

3

Prehistoric Western Europe



Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? These are three of the most universal questions we ask ourselves. They are about time and the nature of the human condition.

Works of art help us to answer these questions. We will begin our exploration of the arts by going back in time to early periods of human history, to the study of prehistory. Prehistory refers to a time before the invention of writing, although objects and images are historical records as well. The challenge lies in discovering how to read and interpret them.

The Stone Age

To organize the vast time span of prehistory, scholars divide the Stone Age in Western Europe into three periods. Paleolithic (from the Greek words *palaios*, meaning “old,” and *lithos*, meaning “stone”) is the earliest and the longest. It lasted from c. 1,500,000 to c. 8000 B.C. The Mesolithic (“middle stone”) period extended from around 8000 to 6000 B.C. in southeastern Europe and c. 8000 to c. 4000 B.C. in the rest of Europe. The Neolithic (“new stone”) period dates from c. 6000/4000 B.C. to c. 3000 B.C. and continued for another thousand years in northwestern Europe.

The designation of these periods as Stone Age derives from the use of stone tools and weapons. As technology developed, metal replaced stone for many purposes. Then, as now, technological and social change went hand in hand, bringing the Stone Age to a gradual close.

Paleolithic (c. 1,500,000–c. 8000 B.C.)

By around 50,000 B.C. in Europe, our own subspecies, *Homo sapiens sapiens* (literally “wise wise man”), had supplanted *Homo sapiens*, who had developed complex cultures. We can gain some understanding of Paleolithic society by interpreting the physical record. But because ideas cannot be fossilized, there is much that will never be known.

Inferences about Paleolithic religion have been drawn from ritual burial practices. Red ocher—possibly symbol-



Prehistoric sites in Europe.

izing blood—was sprinkled on corpses, and objects of personal adornment (such as necklaces) were buried with them. Bodies were arranged in the fetal position, often oriented toward the rising sun, which must have seemed reborn with each new day. Such practices suggest a belief in life after death and offer some insight into the way Paleolithic people answered the third question posed at the start of this chapter: Where are we going?

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

Although the invention of writing was still far off, people made symbolic marks on hard surfaces, such as bone and stone, possibly to keep track of time. The sophistication of Paleolithic art suggests that language—the ability to communicate with words and tell stories—had also developed, and language in itself requires a sense of sequence and time.

The earliest surviving works of Western art correspond roughly to the final stages of the Ice Age in Europe and date back to about 30,000 B.C. Before that time, objects were made primarily for utilitarian purposes, although many have aesthetic qualities. It is important to remember, however, that our modern Western concept of “art” would almost certainly have been alien in the Stone Age, when an object’s aesthetic value was inseparable from its function.

Sculpture

Perhaps the most famous Paleolithic sculpture is the so-called *Venus of Willendorf* (fig. 3.1), a striking figure carved out of limestone and variously dated from 25,000 B.C. to 21,000 B.C. Although this figure can be held in the palm of one’s hand, it is a **monumental** object with a sense of organic form. The term *monumental* can mean literally “very big” or, as is the case here, “having the quality of appearing big.” The rhythmic arrangement of bulbous oval shapes emphasizes the head, breasts, torso, and thighs. The scale of these elements in relation to the whole is quite large, while the facial features, neck, and lower legs are

TECHNIQUE Carving

Carving is a subtractive technique in which a sculptor uses a sharp instrument such as a knife, gouge, or chisel to remove material from a hard substance such as bone, wood, or stone. After an image is shaped, it can be sanded, filed, or polished. The *Venus of Willendorf* was not polished, although some Paleolithic sculptures were. It is made of limestone, which does not polish as well as other types of stone.



3.1a, b *Venus of Willendorf* (front and side views), from Willendorf, Austria, c. 25,000–21,000 B.C. Limestone, $\frac{4}{8}$ in. (11.5 cm) high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

virtually eliminated. The arms, resting on the breasts, are so undeveloped as to be hardly noticeable. What, we might ask, did she mean to the artist who carved her? And what was her function in her cultural context?

In the absence of written records, we can only speculate. Clearly, the artist emphasized those parts of the body related to reproduction and nursing. Furthermore, comparison of the front with the side and back shows that, although the *Venus* is a sculpture in the round (see Box), more attention has been lavished on the front. The exaggeration of the breasts and pelvis has led some scholars to conclude that the *Venus of Willendorf* represented a fertility goddess. Reinforcing this reading are traces of red pigment that may have been associated with childbirth.

This is one of a number of prehistoric female **figurines** (small figures) that scholars have nicknamed *Venus* (after the much later Roman goddess of love and beauty),

TECHNIQUE Modeling

Modeling, unlike carving, is an additive process, and its materials (such as clay) are pliable rather than hard. The primary tools are the artist’s hands, especially the thumbs, although various other tools can be used. Until the material dries and hardens, the work can still be reshaped.

Clay that has been heated (**fired**) in a **kiln** (a special oven) is more durable and waterproof than clay that has not been so treated. A Paleolithic kiln for firing clay statues of women and animals has been found in Eastern Europe, and a variety of finely crafted, decorated clay vessels were made in Western Europe during the Neolithic period (see page 29).



3.2 *Venus of Laussel*, from Laussel, Dordogne, France, c. 25,000–23,000 B.C. Limestone, 17¾ in. (44 cm) high. Fouilles Lalanne, Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, France.

although there is no evidence as to whom, if anyone, the figurines were meant to represent. They all exaggerate the breasts and hips, suggesting a cultural preoccupation with fertility, on which the survival of the species depends.

TECHNIQUE

Categories of Sculpture

Sculpture in the round and **sculpture in relief** are the two most basic categories of sculpture. Sculpture in the round is any sculpture completely detached from its original material so that it can be seen from all sides, such as the *Venus of Willendorf* (see fig. 3.1a, b). The *Venus of Laussel* (see fig. 3.2) remains partly attached to its original material, in this case limestone, so that it is shown in relief—that is, there is at least one angle from which the image cannot be seen. Sculpture in relief is more pictorial than sculpture in the round because some of the original material remains and forms a background plane.

There are different degrees of relief. In **high relief**, the image stands out relatively far from the background plane. In **low relief**, also called **bas-relief** (*bas* means “low” in French), the surface of the image is closer to the background plane. When light strikes a relief image from an angle, it casts a stronger shadow on high relief than on low relief and thus defines the image more sharply. Reliefs can also be **sunken**, or **incised**, in which case the image or its outline is slightly recessed into the surface plane, as in much ancient Egyptian carving (Chapter 5).

Most prehistoric sculptures are in the round, but Paleolithic artists also made **relief** sculpture (see Box). A good example of relief is the *Venus of Laussel* (fig. 3.2), which also has traces of red ochre pigment (see Box). The pelvis and breasts are exaggerated, although the arms are slightly more prominent than those of the *Venus of Willendorf*. In her right hand, the *Venus of Laussel* holds an animal horn decorated with **incised** lines.

In addition to female figurines, Paleolithic artists produced small sculptures of animals. Most often found are horses, bison, and oxen; less frequently found are deer, mammoths, antelope, boar, rhinoceroses, foxes, wolves, bears, and an occasional fish or bird. These, like the paintings of animals, reflect the naturalism of Paleolithic animal art.

Painting

The surviving European Paleolithic paintings are concentrated in caves located in northern Spain, especially the Pyrenees Mountains, and the Périgord and Dordogne regions of France. The well-preserved state of these cave paintings when they were first discovered was due mainly to the fact that most of the caves are limestone and had been sealed up for thousands of years. After exposure to the modern atmosphere, the paintings began to deteriorate so rapidly that some caves have been closed to the public.

The paintings are primarily located deep within caves, in interiors that are difficult to reach and uninhabitable. They seem to have served as sanctuaries where fertility, initiation, and hunting rituals were performed and seasonal

MEDIA

Pigment

Pigment (from the Latin word *pingere*, meaning “to paint”) is the basis of color, which is the most eye-catching aspect of most painting. Pigments are colored powders made from organic substances, such as plant and animal matter, or inorganic substances, such as minerals and semiprecious stones. Cave artists either applied powdered mineral colors directly to damp walls or mixed their pigments with a liquid, the **medium** or **binder**, to make them adhere to dry walls.

Technically, the medium is a liquid in which pigments are suspended (but not dissolved). The term **vehicle** is often used interchangeably with the term *medium*. If the liquid binds the pigment particles together, it is referred to as the binder or binding medium. Binders help paint adhere to surfaces, increasing the durability of images. Cave painters used animal fats, vegetable juices, water, or blood as their binding media.

Pigment is applied to the surface of a painting, called its **support**. Supports vary widely in Western art—paper, canvas, pottery, even faces and the surface of one’s body. For the cave artist, the walls of the cave were the support.

changes recorded. The predominance of animal representations is in part a reflection of the importance of hunting. But the animals most often depicted do not coincide with those that were most hunted, suggesting that these images had other meanings as well.

The Chauvet Cave In 1994, three speleologists (cave explorers) found the entrance to an underground cave complex in the Ardèche Valley, in southeast France. They came upon an interior chamber, later named for Jean-Marie Chauvet, a member of the team. The cave proved to be the largest so far known in this region; it contains over three hundred wall paintings, engravings, Paleolithic bear skeletons and a bear's skull set on a rock, evidence of fires, and footprints. Radiocarbon analysis indicates a very early date, around 30,000 B.C., for some of the paintings, which are generally outlined in red or black pigment. They represent mainly animals along with some signs—especially red dots and handprints. The animal images are unusual, however, in that there are many rhinoceroses and large felines. All together thirty-four images of mammoths were found at Chauvet, of which twenty-one are engraved into the rock and thirteen are painted. The so-called Lion Panel, part of which is shown in figure 3.3, represents various species of animals proceeding across a niche in the wall. Visible here, deep within the cave, are three large lions and numerous smaller but more densely painted rhinoceroses, several of which are shaded. One faces a group that seems to be moving toward it. It is not clear whether this is a coherent scene or a ritual repetition. Some of the animals are superimposed—those at the top—while the others are spread across the surface of the wall. Under the lions, traces of red pigment can be seen, as well as the outline of a deer.

The Lascaux Cave The famous wall paintings at Lascaux, in the Dordogne region of France (figs. 3.4–3.6), are

nearly fifteen hundred years later than the Chauvet paintings. They include a wide range of animal species and a few human stick figures painted with earth-colored pigments—brown, black, yellow, and red. These pigments were ground from ocher, hematite, and manganese and applied to the natural white limestone surfaces of the walls. The Lascaux artists created their figures by drawing an outline and filling it in with pigment. The pigment was stored in hollow bones plugged at one end, which may also have been used to blow the pigment onto the walls. Some of these bone tubes, still bearing traces of pigment, have been found in the caves. Such finds, and their interpretation, exemplify how deductions are made about the use of objects in a prehistoric society. Perhaps if the bones containing pigment had been found out of context—that is, far from the paintings—different conclusions about their use might have been drawn.

The Lascaux animals are among the best examples of the Paleolithic artists' ability to create an illusion of motion and capture the essence of certain species by slightly exaggerating characteristic features. The diagonal planes of the long white bulls in figure 3.4 create the impression that they are going uphill. Since many Lascaux animals are superimposed, they have been read as examples of image-magic. According to this theory, the act of making the image was an end in itself, possibly a symbolic capture of the animal by fixing its likeness on the cave wall.

One Lascaux painting that has given rise to different interpretations is the so-called Chinese Horse (fig. 3.6), whose sagging body suggests pregnancy. The two diagonal forms in this detail, one almost parallel to the horse's neck and the other overlapping its lower outline, have been variously identified as plants and arrows. The sign above the horse has been interpreted as signifying a female. It is not known why signs were juxtaposed with animals, but the elusive character of such images illustrates the difficulty in reading works produced by prehistoric artists.

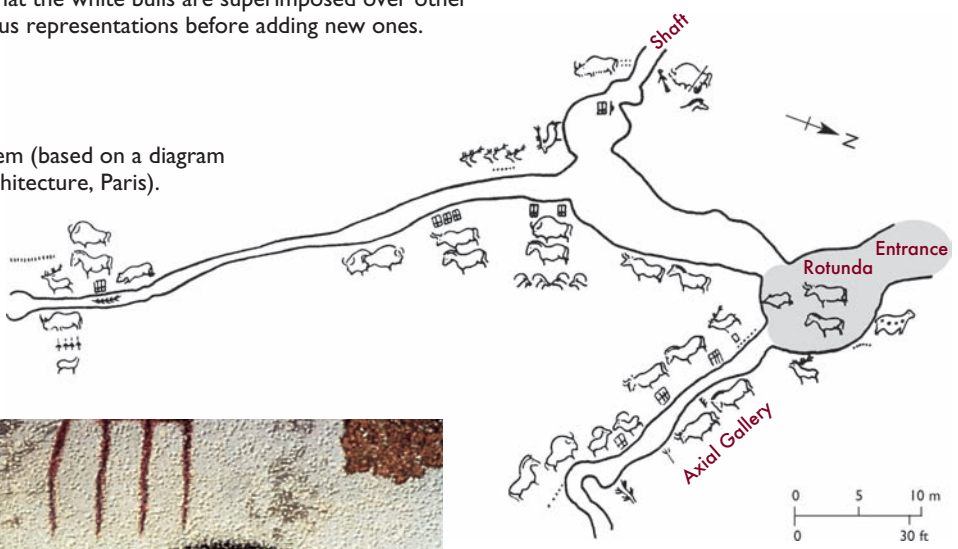


3.3 Left section of the "Lion Panel," Chauvet Cave, Ardèche Valley, France, c. 30,000 B.C. Black pigment on limestone wall. Courtesy of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, Regional Direction for Cultural Affairs—Rhône-Alpes, Regional Department of Archaeology.

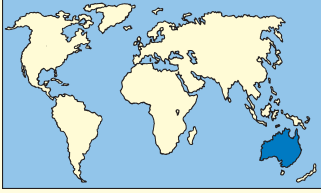


3.4 Hall of Running Bulls, Lascaux, Dordogne, France, c. 15,000–13,000 B.C. Paint on limestone rock, individual bulls 13–16 ft. (3.96–4.88 m) long. Note that the white bulls are superimposed over other animals. Cave artists did not always cover up previous representations before adding new ones.

3.5 Lascaux cave system (based on a diagram by the Service de l'Architecture, Paris).



3.6 “Chinese Horse,” Lascaux, Dordogne, France, c. 15,000–13,000 B.C. Paint on limestone rock, horse 5 ft. 6 in. (1.42 m) long. The animal acquired its nickname because it resembles Chinese ceramic horses of the Han Dynasty.



Rock Paintings of Australia

c. 75,000/50,000 B.C.—Present

Rock paintings, carvings, and other works of art have continued to be produced since the Stone Age by certain cultures around the world. A few of these societies that have persisted into our own era appear to have something in common with Paleolithic Western Europe. There is uncertainty in dating works created by such cultures and in pinning down the antiquity of their mythological traditions. Nevertheless, these “modern Stone Age” societies may provide valuable clues to the way art functioned in prehistoric Europe. Such comparisons must be made with caution, but they can suggest alternative ways of thinking about ancient art.

In the outback of Australia, Aboriginal hunting-and-gathering societies have had an unusually long history. Revolutionary archaeological finds in 1996 in a remote part of northwestern Australia at the site of Jinmium challenged basic assumptions about when and where humans evolved. Stone tools and other objects from this site suggest that Australia was inhabited as long ago as 174,000 B.C. Carved and painted rocks discovered there may be roughly 75,000

years old. If accepted, these dates are far earlier than scholars had previously believed possible. Australia is a continent that was relatively isolated from the rest of the world until the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, there are remarkable similarities between European Paleolithic and Aboriginal rock paintings, including naturalistic animals and hunting scenes.

The kangaroo, which is indigenous only to Australia and adjacent islands, is a frequent subject of Aboriginal rock art. Kangaroos have been hunted for thousands of years, probably as a source of food. Those represented in figure 3.7 are trying to escape from a group of hunters. That the kangaroos are hopping is clear from their poses: the one to the right has just landed and tilts slightly back on its feet; the one at the left leans forward as if to regain its balance. In paintings such as this, Aboriginal artists used two relatively different styles—naturalistic for animals and schematic for humans. This distinction is also characteristic of the Lascaux paintings.



3.7 Men and women hunting kangaroos, Unbalanya Hill, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Rock painting.

Mesolithic (c. 8000–c. 6000/4000 B.C.)

The Mesolithic era in Western Europe was a period of transition more noteworthy for its cultural and environmental changes than for its art. It followed the end of the Ice Age and the development of a more temperate climate in about 11,000 B.C. With the retreat of the glaciers, forests expanded. Animals that had been hunted in the Paleolithic era died out or migrated, and people began to congregate around bodies of water, where fishing became a major source of food. By the end of the Mesolithic period many nomadic hunter-gatherer societies were becoming settled agricultural communities.

Neolithic (c. 6000/4000–c. 2000 B.C.)

In Western Europe the revolutionary shift from hunting and gathering to farming contributed to the development of a new art form: monumental stone architecture. As had been true of earlier art, the character of Neolithic stone structures was largely determined by religious beliefs. These buildings are referred to as **megaliths** (“made of big stones”) and are assembled without the use of mortar.

Among the Neolithic megaliths of Ireland, Britain, France, Spain, and Italy, three distinctive types regularly occur: the **menhir**, **dolmen**, and **cromlech**—terms that are Celtic in origin. These megaliths are not only visually impressive, mysterious reminders of the ancient past but are also imbued with fascinating symbolic associations. For megalith builders, stone as a material was an integral part of cults honoring dead ancestors. Whereas Neolithic dwellings in Western Europe were made of impermanent material such as wood, the tombs—or “houses of the dead”—were of stone so that they would outlast mortal time. Even today we associate durability and stability with stone. For example, we speak of something being “written in stone” when we mean that it is unchanging and enduring, and to “stonewall” means to block a decision for as long as possible. Someone who is “stoned” is unable to move because of excessive consumption of alcohol or other drugs.

Menhirs

Menhirs (from two Celtic words: *men*, meaning “stone,” and *hir*, meaning “long”) are unhewn or slightly shaped single stones (**monoliths**), usually standing upright in the ground. They were erected individually, in clusters, or in rows as at Carnac (fig. 3.8) in Brittany (in northern France), probably an important Neolithic religious center. Menhirs have been interpreted as representing phallic fertilizers of Mother Earth.

Dolmens

Dolmens (from the Celtic word *dol*, meaning “table”) are chambers or enclosures consisting of two or more vertical stones supporting a large single stone, much as legs support a table (fig. 3.9). The earliest dolmens were tombs. Later additions turned them into passageways. Some interior dolmen walls were decorated with carvings; others were painted. Occasionally a pillar stood at the center of a burial chamber. Dolmens, like menhirs, were imbued by Neolithic people with symbolic associations. In contrast to the impermanence of houses built for the living, stone burial monuments functioned as a link between present and eternal time.

Cromlechs

Cromlechs (from the Celtic word for a circular place) are megalithic structures in which groups of menhirs form circles or semicircles. By far the greatest number of Neolithic stone circles are in Britain. Although their function and symbolism have not been determined, cromlechs clearly marked sacred spaces.

The most famous Neolithic cromlech in Western Europe is Stonehenge (fig. 3.10), which was built in several stages from roughly 2800 to 1500 B.C. Rising dramatically from

3.8 Alignment of menhirs, Carnac, Brittany, France, c. 4000 B.C. Stone, 6–15 ft. (1.83–4.57 m) high. The Carnac menhirs, numbering almost three thousand, are arranged in parallel rows nearly 13,000 ft. (4,000 m) long. A small village has grown up around the menhirs.





3.9 Dolmen, Carnac, Brittany, France, c. 4000 B.C.

Salisbury Plain in southwestern England, Stonehenge has fascinated visitors for centuries. The plan in figure 3.11 indicates all stages of construction, with the solid dark sections showing the megalithic circles as they stand today. Many of the original stones have now fallen. The aerial view in figure 3.10 shows the present disposition of the remaining stones.

This circular area of land on a gradually sloping ridge had been a sacred site before 3000 B.C. Originally, barrows (burial mounds) containing individual graves were sur-

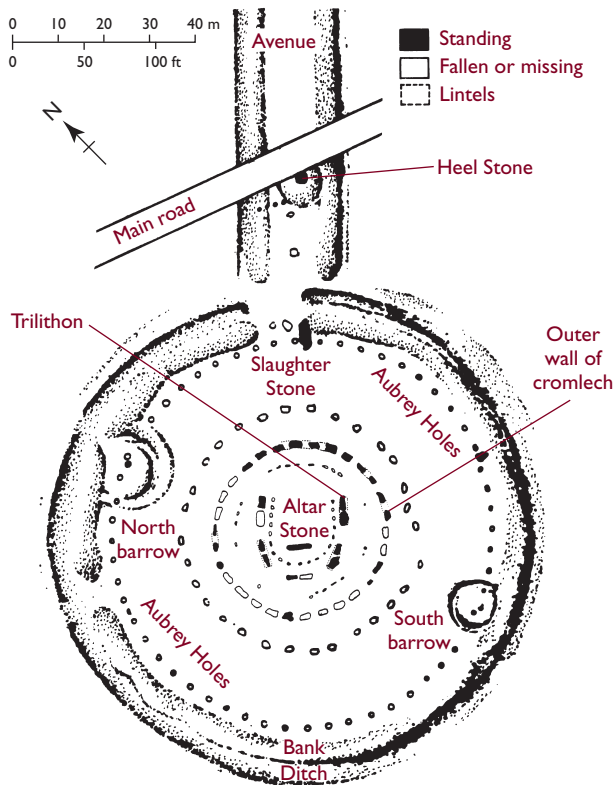
rounded by a ditch roughly 350 feet (107 m) in diameter. A mile-long “avenue” hollowed out of the earth ran in an east-west direction. Fifty-six pits (known as Aubrey Holes after their seventeenth-century discoverer) were added inside the circular ditch and filled with rubble or cremated human bones. Around the same period, the Heel Stone, a block of sarsen (a local sandstone) 16 feet (4.88 m) high, was set in place outside the ditch in the entrance causeway to the northeast. The first stone circle, consisting of smaller stones called bluestones, imported from Wales (over 100 miles, or 160 km, away), was constructed around 2500 B.C.

Over the next four hundred years, a new group of people settled in Western Europe and was assimilated into the native population. The origin of these Beaker People, so called after their beaker-shaped pottery, is still a matter of debate. They brought with them a knowledge of metalworking, new building techniques, and pottery. Partly as a consequence of new technology, the Stone Age gave way to the Bronze Age. Nevertheless, before the total disappearance of the Stone Age in Western Europe, its most famous architectural monument was completed, apparently by the Beaker People themselves. In the final stages of construction at Stonehenge, huge sarsen blocks were brought to the site from Marlborough Downs, a distance of some 20 miles (32 km). From these larger monoliths, the outer circle and inner U-shape were constructed.

The cromlech at Stonehenge is a series of concentric circles and horseshoe- or U-shaped curves. The outer circle is **post-and-lintel construction** (fig. 3.12; see Box). Each post is a sarsen block 13 feet (3.96 m) high, rougher on the outside than on the inside, bulging at its center, and then gradually tapering at the top. Projecting above each post



3.10 Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England, c. 2800–1500 B.C. Diameter of circle 97 ft. (29.57 m), height approx. 13 ft. 6 in. (4 m). Stonehenge possibly served as a kind of giant sundial used to predict seasonal changes and astronomical phenomena. It was almost certainly a ritual site.



3.11 Plan of Stonehenge.

was a **tenon**, which fitted into a hollow carved out of the lintel (fig. 3.13). For the outer wall, the lintels were slightly curved to create a circle when attached end to end.

From the inside ring (fig. 3.14), one can see part of the outer ring and several individual posts and lintels. A second, inner circle consists entirely of single upright bluestones. Inside those are five very large **trilithons** (a pair of sarsen posts supporting a single lintel) arranged in a U-shape. An even smaller U-shape of bluestones parallels the arrangement of the five posts and lintels. We do not know how bluestones weighing up to 40 tons (40,640 kg) and sarsens weighing up to 50 tons (50,800 kg) were transported, or how the lintels were raised above the posts. Within the U of bluestones, one stone lies horizontally on the ground. This is referred to as the “altar stone,” although there is no evidence that it was ever used for sacrifices.

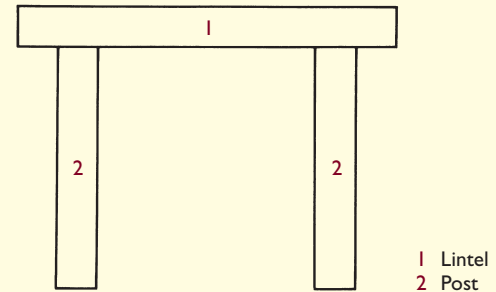
Although continuing archaeological activity steadily increases our knowledge of Stonehenge, we still cannot identify its function. Clearly, the presence of circular stone rings throughout Western Europe points to a common purpose. Some scholars think that rites, processions, and sacred dances were held in and around the megalithic structures, celebrating the resurgence of life in spring and summer. These practices correlate with what we know of early agricultural societies, for which the timing of seasonal changes was of crucial importance.

Also consistent with agricultural concerns are interpretations of Stonehenge and other megalithic structures as

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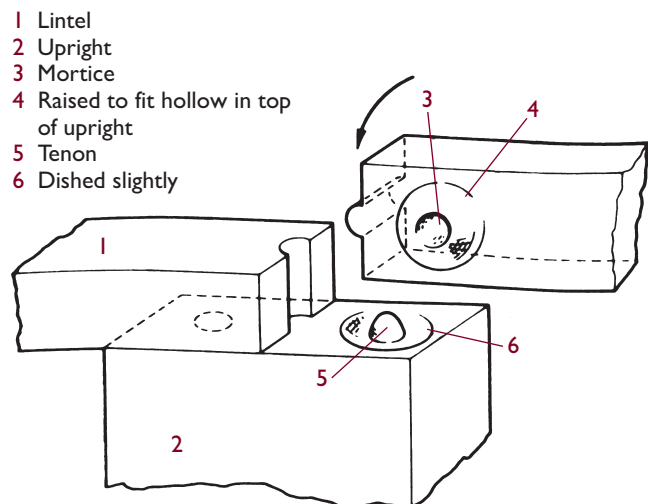
Post-and-Lintel Construction

In this system of construction, vertical uprights (posts) support a horizontal element (the lintel). Figure 3.12 is a diagram of the most basic single post-and-lintel form. In later eras, this simple system was elaborated into highly complex structures.



3.12 Post-and-lintel construction.

astronomical observatories, used to predict lunar eclipses and to keep track of time. At Stonehenge, for example, the absence of a roof reinforces the relationship of the structure with the sky and celestial phenomena. Carnac (see fig. 3.8) has been described as an observatory in which each menhir functions as a point on a landscape graph. Elsewhere, direct evidence of astronomical markings on carved stones has been found. The circular monuments in particular are aligned according to the positions of the sun and moon at critical times of year. Earlier cromlechs were oriented toward sunrise at the winter solstice, and later ones at the



3.13 Lintel and tenon.



3.14 Inside ring of Stonehenge.

summer solstice. At Stonehenge, the avenue is aligned with the rising summer sun. An observer standing in the middle of the circle about 1800 B.C. would have seen the sun rise over the Heel Stone (see fig. 3.11) on June 21, the summer solstice. Other stones are aligned with the northernmost and southernmost points of moonrise.

The greatest megalithic monument of the Neolithic era in Western Europe was also among the last. Around 2000 B.C., as the use of metal increased, the construction of large stone monuments declined.

