above the mountain top in the early morning... I can see him standing by the water's edge with his arms raised above his head while he softly moaned, "Thank you, thank you".

It left a deep impression on my young mind. And I shall never forget his disappointment when once he caught me gaffing for fish 'just for the fun of it'. "My son", he said, "The Great Spirit gave you those fish to be your brothers, to feed you when you are hungry. You must respect them. You must not kill them just for the fun of it".

This then was the culture I was born into and for some years the only one I really knew or tasted. This is why I find it hard to accept many of the things I see around me [today]. I see people living in smoke houses hundreds of times bigger than the one I knew. But the people in one apartment do not even know the people in the next and care less about them.

It is also difficult for me to understand the deep hate that exists among people... It is hard to understand a culture that spends more on wars and weapons to kill, than it does on education and welfare to help and develop. I see my white brothers going about blotting out nature from his cities. I see him strip the hills bare, leaving ugly wounds on the face of mountains...

I am afraid my culture has little to offer yours. But my culture did prize friendship and companionship... My culture lived in a big family community, and from infancy people learned to live with others. My culture did not prize the hoarding of private possessions – in fact, to hoard was a shameful thing to do among my people. The Indian looked on all things in nature as belonging to all and he expected to share them with others and to take only what he needed. I have spoken.⁹

⁹ Chief Dan George, *I am a Native of North America*, several online sources, such as <https://hestories.info/i-am-a-native-of-north-america-chief-dan-george.html>

3. Age of the Longstone Builders

The Bronze Age 2300-800 BCE

In the initial two-thirds of the Bronze Age came the second phase of the megalithic era, starting around 2500 BCE, lifting off around 2300, peaking around 2000-1800, then continuing into a stable period up to 1500ish. The Bronze Age saw the arrival of stone circles, standing stones and high culture in Britain and Ireland. The late Bronze Age was, however, a different story.

The notion of a Bronze Age is rather misleading. The rise of the use of bronze around 2200 BCE was important, though in Penwith it was locally processed and crafted only from 1800 onward. Up to then tin ingots were ex-



Trelew Menhir with St Buryan church behind

ported in exchange for bronze products. Bronze was not the trigger driving the rise of megalithic civilisation, but it played a part.

There's a confusion between the megalithic ascendancy and the beginning of the Bronze Age. In the preceding chapter it was suggested that menhir and stone circle building had already started when the Beaker influx and the ensuing use of copper and bronze came about. Even if the difference was but fifty years, a short time, fifty years ago the internet didn't exist. Megalithic culture in

Penwith was cranking up around 2500-2400, during the NBA, while in parts of Britain and Ireland it had come a little earlier.

Dated from around 2300 to around 800 BCE, the Bronze Age is usually divided into three parts, the first two of which are megalithic in significance:

- **2300-1500 early Bronze Age** (eight centuries);
- **1500-1200 middle Bronze Age** (three centuries);
- **1200-800 late Bronze Age** (four centuries).

Here we're interested in the early and middle Bronze Age, though we'll cover the late period at the end. Early Bronze Age civilisation marked a high-point in British history and also the zenith of the megalithic era. Things cruised along for several centuries until 1500ish. In the subsequent period from 1500 to 1200 the culture shifted toward custom and tradition, *doing things because that's the way we've always done them*. Meanwhile, emergent changes led to the end of the megalithic period around 1200.

The Early Bronze Age

The Bronze Age was so named due to the adoption of bronze technologies. Penwith became an exporter of tin, a key ingredient in bronze, and some copper and gold, while importing bronze items, mainly from Ireland and Wales.

Strangely,

Penwithians did not seem to take up bronze-working until around 1800 BCE, even though they had access to knowhow. Perhaps the



CASPN clearing a chambered cairn at Treen, Morvah

barter and trade system discouraged a local craft industry since importing was easier, or perhaps there was a local consensus preferring to keep life relatively simple.

Megalith building in Penwith grew to a peak between 2400 and 1800 BCE. By 1800 BCE there are signs of a relatively dense population that might have reached 10,000. Reliable dating is vague, patchy and unsystematic, so the timing and sequence of megalith-building remain shrouded in mist.

Penwithians were transhumant until 1500ish, as gardeners and small farmers, still gaining much of their nourishment from game, seafood and foraging. Seemingly they were not greatly smitten with material growth and did not settle into permanent, stone-built settlements until the decline of the megalithic period.

This throws some light on the continuity of their worldview, still shamanic, with an attitude of numinous cooperation with nature and the world of spirit. Tribal relations were largely communal and, while people impacted significantly on nature, they did so with a philosophy that people later incrementally lost: an approach of working *together with* subtle energy, natural cycles and forces, to foster land fertility and improve the fortunes of tribes.

In the later 2000s, memorialisation of individuals in cairns was uncommon. Most funerary evidence from that time consists of the bone chips of lots of people stored together in urns – suggesting collective ancestor and tribal rites, not personal, whole-body burial. Cairn burials were often done around the edges, as if as an afterthought or supplement, not a primary reason for cairn-building.

Corpse disposal might not have been the main point here, since cremation and other means were also common at the time, and people seem not to have been highly ritualised in their funerary habits. The reasons for burial in cairns and barrows might well have been geomantic, creating links in the overall system of sites in Penwith, or relating to shamanic dialogues between the living and the dead, or to empowerment, blessing and protection of the land by

burying revered people in key places – such as the Boscregan cairns, Carn Môn Ellas, Caer Brân, Bartinney Castle or the cairns atop Watch Croft.

As time went on worldviews changed, and by the 1500s BCE burials of the great and good in cairns and barrows had become more common. While this might have been seen as a form of blessing and land-empowerment, the emphasis was tilting



A bronze age barrow near Bodrifty

toward memorialising the high-born – a trend which, by the late 1000s, had become distinct aristocrat-led social stratification. Deeper down, it symptomised a profound shift from a cooperative-sympathetic way of life toward a competitive, hierarchical, patronage-based model of belief and social organisation – perhaps a longterm effect of Beaker-modernising influences, arriving centuries before.

The Beaker Influx

Signs of activity in Penwith emerged from 2500ish – or so the rather fuzzy archaeological consensus goes. Yet sites in the Boyne valley in Ireland, built around 3300-2900, Callanish in the Hebrides and Stenness in the Orkneys, built around 3000, were there centuries earlier. Even so, few, or no, known remains from the 500 years preceding 2500 are found in Penwith. This was either genuinely a fallow time, or insufficient evidence has been unearthed, or insufficient dating work has been done, or ideas around the dating and sequencing of this period need re-examining.

The evolving situation in Britain was much affected by the Beaker influx, a steady trickle of ideas, technologies and people migrating in the 2400s and 2300s from two regions: people from Brittany and Iberia went to Cornwall, Ireland and up the Irish Sea coast, and those from the Rhineland and Danube areas, arriving slightly later, settled in the east of Britain. A proportion were travellers and artisans, followed over the years by families and relatives as settlers. They seem not to have come in tribal migrations but as individuals and groups as part of normal interaction between peoples.

Here we need to backtrack. The proto-Celtic peoples of the Tagus valley in Iberia, arriving in Cornwall during the Neolithic, also occupied the Biscay and Brittany regions. The Tagus flows from eastern Spain westwards to Lisbon in Portugal, through the centre of Spain. These people weren't Celtic, but the proto-Celtic cultural and linguistic grouping was later to emerge among this array of peoples, after the fall of the megalithic era.

They were made up of a fusion of local Iberians with migrants from North Africa and the Middle East who converged many centuries earlier. Archaeologists call them Maritime Bell Beaker folk, based on a characteristic pottery drinking flask they used. These incomers had adopted copper working around 2700 BCE in Iberia, toughening it with arsenic and sulphates to make an early form of bronze. Some migrated north to Biscay, Brittany, Britain and Ireland from 2500 onward, while others migrated east to the Seine and Rhineland from around 2600 BCE.

In Rhineland they met up with migrating peoples who had spread up the Danube valley. These were a mixture of Neolithic Danubians (Lithuanian archaeologist Maria Gimbutas called them Old Europeans)¹⁰ and Indo-European Kurgan or Yamnaya people who had migrated around 2800 BCE up the Danube, originating from Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Gimbutas identified the Danubians as a

¹⁰ Maria Gimbutas wrote three noteworthy books in English: *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974); *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991).

matrifocal goddess culture that was subsumed by patriarchal Kurgans. The mingling of Atlantic with Danubian-Yamnaya peoples in the Danube and Rhineland headwaters created a hybrid Bronze Age culture that archaeologists call the Corded Ware culture, after another style of drinking vessel.

Some of these hybrid folk migrated to eastern Britain around 2300-2200 BCE, later than the Atlantic people who migrated to and through Cornwall around 2500-2300, both of them bringing new knowledge and capability in working copper and, later, bronze. The Cornish had had contact with Beaker Bretons through longstanding maritime contacts, so Beaker ideas and innovations probably arrived before people did.

Here lies the origin of proto-Celtic culture and languages. The Beaker people laid the foundations, then time and circumstance rolled on for more than a millennium before the Celtic tongues and the shape of Celtic culture emerged during the late Bronze and early Iron Ages. Proto-Celtic was a coastal Atlantic pan-tribal tongue used by peoples with differing languages and dialects,¹¹ moving up to Britain with the Beaker migrants, travellers and mariners.

The Beaker influx, so named after the pottery drinking vessels these people brought with them (they brought social boozing too), was a change-bringer. With the arrival of the Beaker folk, the Bronze Age and all that came with it really lifted off. This wasn't just about metallurgy: with the influx came advances in husbandry, land improvement, carpentry, textile weaving, tools, medicine and many other things, and greater social diversity and skill specialisation, new seed and animal stocks, ideas, designs and language.

Conceivably the influx might have created underlying divisions between the Britons themselves – divisions between early adopters of new ideas and those not doing so. This was not just a classic rift between modernisers and traditionalists, but also a disparity between more and less accessible areas of Britain. Some researchers

¹¹ Cunliffe, Barry, *The Ancient Celts*, second ed, Oxford Univ Press, 2017, Ch 3.

suggest that a form of cultural competition took place, wherein the incomers competed for control through cultural capture (though not destruction and conflict, for which there is no evidence). But more signs point toward relatively friendly settlement and intermixing. Migrant numbers were not enormous, yet it seems these were high-impact immigrants. Perhaps by osmosis they gradually became a new elite or merged easily into the existing one. Incomers tend to work hard and, within a few generations, their offspring infiltrate indigenous elites, often through sheer skill and aptitude, so gradual capture of elite positions can happen naturally over the generations.

It seems that the incomers had a more hierarchical, individualistic social structure, while the indigenals were more communal and esoteric in outlook. Both had something to offer each other but there were surely differences too. Over time an upswing grew out of this cultural fusion, intermixing and intermarriage. This period, the NBA, is not at all clear in shape and sequence, and the scenarios portrayed here are a best guess.

The evidence that does exist suggests that new Beaker influences were grafted onto an indigenous megalithic upswing that was already taking shape. The incomers didn't seem as interested as the Britons in building sophisticated megaliths, though they did build barrows and cairns, based on the *kurgan* mounds. Long cairns, not a difficult invention to conceive, had already been built in Neolithic Britain, so the Beaker people didn't invent a new idea – perhaps they gave the Cornish added impetus to build cairns, though for their own geomantic purposes and reflecting their own beliefs and worldview. Meanwhile, the Beaker folk tended toward using cairns for burial of their notables. Thus, there might have been a variety of motives and purposes for building cairns and barrows.

This intermingling of ideas and people led to the ascent of one of the great civilisations of prehistory which, by the 1800s BCE, was an exporter of ideas and knowledge, together with adornments, metals, crafts and clothing to Europe and the Mediterranean. In the Iron Age, the druids of Gaul and much of Europe looked up to the

British druids, and this primacy probably began in the Bronze Age because Britain and Ireland had become standard-setting centres of excellence in megalithic culture. Contrary to the customary archaeological tradition of diffusionism, which regards all things civilised to have come from the Near East, at this time the net flow went in the other direction, with Britain as a cultural exporter.

Copper, an attractive metal and easily workable for adornments, mirrors, needles, blades and utensils, improved people's lives but it was too malleable for use in making tools needing a tougher material. Once the alloying of copper with tin was developed, producing hardened bronze, people's capacities in farming, woodwork and crafts escalated thanks to a dramatic improvement in the durability and sharpness of knives, axes, ploughs and tools.

Recent studies have revealed a surprising 90% change in the genetics of the British sometime after 2300ish – that is, sometime after the Beaker influx had started.¹² This happened to a lesser extent across Europe. Prehistorians previously had it that the Beaker influx was an inflow of ideas more than of people. This recently-discovered genetic change suggests however, that *people* – specifically male genes – had a big impact. The indigenous female mitochondrial line remained intact and consistent while much of the indigenous male gene pool was replaced by Beaker-origin male genetics. It could have meant warfare, rape and pillage, though there is no evidence of these – the signs are of a welcome. This implies a possible infertility crisis among indigenous males around the time of the inward migration of Beaker males, many possibly travellers, artisans and traders without families.

If this genetic change was caused by a health condition affecting male fertility, no sign of mass graves has been found. The change may have been incremental, leading to a die-out and replacement of

¹² *Ancient Britons 'replaced' by Newcomers*, BBC News, 2018. www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-43115485 | Olalde, I, et al, *The Beaker Phenomenon and the Genomic Transformation of Northwest Europe*, 2017. www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/135962v1.article-info

indigenous male genes over several generations. One possibility is that, given the tribal-communal society, partially polyamorous, male Beaker DNA infiltrated the gene pool, replacing indigenous genes by accretion. As far as we know, genetic paternity was not clearly understood then, and social structures were such that identifying precisely whose children belonged to whom was not a primary concern. They were tribal children.

There are a few problems with this 90% finding, such as the small sample sizes used in the study and the limited areas that they were taken from, so the matter is as yet unsettled. Genetic samples were extracted from graves and cists, elite burials in relatively cosmopolitan parts of what is now England. The extent to which Beaker genetics spread across the whole population, especially in remoter areas such as Cornwall, is an open question.

A discovery in Sweden of the arrival of a disease at that time has found that the indigenous population there was wiped out by Yamnaya incomers from the Caucasus – ancestors of the blonder strain of modern Nordics.¹³ This provides a viable, though as yet unconfirmed, hypothesis explaining this population replacement. Speculation has it that people in Britain and Scandinavia lacked immunity, so they could have been much reduced by the influx.

However, since the Cornish Beaker influx came from Brittany and Iberia, not central Europe, such immunity issues might have been less applicable here. Significant population replacement does seem to have happened in Britain, but perhaps not to the extent that has been rather sensationally claimed. There are no conclusive signs of significant population decline during the late 2000s but, if it lasted a few decades with numbers reviving soon after, the accuracy of archaeological dating techniques is insufficient to track changes on a small timescale of decades.

There's another quandary too: this genetic change happened at roughly the same time as the building of copious numbers of Bronze

¹³ www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/12/181206120035.htm

Age monuments all over Britain – and such construction is not a sign of population decline. Major construction projects require a buildup of capacity to support the necessary skill-development and work. So, the later 2000s BCE contain many quandaries that remain to be cleared up.

The Megalith Builders

The arrival of menhirs and stone circles was symptomatic of a cultural shift, bringing less of a light touch on the earth and more engineering and alteration of it. In building megaliths people sought to support and magnify natural energy



The Nine Maidens stone circle

conditions in the land, sky, the human and spirit worlds, calculating that it was in their best interests to do so. Or perhaps they felt they had no option, or perhaps it just came naturally. They took it upon themselves to make sympathetic interventions in nature – landscape design with a magical dimension, and ropes and invocations working together. People were clearly adept in engineering and an advanced system of thinking gave logic to their geomancy.

Neolithic Cornish had been transhumant smallholders, herders, hunters, fishers and foragers, moving around their patches with the seasons. Maintaining and enhancing the fertility of the land as well as they could, living in extended tribal kinship networks, moving between summer and winter settlements, people worked the soil, cleared rocks and developed garden-fields following the contours of the land and utilising patches of good soil. When land lost fertility they would leave it fallow, returning years later. Land management,

fertilisation, seed improvement and husbandry were developing, though since these were relatively good times there was little pressure to change. A need for change arose by the late Bronze Age, when overall conditions deteriorated.

As people impacted more markedly on the landscape through wildwood clearance, it changed their psychology. Clearings and the resulting landscape were *man-made* – this had big implications. People's perceptual relationship with their environment – their psychogeography and geomythology – shifted in perspective. No longer were humans just another species in a wildscape: we were dominant, creating an open landscape with fields, pastures, parklands and woodlands never seen before. This evolving mindset proliferated as woodland clearance increased and tools improved. Populations grew, attitudes changed and impacts on the local environment intensified. While plenty of woodland remained intact, a deforestation trend was gathering pace.

Arguably, in the late Neolithic, there had arisen a kind of cultural eco-religiosity, integrating issues such as soil fertility, farming, stock and plant breeding with a magical-spiritual approach to weather, season, time and the subtleties of nature. Astronomy-astrology and geomancy were forms of advanced knowhow needed for survival, giving people an understanding of the way energy behaves when it exudes into time and space, in turn affecting harvests and weather. This civilisation built no cities yet its knowledge was sophisticated. Astronomical and mathematical principles embodied in the building of Egyptian constructions had been built into sites in the Boyne valley, the Hebrides and Orkney centuries earlier – and seemingly some of this knowledge in mathematics and astronomy was taught to the Egyptians by the Britons.¹⁴ The pyramids were built at the same time as the beginning of the Bronze Age in Britain.

¹⁴ Knight, Christopher & Lomas, Robert, *Uriel's Machine*, Random House, 1999

Britain was tribally and regionally organised, yet it had a common culture stretching from Cornwall to the Shetlands, shared with Ireland and Brittany. Skill-levels, advanced thinking and shared design themes spread across this megalithic zone imply the presence of a druidic, aristocratic and artisanal elite covering the whole area.

Changing times brought a religious change: the morphing of a relatively informal, organic, unsystematised culture of shamans, teachers and healers into an organised institution of druids, ovates, bards and elders. A Neolithic shaman, or a villager with a gift of spirit, would be mentored by his or her predecessor and to an extent was self-trained by direct initiatory experience, whereas Bronze Age druids will have had a more structured training, with specialisms, attainment goals, tests, rituals and traditions. This was not like the elite priesthoods we see in later times, but the development of an advanced theology does tend to stratify society. Nevertheless, the longevity of Bronze Age civilisation suggests that something was more or less right about it, and it had popular support.

In the Tibetan tradition, which morphed similarly from a shamanic to an institutional faith, Buddhism, three parallel levels of religious-spiritual practice developed:

- ***folk faiths*** – commonly held village beliefs and rituals with local shamanic roots;
- ***monastic orders*** – theological, scriptural and ritual practices, drawing on meditation and study, framed around a fusion of Buddhism and Tibetan *Bön* shamanic traditions; and,
- ***hermit yogis*** – who attained inner realisation through lengthy retreat and solitary practice, ‘maintaining the purity of the Dharma’.

In terms of spiritual authority, monks and abbots would defer to the influence of the yogis and by this means the faith, *Dharma*, was kept alive and moving, avoiding many of the theological distortions that priesthoods can create. I suspect that a similar interaction of hermit sages with the priesthood might have pertained in Bronze

Age Britain. Bronze age druidry was a pre-literate, pre-doctrinal faith where rules and rituals were maintained through an oral and initiatory tradition. Druids were probably quite an individualistic lot, many of them wanderers. But they received a solid, protracted training, judging by later Iron Age druidic traditions.

This is qualified guesswork backed by circumstantial evidence: ancient sites across Penwith and throughout Britain had a technical consistency, demonstrating detailed, advanced knowledge that remained consistent over a wide area over many centuries. This could only have been held by a caucus of specialised knowledge-holders – academics of the day. It would have required an expert group spread across Britain and Ireland, with special centres and colleges but also travelling around. Yet every site across Britain was also unique – the uniformity that we are accustomed to today was a thing of empires that would hit Britain only when the Romans came.

The Megalithic Inheritance

Around 3700-3500 BCE the system of backbone alignments associating Penwith's major base sites had been established. Anchored in the tors and cliff sanctuaries, it formed a geomantic foundation that was then bequeathed to the Bronze Age. Menhirs,



Tregeseal stone circle, with Carn Vrês behind

barrows, stones and enclosures were erected to extrapolate the system, all plugged into the network and installed for a variety of terrestrial, astronomical and geomantic purposes.

They were located where they were for intricate reasons, using a megalithic science that was both intellectual and intuitive in

method. Geomancy was a core subject: megalithic *feng shui*. Another was astronomy-astrology, studying the nature and passage of time, its interpretation and its effects on land, sea, wildlife and the welfare of tribes. Another was mathematics and geometry, built into the design, proportions and positioning of ancient sites. The physical and the metaphysical were interdependent, co-engineered.

In designing megalithic structures with astronomical orientations and sophisticated geometry, megalith builders sought to lock time and change into space, embodying the periodicities of the sun, moon and movement of the planets. They used a coherent terrestrial framework – the backbone alignments – to create an integrated system of sacred sites.

The Neolithics intuitively located their sites on energy vortices, also using astronomical, landscape and other factors. Astronomical and geomantic knowledge was well developed by the mid-3000s and, despite the seven century late Neolithic gap when seemingly no new sites were built in Penwith, somehow this knowledge survived. How it survived is an open question – some posit a group of knowledge-holders who persisted through time, or perhaps the knowhow survived elsewhere, in Brittany, Ireland or Scotland, later to be re-seeded in Cornwall. Arguably it could be rediscovered in the Bronze Age by studying Neolithic sites, but this would have encountered deciphering problems not dissimilar to those we face – we can deduce many things, but we can only imagine, not know, the thinking-processes the megalith-builders had.

As sacred site location and design turned into a science, Penwith morphed into a kind of megalithic national park, a scaled-up geoengineering project that eventually covered the peninsula. It reached into the earth by being plugged into underground water and subtle earth energy, into the heavens with astronomical orientations, across the land through alignments and subtle energy-lines, and beyond it through alignments stretching through Cornwall, Devon and further. Whatever Bronze Age people were really seeking to

achieve, this was big. But the thinking behind it had started at least a thousand years before.

Metallurgy

One catalyst of change was the use of bronze, used in blades, axes, needles, mirrors, razors, ornaments and other paraphernalia, making them more durable, sharp, polished and useful than ever before. Increased productivity brought greater wellbeing, enhanced crop yields, better crafts and woodwork and a host of other benefits. Penwithians' lives were changing.

It started with copper. West Penwith had only small deposits, though North Wales and the west of Ireland had better ones. In the earliest days in Penwith, gold and copper could be picked up from the ground, found in streams or shallow-buried in the area between Sennen and Botallack and in places elsewhere. Tin was Penwith's big asset and, as bronze-working grew, Penwith and other parts of Cornwall and Dartmoor did well. Deep mining was rare because streaming was easier, although they would dig around if tin was present below the surface, which they could tell by looking for indicator plants and other signs (or the absence of them), and by intuition and dowsing.

Streaming was a common technique. This involved channelling and re-routing streams to loosen and erode their banks, exposing metal-bearing stones that could be caught in the stream, shattered, sorted and smelted. There are quite a few streams in Penwith where signs of streaming remain – though much of it is from relatively recent centuries, in some cases started in earlier times. Steep-banked streams cut extra deep, with discernible valley levels, are visible in Kenidjack valley, Cot Valley, at Nanquidno, Bosigran and Porthmeor. Metals were initially exported as ore ingots to Ireland, Wales and elsewhere. Only later, around 1800 BCE, did Penwithians develop a forging and metalcraft industry of their own. After 2000 BCE Penwithians also developed copper and gold streaming.

Early hard-rock mining was done by setting fires close to metal-bearing rocks to heat them, and then shattering them with water poured onto the hot rock. Sometimes metal would flow out during the burning but, after shattering with water, pieces could be prised out with wooden and bone tools, hammered with stone, then sorted to pick out metallic bits. Copper starts to melt at 1083°C and bronze at 830-1,000°. Moulds often contained quartz, which melts at 1,500-1,750°. To make copper useful for pouring and moulding in stone, clay or bronze moulds, often quartz-lined or made of quartz-rich rock, had to be heated to around 1,300°C in pottery crucibles and poured quickly and competently into the moulds – small errors could render a copper or bronze piece useless. Metalsmiths were highly trained specialists, some of them probably peripatetic, possessing some social and religious status.

Bronze is comprised of 88-90% copper plus 10-12% tin. Tin was a thus a high-value commodity and, because of the proportions used, tin was taken to copper, and not the other way round. Arsenic, cobalt and other metals serve as key hardening ingredients in bronze, and deposits found around Botallack and St Just were rich in them. These marker ingredients made for sharper, more durable blades for tools and weapons, and they have helped archaeologists determine that Cornwall's export market stretched as far as the Rhineland, the Baltic and the Mediterranean.

The richest part of western Eurasia was the East Mediterranean. It had two main sources of quality tin – Cornwall and Afghanistan. Supplies from both met at the ancient port of Ugarit in today's Lebanon, at the east end of the Med and the west end of the Silk Road. Traders did not travel all the way from Cornwall to Lebanon: the tin was passed from trader to trader, first to Brittany, down the French coast, up the Loire or Garonne, down the Rhone and across the Med to Sicily, Crete, Egypt, Lebanon and Cyprus, the richest copper source at the time.

Cornish tin also travelled down the Atlantic coast to the Carthaginian port of Tartessos in the eastern Algarve, then through the

Pillars of Hercules into the Mediterranean. Here lies the tradition of Phoenicians visiting Cornwall, against which there is much archaeological scepticism, though this might be excessive, overriding a fair assessment of historical probability. A few Phoenician ships might well have come to Cornwall, one possible explorer being Himilco in the 500s BCE. Individual traders or agents would come up on Breton boats to visit trading contacts and the mysterious Tin Islands.

Tin trading likely took place at St Michael's Mount, Porth Curno, Porth Ledden, Porth Nanven, Lelant, Carnsew and St Ives.

Though mariners chose their summer sailing days carefully, with noses to the wind and an eye on the currents and weather, Penwithian culture would have been greatly influenced by its summer visitors. The metals trade depended on intrepid sailors. They built seagoing boats of wood with leather sails, to withstand journeys to mainland Europe and up the Celtic and Irish Seas. Tin ingots, heavy but not large, were quite transportable and high-value.

Acceleration

The high Bronze Age lasted from 2200ish to 1800ish BCE with its peak after 2000. Before 2200 things are fuzzy. Some archaeologists are happy to date some sites back to around 2500, calling them 'late Neolithic' while others are more cautious, perhaps believing that megalithic activity started up as a result of the Beaker influx, thus tending toward 2300-2200. Insufficient systematic dating has been done to clarify this. My suspicion is that there is something amiss in the way we currently visualise this period, and I tend toward the earlier date. Part of what drives this thought is the rather long gap between the building from around 2800 of megalithic sites in other parts of Britain and their construction *a whole 400-500 years later* in Penwith. Something is missing here. In those days Penwith sat in the way of such changes – it wasn't remote and out of the way.

The Bronze Age megalith-building enterprise in Penwith seems to have arisen quite quickly, and the spark for this may have come

northwards from Brittany and Iberia or southwards from Scotland and Ireland. Much of the necessary knowledge had already been applied in Penwith's Neolithic sites, so indigenous knowhow did exist. What was needed was a burst of ideas, inspiration, drive and organisation. It is likely that the impetus to build Bronze Age sites in Penwith was inspired by examples from other parts of Britain and Ireland, supplemented by knowledge and energy accompanying the Beaker migrants.

After the NBA a second phase of the Bronze Age arose around 2250-1950. Building, clearance, population growth, economic and cultural development made Britain a leading culture. This and the next phase marked the zenith of Penwith's Bronze Age when its ancient sites were expanded and integrated into a complete system.

In the third phase, from around 1950 to 1700, Britain was a cultural exporter. Its crafts, metals and ideas spread through Europe and the Med, and many influences and goods came back – this was a 'globalisation phase' of prehistory.

Following this, up to around 1500 BCE, it was more or less business as usual. During periods such as this, life goes on and people experience relative stability. All is relatively well, and life's ups and downs operate within a manageable framework – the fundamentals remain consistent. A successful formula is perpetuated since it is comfortable to do so and there is no pressing need to change it. This was happening in cultures across Europe and the Mediterranean at the time. In history, stable periods are more common than we tend to believe because historians tend to look for change, drama and distinct events, overlooking stable, peaceful, less eventful times, seeing them as unremarkable.

The Bronze Age Zenith

Penwith was significant amongst megalithic areas in Britain, of which there were fifteen or so other concentrations such as Bodmin Moor, Dartmoor, the Mendips-Cotswolds, Dorset, Salisbury Plain,

Mynydd Preseli, Powys-Shropshire, Anglesey, the Peak District, Cumbria, Arran, Argyll, Aberdeenshire, the Hebrides and the Orkneys. Something clearly drove Bronze Age people to undertake engineering on this scale.

Locational factors became more complex and subtle: visit Boscawen-ûn or the Merry Maidens and the significance of their positioning is not immediately obvious – they appear to be situated on un-remarkable slopes without the best of



Boscawen-ûn stone circle

views. Yet they sit atop blind springs, with sightlines to holy hills and other ancient sites, acting as alignment intersections and drawing in astronomical factors. They were landscaped to optimise the sense of psycho-geographic axiality that arises in the intensified reality-field of stone circle. Today's farming landscape obscures this perceptual nuance.

There is more to decipher in megalithic science. Researchers have progressed with the geometry of stone circles, archaeoastronomical and other locational factors, though this is yet to be done systematically in Penwith – more work on locational geometry, systematic dowsing surveys, intervisibility and archaeoastronomy is needed. It needs to be seen as a whole system.

Although megalithic constructions grew in number and complexity, Penwith is not overflowing with signs of permanent Bronze Age houses, villages and everyday items. Such finds more commonly come from the late Bronze and Iron Ages. Clearly Bronze Age people had a decent life, not just scratching around for survival.

Their wooden living structures would have sufficed in the warmer and fairer climate of the time, and bronze tools were used, but signs of domestic and farming stonework are unusual, as are finds of durable metalware. However, pottery finds are common. It is surprising how few settlements and utility objects have been found from before 1500.

From our viewpoint, there is a discrepancy between the seemingly simple material standard of living and the sophisticated megalithic engineering of Bronze Age people. Even if the building of sites was spread out over generations, its integrated pattern reflects a consistency of ideas applied over time. Given that we're talking about building a *system*, not just a haphazard assortment of sites, the construction probably proceeded in concentrated phases and waves. In the north, in 'metro Penwith' (the populated upland area between Chûn Castle and Zennor Hill), the density of sites indicates a longstanding development of megalithic landscaping, whereas in the south, colonised in the early Bronze Age, the systematic building of stone circle complexes and landscape-wide megalithic systems represented a new phase and a big expansion for Penwithians.

The main elements of the megalithic system were in place by 1800 BCE. After that, cairns and barrows were added over time, together with local extensions and additions (perhaps the menhirs around Sennen or the Lamorna plateau menhirs). The circular enclosures at Castle an Dinas, Bartinney Castle and Caer Brân came around 1800. Apart from funerary cairns for the great and good, further building slowed by around 1500.

By now, Bronze Age civilisation was running out of vigour. While circumstances began to change, it continued a further three centuries until around 1200. Here archaeologists get excited because permanent settlements, hill camps and signs of serious farming, trade and conflict become more visible – society becomes more competitive, stratified and comprehensible to modern researchers.

The Late Bronze Age

By 1500 BCE the megalithic impetus had slowed. Few ancient sites except burial mounds were built thereafter and a new dynamic was seeping into society. Nevertheless, life continued along traditional lines for three centuries, up to 1200 BCE. Times were moving on. Or maybe something serious was going wrong. Perhaps it was the breaking of a spell, an enchantment, or a release from constraining traditions, since megalithic culture was well past its peak. Megalithic sites became peripheral – rather like churches and cathedrals in secular Britain today. Clearly respected as remnants of the past, they weren't demolished, but their day was gone.

Then came the 1100s BCE. Circumstances changed fundamentally. Megalithic culture, along with ancient cultures elsewhere, was unable to meet new challenges. Something cumulative was going wrong. In history, change comes slowly at first and then it comes fast. A critical tilt or inflection of social consensus and viewpoint around 1200 occurred quite quickly. It was the end of a worldview and a reality, a soulquake whose time had seemingly come.

A concept used by some anthropologists is that of the *ring of power* – a virtuous cycle of mutually-reinforcing customs, consensus, ethics, kinship, solidarity and cooperation in traditional societies with low levels of social alienation, high group coherence and

relatively clear shared values. Mutual trust and community convergence bring benefits and economies, building a culture of support and security that can hold up under duress. When the ring of



Trencrom Hill – a Neolithic tor enclosure that became an Iron Age hill camp

power breaks, the results can be tragic, dramatic and deeply emotional, fundamentally undermining social trust.

Society went through a reset in the late Bronze Age. Pending issues went critical: viral ideas, decisive events and changing conditions sparked shifts in viewpoint and circumstance. The extent of social-cultural change taking place at the time is, I believe, underestimated – it was one of Britain's defining, traumatic change-points, and its consequences rippled into the longterm future. Not just the fall of a culture, it was the fall of an *ethic*, an optic, a worldview.

The early-mid Bronze Age embodied a fundamentally different mindset and social order to that of the late Bronze Age. Its breakdown represented the beginning of an enormous transition from a relatively cooperative model of organisation to a society where the strong got what they wanted and the rest got what they could. By the time the Romans came along a thousand years later, this megatrend was serious. In terms of the development of patriarchal social relations and patterns, 1200 BCE and the Roman invasion around 50 CE were both critical points.

Something unravelled in the implicit social contract that bids a society: a level of inherent social relatedness, trust, shared interest and sustainability subsided. The emphasis shifted from one of comparative cooperation, care for and trust in the people and the world, toward one of care for *my* family, *our* clan, *our* lands and *our* fortunes – because life is tough and it's 'every man for himself'. Cultivating good fortune turned into hedging against misfortune. Fear entered into social and religious beliefs.

Traumatic breakdown and separation periods like this leave a big shadow in the collective psyche, or in that of particular ethnicities, social classes or subgroups. In the Middle East the breaking of the ring of power started millennia ago, in Britain it happened around 1200 BCE, and in isolated cultures of recent years it broke down only in recent generations.

The early Bronze Age was neither ideal nor was it heaven on earth, but at its peak it marked a golden age, with a higher level of social cohesion than has been seen in Britain since. But something slowly ossified following the Bronze Age zenith. By 1200 the climate had deteriorated, social norms were shifting and trade sank with the collapsing Mediterranean civilisations. New generations, tired of the same old formula and traditions of the past, sought to take life in their hands.

The first hill camps were built by an emergent warlord class for whom strength, status, wealth and power were important. Hill camps, though many were defensible, were not forts – they hosted markets, fayres and services. People loved gathering and trading, and these warlords morphed into oligarchs. Many hill camps were built around the 1100s-1000s during times of reactivity, territoriality and cultural downturn. The former allegiances, conventions and agreements of earlier times had cracked apart.

Those with options would align with leaders offering the best protection and advantages, and the rest had to stay out of trouble or avoid problems as best they could. The economy and social order thus became redefined. There were growing signs of propitiation of the gods in the form of offerings and sacrifices of weapons and valuables, buried in the ground or cast into rivers or lakes, at great expense, as if to buy off misfortune. Weapons production, warrior elites and patron-client social arrangements developed.

A new insecurity and anxiety, a mutual retraction of collective goodwill, sharing and relatedness, infected society. The viral spread of self-interest caused a painful social tightening and touchiness, a growth of distrust, insensitivity and alienation, a feeling of being let down, threatened, even violated.¹⁵ But, as humans do, people got through it. They got down to work.

¹⁵ An interesting take on this is the book *Sahasia: the 4000 BCE Origins of Child Abuse, Sex-Repression, Warfare and Social Violence in the Deserts of the Old World*, by James DeMeo, Natural Energy Works, 1998.

In Cornwall, in response to deteriorating conditions, land was divided up, farming methods changed and capital improvements were made: land enclosure, wall-building, stone-clearing, field-leveilling, crop rotation and farm-building. Late Bronze Age field systems between Morvah, Zennor and St Ives, still visible today, were established around this time. Those who could sought to build up surpluses, using them for trading, feasting, gift-exchange, patronage and barter. Horses came into use, working dogs were trained for shepherding and animal pedigrees were refined.

Around 1159-1141 BCE (dated dendrochronologically) a volcanic eruption somewhere – Hekla in Iceland is a candidate – brought colder, cloudier and rainier conditions, soil-acidification, crop failure and abandonment of marginal land. Around 1100 a longterm climatic change, with significantly cooler and wetter weather, set in. Overall land productivity and human wellbeing declined. Life went into an initial slump, which must have been hard, leaving a shadow of pain and loss in the psyche of the British. The megalithic era – long and fairly stable – was gone. But people worked at building up their security and fulfilling their needs. Things bumped along until around 800-600 BCE when a new epoch took root. It was then that the culture we call ‘Celtic’ took shape. This was the Iron Age.

The Coming of Patriarchy

Before we move on, there is a wider, deeper cultural-historical question, identified by feminist prehistorians and much argued over, though it is clearer now than it was 40-50 years ago. Matters of social power, race, inequality, gender and justice have become key areas of attention in modern society, bringing up long overdue issues of gender power. This is important and historic in scale, since its roots lie in ancient times – in Britain, many of today’s problems go back to the changes that started in the late Bronze Age.

One key indicator of patriarchal social patterns observed by anthropologists and ethnographers concerns marriage and whether a woman, upon marriage, is obliged to leave her family or tribe to join

that of her spouse, or whether such a choice applies more or less equally to both sexes. Another key issue, less easy to determine, lies in societal power, decision-making and the roles women play. This concerns the overall character and behaviour of what have become called *matrist* and *patrist* societies, tending either toward inclusion ('power with') or extraction ('power over') – and no society is exclusively patriarchal or matrifocal. The issue lies in values, beliefs, cultural patterns and power games, though it reflects also in daily-life wellbeing, human relationships with the environment and the way a culture as a whole lives and behaves. To generalise, matrifocal societies tend to care more for their members while patriarchal societies seek to get what they can out of them.

Humanity has gone through a series of incremental transitions from matrifocal toward patriarchal social systems at different times in history, in differing parts of the world. In some isolated parts this has happened only in the last century, but in Britain it goes back at least 3,000 years. The period before that could be called pre-patriarchal – in other words, tendencies were developing though they had not gone critical. Neolithic and early Bronze Age cultures are seen as predominantly Goddess oriented, though this is a matter of interpretation. It is arguable that, instead of 1200 BCE, early patriarchal patterns began creeping in during the NBA with the Beaker influx around 2500-2300 BCE, expressed particularly through grandiose ancient sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury.

Here come some more sweeping generalisations. A matrist or matrifocal society is largely tribal, cooperative or communal, people-scaled, sympathetic-magical, often polygamous or polyamorous, with looser gender distinctions, nomadic or transhumant life-patterns and tending toward self-sufficiency. But there have been complex, matrist, urban and palace-oriented matrist societies too, such as in Minoan Crete. Tribal power, however exercised, is either gender-egalitarian or largely determined, guided or authorised by women. Conversely, a patrist or patriarchal society is hierarchical, competitive, growth-based, market-agricultural, urban or centralised, militaristic, often developing a raiding or

conquering economy, often practicing primogeniture and monogamy or polygyny (one husband, many wives), and steered largely by men according to their values. Religiously, matrlist societies tend toward a spirit-within-all-things approach (immanence), while patrlist societies tend toward a gods-beyond-all-things approach (transcendence).

In both kinds of society, it's not that the other sex has no role or power, but that their role is largely framed by members of the opposite sex or it takes place in such a cultural context. These are loose, tricky definitions and, throughout history, it has always been a matter of degree: there has been much variation between clans, regions and social sectors – urban and village dwellers, elites and peasants, trading and farming societies, or even between families.

The transition from matrifocal to patriarchal societies was largely incremental, with crunch points. In Britain this seems to have been seeded around 2500 BCE with the Beaker influx, bringing Indo-European influences with new interests and priorities. This seeding developed slowly through the Bronze Age to reach a tipping point around 1200 BCE. A growing impulse to alter the face of the earth is seen through this period, with wildwood clearance and megalith-building, though the aim, at least up to 1500, was nevertheless to enhance and upgrade nature. Deforestation would not then have been considered environmental destruction in the way that we now consider it to be – it was *progress* and *development*. Altering the landscape created a new, man-made reality, and with it came changes of worldview. Early Bronze Age society in Cornwall remained largely transhumant, community-based, personal in relationships and stable in structure, ethics and social relations. As time went on the conditions fell into place for a change in the late Bronze Age – and change was happening elsewhere too.

Patriarchy took a leap around 1200 BCE when a new way of living emerged. This was perhaps one of the more painful transition times in British history when an aspect of the psyche of the Britons was lost forever. From this perspective it was to get worse in later times,

and the emotional splintering of societal bonds had a longterm ripping, tearing and toughening effect. A critical threshold was crossed. If seek a watershed between matrist and patrism cultures in Britain, 1200 BCE is it, though the process had started around 2500, with roots further back, and the process continued into the future. To explore truly matrist cultures we need to go back to the early Neolithic and the Mesolithic periods of prehistory.

Even so, in Iron Age society around 200 BCE, women held more power than in subsequent times and by comparison with other European societies of the period. They could be druids or chiefs and, even when males made and implemented many decisions, the final moral arbiters were often women. The epic battles of the Iceni queen Boudica against the Romans, put down by sheer force, marked the end in Britain of this culture of comparative equity.

Dual societies and economies thereafter existed side by side: one based on trade, law, towns, roads and a moneymaking economy; the other a village subsistence economy of barter, close community relations, tradition and, later, serfdom. In relative terms, the first was more patriarchal, eventually becoming Christian, and the second was more matrifocal, remaining pagan, with the urban economy growing while the rural one was shrinking.

However one may feel about what has been said here, and the debate continues, the main thing to note is the date: 1200 BCE. This marked the end of the megalithic era and the beginning of a fundamental shift in society.

4. Druids, Roundhuts and Smithies

The Iron Age 800 BCE – CE 300

The Iron Age began around 800 BCE, with a slow start to a gradual revival, not with a bang. The Celts were a culture, not a people: British Celts were made up of Bronze Age clans plus inwardly migrating tribes and trickles arriving over time. It takes a virtuous cycle of growth for a new culture to develop, and it gained momentum between 800 and 500 BCE.

The Celts were a variegated pan-European culture and language bloc, an early EU with precursor versions of the same kind of community rivalries, alliances, deadlocks, compromises, collaborations, tragedies and triumphs that we see today. For several centuries they were Europe's dominant culture, stretching from Romania to Iberia and Anatolia to Britain.

In West Cornwall, the Iron Age lasted from about 800 BCE to around CE 300-400. If we thought in terms of a Big Iron Age, then we could say that there was an evolving cultural continuity in Cornwall from 1200 BCE to CE 400ish – 1,600 years – though going

through several stages. Elsewhere in Britain the Iron Age ended sooner, around CE 60-100 with the Roman occupation.



A reconstructed iron age roundhut at Bodrifty

Iron Age Britons were largely descended from Bronze Age ancestors and new incomers. Early migrations are unknown. Migrations into Britain in the later Iron Age included the Brigantes, moving into northern England, and the Germanic tribes of the Belgae in the SE, both of whom had relatives on the continent. But peoples came earlier too, changing the social and tribal landscape.

Incoming tribes tended to settle in the south and east. Western and northern tribes, including the Dumnonii in Cornwall-Devon, the Silures and Ordovices in Wales, and others in Cumbria, the Isle of Man and Scotland, had more ancient British origins. Over time Gaels trickled over from Ireland, such as the warlike Gangani and the Deceangli of Lleyrn, in north Wales¹⁶, and Britons went to Ireland too. Gaelic elements arrived amongst the Cornish.

But there's a problem. Surprisingly little is known about Iron Age Britain, though knowledge is growing as new remains are discovered. Our imagery of that time is influenced by Roman observations at the end of the period. Seen from the Roman viewpoint, and also through the lens of later biases such as the romanticisation of the Celts in recent centuries, an inaccurate optic survives today. Added to this, English classicist historians have implicitly regarded the Romans as urbane civilisers of woad-painted barbarian Britons, and Oxbridge historians still periodically clash with what they call 'revisionist' historians from the Celtic Fringe over interpretation of Iron Age and Celtic cultures.

Winds of Keltia

During the late Bronze Age, proto-Celtic took shape as an intertribal language across Europe. By 900 BCE it had diverged into a range of languages including *Goidelic* (Irish, Manx and Scots Gaelic) and *Brythonic* (Cornish, Welsh, Cumbrian and in Strathclyde) – both

¹⁶ For a list of Britain's Celtic tribes:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Age_tribes_in_Britain – these tribes were recorded around the time of the Roman occupation in the late iron age.

known as Insular Celtic – together with continental forms such as Gaulish and Celto-Iberian, which later became extinct.

While Brythonic became a *lingua franca* for much of Britain, in a land that, during the late Bronze Age, had become increasingly regionalised, it is likely that, in Penwith, Brythonic, Goidelic, Breton and other tongues were known, at least by some, or there was a hybrid local pidgin. We do not know the difference between the language of the high Bronze Age and Iron Age Brythonic, though elements of the former would have passed into the latter.

Over the centuries a new society took shape, a patchwork of tribes variously interacting with each other. Hilltop camps, rounds, stone-built settlements and cleared farmland became the norm. In Cornwall fogous, cliff sanctuaries, hill camps and holy wells became the centres of social and spiritual life.

The Iron Age saw a cultural upswing across Europe, peaking around 500-300 BCE, incorporating a wide variety of tribes and peoples. Celts weren't the only people around but they were the dominant culture. Growing aristocratic wealth and exchange sponsored an artistic florescence that the Celts are well known for. For a few centuries they were centred in two main areas: the Atlantic west between Iberia and Britain, and middle Europe from eastern France to Bohemia – the Rhine, Rhône and Danube headwaters.

Originally it was believed that the Celts had diffused from central Europe (the La Tène and Hallstadt cultures, 800-350 BCE), but it is now more likely that Celticness originated earlier with the Tagus valley people of Iberia, who migrated north to Brittany, Ireland and Britain, and eastwards into France (Gaul) and central Europe. Mingling and merging with people of other cultures, in the Hungarian plain they met up with the descendants of the steppe Yamnaya, forming a hybrid warrior society. Meanwhile, the Atlantic Celts, not such avid warriors and by degrees less hierarchical, influenced Cornwall and western Britain through

existing maritime links, while the east and south of Britain were middle-European influenced.

These Atlantic-zone connections dwindled during the late Bronze Age in parallel with the climatic, social and economic downturn of the time. This isolated segments of the Celtic world, tending to regionalise them: the Celts of Ireland formed a Gaelic group, whilst a Brythonic group formed in Britain. Atlantic coast connections improved as the Iron Age proceeded and, later, around CE 400-500, British and Breton ties were strong, following a British migration to Brittany – hence Breton and Cornish are linguistically close. In Britain several zones developed: the Irish Sea coast from Cornwall to Strathclyde, the Marches from Dorset to Lancashire (notable for grand hill camps), the east from Kent to Yorkshire, and Highland Scotland, each with their own cultures, traditions and characters.

Worldviews

The late Bronze Age saw a few centuries of relative cultural doldrums following the deflation of the megalithic mindset and a profound retraction of social trust and cohesion. This will have undermined Britons' collective spirits but life went on, and a new society and economy took shape, out of which emerged a changed worldview. This transitional period was the British variant of the Axial Age, a Eurasia-wide time of growing competition, turbulence and territoriality. Old certainties were obsolete and new, big ideas, as yet unformed, were to emerge after 500 BCE.

During this period, a profound metaphysical shift occurred. It moved from a sense of inherent *spirituality* – attention to the indwelling spirit within all things – toward a more structured sense of *religion* – of gods and their powers standing around and above, beneath and beyond, determining the fates of humans. We became more like outsiders in the spiritual world. Inner life morphed from the encouragement of favourable circumstances toward guarding against unfavourable ones. Perhaps this arose partially from a sense

of cultural failure and jaded disillusionment and partially from a loss of personal divinity. The Celtic sphere, though still a magical culture, differed from that of a millennium or more before.

Writing was known, having been passed to the Iberian Celts by the Phoenicians, and to mid-European Celts by Greeks and Italians, but its use was limited to records, memorials, messages and practical uses. The Celts were a word-of-mouth people who wrote down none of their philosophy, poesy or knowledge. Druidic secrets were shared through an oral tradition, passed down through whispered lineages. They acquired knowledge by rote, maintaining strict verbal accuracy in the tradition of their Bronze Age forebears. They had no bible or rulebook.

While the druids retained many ancient traditions passed down from former days, they also served contemporary needs, upholding a certain spiritual, moral and judicial order in unstable times, counterbalancing the excesses and power of chiefs and warriors. A growing conflict between magical-spiritual and earthly priorities, the power of druids and chiefs, was symbolised in the later Arthurian traditions, in the dialogues between Merlin and Arthur concerning magical and worldly power – a dilemma which probably had its origins in the Iron Age.

The druids upheld social and cultural standards during periodically strident and unsettled times, becoming central players in society. As priests, healers, justices and astrologers, they advised chiefs, sometimes becoming chiefs, and they were sponsored and protected by the elite. Choosing trees and natural sites as their holy places, they had no wish to build grand monuments or to immortalise their traditions in writing, so we know tantalisingly little about them.

Today, there is a certain romance to the Celts but, to them, the same was true with their forebears, the people of the Bronze Age and further back. In Penwith the remains that Iron Age people left took the form of homesteads and settlements, hill camps, holy wells, inscribed stones, fogous and upcycled cliff sanctuaries.

They had less of an urge than their predecessors to build sacred sites and enduring structures – perhaps the legacy of the long-gone Bronze Age was reason enough to avoid grandiose projects. But they did reoccupy the hills and cliff



An iron age roundhut at Bosulow Trehyllis

sanctuaries. Much of Iron Age people's building was functional, in the form of dwellings, enclosures, bridges and field hedges. They liked high places, but they also loved nooks and crannies, springs, fords, streams, valleys, glades and groves, rocks and trees.

Their deities resided in nature, the underworld, the otherworld and the heavens. There was an inherent naturalism and magic to their faith. Many questions surround this period since Britons of the time did not immortalise their thoughts and beliefs in script. They left Ogham stones in Cornwall, Wales and elsewhere, but these have not thrown great light on their worldview.

Iron Age Society

Iron age people were tribal and their clan lands could be extensive. Penwith will have been occupied by various extended families, probably all members of a bigger clan bonded by intermarriage, longterm relationships and centuries of heritage. In turn, they were part of the Dumnonian nation-people. Across Britain there were pan-tribal laws and traditions offering degrees of harmonisation between tribes, with a judiciary of judges and advisers (ovates); poets, musicians and keepers of histories (bards); and the priest-

shamans (druids) who upheld these customs by holding mentoring, political and jurisprudential roles in society.

Britain was thus welded into a trans-tribal patchwork of domains with no national constitution but with shared rules, laws and customs – an implicit federation of clans maintaining a common system of laws, customs and beliefs that gave rights and justice to all. Kings, queens and chiefs were chosen or elected from eligible candidates by the chiefs and elders of the tribe, accountable through duty, custom, law and personal relationship to those below them. Chiefs and local monarchs held resources on behalf of the clan and they were accountable at least to its prominent members, who themselves had their own accountability. It seems to have been a relatively responsive social system that was proto-democratic in principle, though its practice would have varied between clans.

Celts had a sounder sense of social justice, conduct and integrity than we see in later societies. The moral and legal rulings of the ovates were rooted in druidic spiritual code, endowing everyone with rights and duties within society. Hill camps were strongholds for people at the top, also providing organisational and judicial services, governance, resources, artisans, expertise and some sacred functions. It was not a perfect system and there were undoubtedly rivalries, squabbles and problems, yet the British social and judicial system was noted and remarked upon by outsiders from abroad. The common law system of today has its roots in principles established then, as do the earliest roots of democracy. There was a class system, and this included slaves – debtors or captives – but even slaves had certain rights. There was an ongoing moral struggle between honour and ambition, and this weakness brought the eventual downfall of the British at the hands of the Romans, who divided them against each other to gain a foothold in Britain.

There was both cooperation and rivalry between clans, tribes and regions. There are signs of warfare, and in a heroic warrior society status and strength mattered. Yet there are also signs that, whether achieved by good sense or by détente, tribes rubbed along, acting in

consort too. Like the fractious Greeks of the same period, they argued and tiffed, proudly defending their independence, yet they were essentially one culture.

Trade was important and each region had its skills and assets for barter, such as horses, specialist crafts, textiles or gold. Intertribal trade will have involved exchange of surplus items and crops, plus gifts to forge or maintain goodwill or to curry favour – these could include crafts, tools, stud animals, medicines, valuables or fineries. It was a largely localised, self-sufficient economy of community skill-sharing and resource-pooling to which trade added bonuses and filled gaps.

Late in the Iron Age a money economy, small towns and roads developed in southeast Britain, under the auspices of increasingly strong aristocracies. This spilled over into Dumnonia to a degree, though the Dumnonii retained their own ways. For the Dumnonii, relations with regions around the Irish Sea were more important than those with people upcountry. They were Atlantic Celts, and the Celts upcountry were continental La Tène Celts.

The Iron Age World

Along came iron technologies, the potter's wheel, the rotary quern for milling, and new farming, crafting and building methods, together with growing intertribal exchange. Innovations came about indigenously and through influxes of ideas and people – there was regular mingling with Gauls, Bretons, Germans and Nordics.

Iron is a technological enabler but not a fundamental cultural transformer. Adopted gradually in the late Bronze Age, its use spread slowly – possibly because the necessary skills and equipment were hard to acquire. Iron was more easily sourced than copper or tin but it required higher smelting temperatures and more complex smithing skills and tools. It was good for making tools, blades, weapons, ploughs, nails and everyday items, though it didn't have the shine, look and feel of bronze, which continued to be used in

crafts, adornments and anything made to look nice. Iron rusted but it was practical, tough, and its use improved living conditions. Steel, made in India and China around this time, didn't arrive in Europe for a further two millennia.

The Iron Age zenith in Britain, from around 300 BCE to the Roman occupation, was socially and economically more complex and developed than that of the late Bronze Age. Population was higher and more land had been colonised. Britons were hardworking builders, craftspeople and traders, reputed as potters, smiths, weavers, dog trainers, breeders, mariners, fishers and farmers.

The decline of megalithic culture affected western Britain significantly, moving the centre of activity eastwards. During the Iron Age the Atlantic heartland exerted less of an influence than before. Even so, when the Romans invaded Britain, Anglesey was the last bastion of druidical power that the Romans felt they had to vanquish, in CE 60/61. Subduing the Britons took a few decades and parts of Britannia were never fully controlled.

Romans visited Cornwall but they didn't penetrate it in numbers, except for travellers, traders and romanised Britons. A few incursions happened and a few Roman forts were built in East and Mid-Cornwall, but these were more like secure trading and logistical stations than forts used for military occupation. Since it was a relatively marginal region, the Iron Age survived later in Cornwall than upcountry, tapering into Early Medieval times around CE 400 as Roman influence in Britain dwindled. Cornwall had gone through a quiet period during Roman times, though from around CE 250 something new had started taking shape – early Medieval Celtic Christian culture. Since Cornwall was never forcefully invaded, remnants of druidry quietly survived here into Christian times, melding with Christianity to form a hybrid, phase-two, medieval Celtic culture.

Iron Age Penwith

Some inherited sites – the hilltops and cliff sanctuaries – were upcycled in the Iron Age. Stone circles, menhirs and cairns were left as they were but, out of a mixture of respect and superstition, they were probably kept in good condition. As time went on, Iron



Maen Castle, an Iron Age cliff sanctuary

Age society formed its own viewpoint, drawing on the past but attending to the present and its current imperatives.

Cornwall and Devon were held by the *Dumnonii* – from which comes ‘Devon’. The roots of the Dumnonii go back at least to the Neolithic. The notion of ‘Cornwall’ came only with the Saxons in the 900s CE, when they took over Devon – half of Dumnonia. They called the Cornish *Carnwalas* or Peninsular Welsh – *carn* being a headland and *walas* or *walha* meaning ‘not us’ or ‘that lot’. Being a long, thin peninsula, east and west Cornwall were differently affected by the Saxons. Old Penwithians today are genetically distinct from other Cornish who, in turn, with the Welsh, are genetically distinct from most English, and English genetic strains are more common in East Cornwall.¹⁷

The Dumnonii were a relatively prosperous clan, holding their autonomy throughout the Iron Age. The SW peninsula was generally stable: it did not have as many or as grand hill camps as

¹⁷ Weatherhill, Craig, *The Promontory People*, 2018, p30. See also the postscript on genetics, p209.

upcountry. This said, mid-Cornwall had an array of hill camps crossing the peninsula that clearly reflected a perception or an actuality of risk coming from upcountry – there are far fewer hill camps further west. As trading centres the hill camps in Mid- and East Cornwall will naturally have carried more traffic and trade.

During the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, Dumnonia's heart-lands were Dartmoor, Bodmin Moor and Penwith, with the Lizard, Scilly and other localised parts, separated by large swathes of wild-wood. Many wild-wood areas were settled, colonised and



Sancreed Well, West Penwith

cleared during the Iron Age, and mid-Cornwall was opened up. Bodmin Moor's climate deteriorated from 1200 BCE onward and, though mining continued, most people moved down into lower lands, the *Killas*. This happened in Penwith to a lesser extent.

Iron ore was more widely available than copper or tin. But there was still a market in tin, and Penwithians did well – one ingot could yield gifts of wine, oil, shawls or sheep. Though it was a barter and gifting economy, the high value of tin meant that Penwithians led a decent life, trading across Europe with ingots, crafts and other products – especially through the Bretons. Bretons traded with Phoenicians, Greeks and Cornish, and some Cornish will have been steadfast mariners and travellers, meeting Mediterranean people in France. Over many centuries Penwith had had significant overseas contact, yet it was in a world of its own, with a local culture offset even from the rest of Dumnonia. As is the case today.

The population of the later Iron Age was relatively dense and there were numerous settlements: Carn Euny, Chysauster, Goldherring, Bosulow Trehyllis, Bosiliack, Nanjulian and more. Many are still visible, mostly as piles of stones, some more intact than others, and best seen in winter or spring before the bracken is up. Most have a good atmosphere, and you can get a glimmer of the feeling of their inhabitants' lives if you allow yourself to sit quietly and, in your imagination, go back two millennia and more. You might be sitting on a spot that someone sat on way back then.

Penwithians seem to have been largely at peace, although they had defensible camps on the borders of Penwith (Trencrom and Tregonning Hills), on some inland hills (Chûn Castle) and some cliff sanctuaries (Treryn Dinas, St Ives Head and St Michael's Mount). Events upcountry tended not to reverberate much down here though. Nonetheless, having valuables derived from tin wealth meant that Penwithians could have been raided.

Camps, enclosures and cliff sanctuaries in Penwith were landscape assets, places of strength, centrality and atmosphere, commanding fine views, endowing a feeling of greatness and dominion – hot property in an heroic age where eminence and nobility mattered. Well, at least to some. Most people were crofters and artisans who just got on with their lives, concerned about weather, children, the harvest, laying in supplies for winter, fixing the house and working the land. They lived in farms and crofts, roundhouses and courtyard houses, engaging in farming and fishing, barter, horse-riding, sailing boats, and some were involved in the tin business – many of these probably built the more classy courtyard houses of West Cornwall.

Iron age aristocrats had an emotional connection with their people, being related to them, unlike later Norman lords whose placemen were outsiders despatched to control and tax the locals, taking power by force, bequest or inheritance. Everything on clan lands was clan property, in overall control of the chiefs. Individual rights pertained unless overridden by wider tribal needs. If a family grew in size it could be allocated new lands, and if it suffered misfortune

it could be supported. In Penwith there might have been five or ten extended families under an overarching clan. Penwithians stuck together and still do – it's in the nature of the place – and what problems they had often came from elsewhere. Or from the weather, fluctuations in the value of tin, or periodic fullmoon tiffs and feuds over the silly kinds of things we humans tend to get het up about.

Iron Age culture in Penwith peaked between 200 BCE and around CE 100. It tailed off as, in Roman times, Cornwall went through a downturn. The tin trade slumped when tin mining was developed in Galicia, NW Spain, though they were exhausted by around 400 and the Cornish tin trade revived, just as the Romans were leaving.

Later History

Up in England, the Iron Age came to a close with the arrival of the Romans.

Resistance lasted decades, but

Romanitas was a soft-power culture with ruthless hard-power clout and, within a century, the Brits were cleaved



The fogou at Carn Euny, a restored Iron Age village

between Romanised Brits concentrated in the Roman orbit and traditional Brits living in outlying areas. Perhaps the Dumnonii played good politics in keeping the Romans out by giving them business and avoiding trouble – as they did later with the Saxons, Vikings and Normans. Those in a position to do so will have enjoyed Roman products and opportunities, but most people in Cornwall were only marginally affected by *Romanitas*.

The Roman occupation marginalised the Dumnonii, to some extent conveniently, and Dumnonia held together during Roman times, keeping its head down, protected by its geography. The Romans came as far as Exeter, *Isca Dumnoniorum*, a frontier trading centre. Upcountry, Roman hegemony lasted 350 years until the Romans withdrew in CE 410.

During the early medieval period and up to the 900s, Dumnonia experienced 500 years of sovereignty. This was the time of Celtic Christianity and a cultural and economic revival under a series of kings, some of whom were astute rulers.¹⁸ Christianity entered the Celtic lands early, grafting onto druidism and giving a new lease of life to old ways.

There is a viable tradition that Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea, a metals trader, visited Penwith, Glastonbury and other places in the West Country when Jesus was a youth. Tradition has it that Anne, Jesus' grandmother and mother of Mary, was Breton. Whether or not this was so, Christian influences percolated into Britain within decades of Jesus' mission, brought by refugee Jews, some of whom might have arrived in Cornwall, following the Atlantic route from France and Iberia.

The Ancient British Church evolved with a life and a way of its own, peaking between the 300s and 500s CE. It was far from the evangelical kind of Christianity that developed as the Roman Catholic Church grew in influence, to penetrate Britain in the early 600s. The British Church formed a counterbalance to the centralised, institutional Roman Church, which had grown strong from the 200s CE onwards, becoming Rome's state religion by the early 300s, and then spreading across Europe.

A neo-druidic theological fightback was led by the scholarly British monk Pelagius, who around CE 380 went to Rome and in 410 to Carthage, challenging Augustine of Hippo's then mainstream philo-

¹⁸ Weatherhill, Craig, *The Promontory People*, Francis Boutle Pubs, 2018.

sophies. Pelagius became popular, causing big ripples, later to be branded a heretic and disappearing from view after being thrown out of Jerusalem. A feisty gentleman.

In Saxon states Catholicism prevailed, having been adopted by the Saxons in the 590s to give themselves some respectability. Christianity in Britain came under its aegis around 664 following the Synod of Whitby, the Celtic church dwindling thereafter. The Roman Church was the EU of the time and affiliate states were independent but subsidiary to it.

Early British Christianity was closer to nature than Catholicism, surviving in the Celtic Fringe through to Norman times. Early medieval wandering saints or *Culdees* stimulated a cultural revival in the 400s and 500s, lasting up to CE 1000. Often called the Dark Age, for Celtic peoples this was an Age of Light. Many Culdees came from elsewhere, finding a home in Cornwall, following vows of voluntary exile – a leftover tradition of Bronze Age druids.

Celtic culture had two heydays: one preceding the Romans and the other following them. During the Arthurian period around CE 500 the Britons re-established themselves after the Roman occupation, also being under threat from incoming Angles, Saxons and Jutes. Whatever the veracity of the Arthurian legends, telling of the conundrums faced by Merlin, Arthur and other knightly and court characters, they symbolised a crucial post-Roman recovery of identity for the Britons, a process sharpened by the need to resist an increasing Germanic influx – another Brexit moment. Certainly, during the Arthurian period the British delayed the Saxon advance, yet their war leaders were only vaguely documented.

The Matter of Britain,¹⁹ framed around the Arthurian legends, concerning the nation's soul and how power was exercised, might well be a romanticised account of events of the time, yet the origins

¹⁹ A collection of literature from primary sources telling the early history of Britain. See www.edwinhopper.com/Mater%20of%20Britain.pdf

of its tradition and imagery might come from a more ancient body of beliefs arising during the Iron Age ascendancy a millennium earlier, finding new relevance in the turbulent 500s. These legends were romanticised and made famous by the Normans after 1100, partly to give themselves legitimacy as foreign rulers.

The cultural struggle of the Britons against various invaders from the Romans to the Normans all ultimately failed. This led, in the Middle Ages, to the founding of England and the final end of the old, more or less unified Britain of the Iron Age. Dumnonia was separated from Wales in the 700s by the Saxon occupation of Somerset. History is sometimes called a chronicle of compounded errors, and perhaps one such error, from the Celtic viewpoint at least, was the separation of Wales and Dumnonia, arrayed around the Severn Sea.

While the Saxons came as far as Exeter in the 500s, only in the 900s, in the time of Athelstan, did they take over and anglicise Devon to reach the river Tamar. The cultural cleansing of Somerset and Devon was surprisingly rigorous – the genetics and social patterns of Devonians and Cornish are now markedly different. The sundered Welsh and Cornish developed as separated cultures, and their languages, already separate dialects, drifted further apart.

Some see the Saxon invasion of England as traumatic for the Britons, causing a westward migration to the Celtic fringe, while others see it as a simple layering of Saxon culture over that of the British. Celtic historians prefer the former while English academics prefer the latter – the jury is still out, and both might be partially correct. There were indeed significant migrations to Cornwall, Wales and Strathclyde. Something serious caused it and the Saxon occupation was the main event of the time – though Irish raids were harassing the Welsh and Cornish too. Cornwall gained new blood and many of these incomers continued to Brittany. Cornish is closer to Breton than to Welsh because many Britons migrated to Brittany at this time – though Breton-Cornish contacts went back millennia.

In the medieval period, following CE 1000, Cornwall was infiltrated and incorporated in steps by Norman and Catholic powers in England. By 1500 penetration grew, and the Cornish didn't do well. In Penwith, church building took place on some former ancient sites, on *lanns*, ancient enclosures or rounds, at places such as St Buryan, Ludgvan, Pen Sans, Paul, Madron, Sancreed, St Erth, St Ives, Hayle and St Just. Although Cornish culture was weakened by Catholicism and English influences, it survived – though the ascendant English were to prove very problematic for the Cornish. But that story is not for telling here.

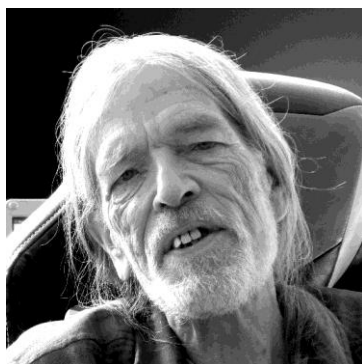
This material is supplementary to the book *Shining Land – the ancient sites of West Penwith and what they say about megalithic civilisation*.

See: www.palden.co.uk/shiningland/

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About the Author

Palden was involved in flower power and student activism (LSE) in the 1960s, and this was a life-changer. Since then, he has been interested in history and prehistory, studying social-cultural change and global megatrends. Through his adult life he has worked in counselling, holistic education, event organisation, humanitarian work in the Middle East and



Africa, book editing and publishing, and he has a track record in community and internet activism and peacemaking. He has written eleven books, built several big resource websites (including the online *Meyn Mamvro* archive) and started various organisations and initiatives. An archive of much of his work is on his website.

A polymath, he's good at joining the dots between a wide range of ideas and perspectives. Growing up in 1950s Wales and 1960s Liverpool, Palden has lived in North Wales, Sweden, Glastonbury, Bethlehem (Palestine) and now Cornwall. He has four grown-up children and eight grandchildren (two of them adopted). He serves as a kind of soul uncle to many people far and wide and is nowadays a blogger and podcaster.

When he went down with bone marrow cancer in 2019, Palden felt a need to record much of what he has learned, for future benefit after he's gone. In *Shining Land* he shares his understanding of the ancient history of Cornwall and of one of the greatest periods in British history – the megalithic period of the Neolithic and Bronze Age, of which Cornwall was one of its centres.

www.palden.co.uk

www.ancientpenwith.org

www.palden.co.uk/shiningland

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