

BRONZE, BOATS AND THE KENTISH SEABOARD IN
PREHISTORY: THE ROLE OF COASTAL KENT IN A
MAJOR TRANS-CONTINENTAL TRADE ROUTE

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This study focuses on the major role that coastal Kent played in prehistoric cross-Channel trade, particularly in bronze scrap and high-status bronze artifacts during the Bronze and Early Iron Age. The role of what may conveniently be called 'the eastern route' is contrasted with that of 'the western route', which has previously been the subject of much archaeological interest. The study is a tribute to, and is intended to build on, the detailed work on this subject carried out by the late Dr Perkins of the Trust for Thanet Archaeology (see, for example, Perkins 2006, 279-294).

Sea-borne cultural contacts during prehistory via the western route between south-western Britain and the western European seaboard (and ultimately with the Mediterranean) have been much discussed by archaeologists for many years; in large part in respect of the megaliths and sepulchral monuments associated with the Early Neolithic passage grave culture (see, for example, Renfrew 1973, 90-1; Johnstone 1988, 85-87; Brun 1991, 11-24; Scarre 1998, 165). It is proposed here that, without wishing to diminish the importance of the western route, these discussions have failed to recognize the usually predominant role of the eastern maritime and riverine route, of which coastal Kent was a critical part, in relation to prehistoric trade and cultural interaction with the European mainland. In order to undertake this study it has been necessary to examine some of the wider aspects of mainland European archaeology that had a direct, or indirect but major, impact on the role of coastal Kent in prehistoric trade.

The archaeological and documentary evidence described below shows that, from the Neolithic period to the Iron Age, the eastern route connected south-east Britain via the Thames and the coast of Kent with the resource-rich areas of the Alps and Central Europe. The route consisted of the Thames, the Swale, the Wantsum, the Kentish east coast, the Straits of Dover and the Rhine, with other waterways such as the Medway, the Marne

and the Moselle representing subsidiary routes. Furthermore, during the later Bronze and Early Iron Age, Kent can be shown to have acted as the northern *entrepôt* for a much expanded trade in bronze artifacts and scrap, and in the tin, copper alloy and lead from which they were made.

At its most developed stage, during the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age, the eastern route also extended as far as the Mediterranean, with the Rhône providing a link from the headwaters of the Rhine to the Marseille area via the Haut Rhin land bridge, which separates the upper Rhine from the Doubs, a tributary, via the Saône, of the Rhône. At this period the evidence, particularly in coastal Kent, shows the route to have reached a zenith in terms of its impact on settlement patterns, the quantity and quality of materials transported and the complexity of the associated system of exchange, which probably also saw a transition from barter to the use of rudimentary currency. However, the route's origins clearly lie much earlier, as discussed below.

The Neolithic and the first evidence for the eastern route

Despite the clear cultural links between south-west Britain and the western European seaboard, especially Brittany, only very limited trade appears to have taken place across the western or central parts of the English Channel during the Neolithic. Most of the trade that did take place appears to have been predominantly in stone axes from Ireland via the Irish Sea (Darvill 1995, 88). Indicatively, there is an almost total absence in Britain of high-status Armorican polished stone axes manufactured in Brittany (Le Roux 1998, 378), although such axes are generally widespread across western mainland Europe. Their scarcity in Britain contrasts with the relatively common occurrence of high-status jadeite axes manufactured in the Alps of southern France and Italy (Ricq-de-Bouard 1993, 62, Cunliffe 2011, 152, see **Fig. 1**). Over one hundred examples, including one from Canterbury, are known in Britain (Darvill 1995, 72). The linear clusters of find-spots for such axes shown on Ricq-de-Bouard's distribution map indicate that the eastern route was used to bring the axes down the Rhine and across the Straits of Dover, and that this route was therefore already established during the Neolithic. It should be noted that during this period jadeite axes (which were too thin and fragile actually to be used as axes) were also carried in much greater numbers southward from the Alps down the Doubs, the Saône and the Rhône for widespread distribution throughout the Mediterranean area.

The Bronze Age and the development of the eastern route

While some small-scale, cross-Channel trade, much in élite-status gold artifacts, took place between Brittany and Wessex during the Early and

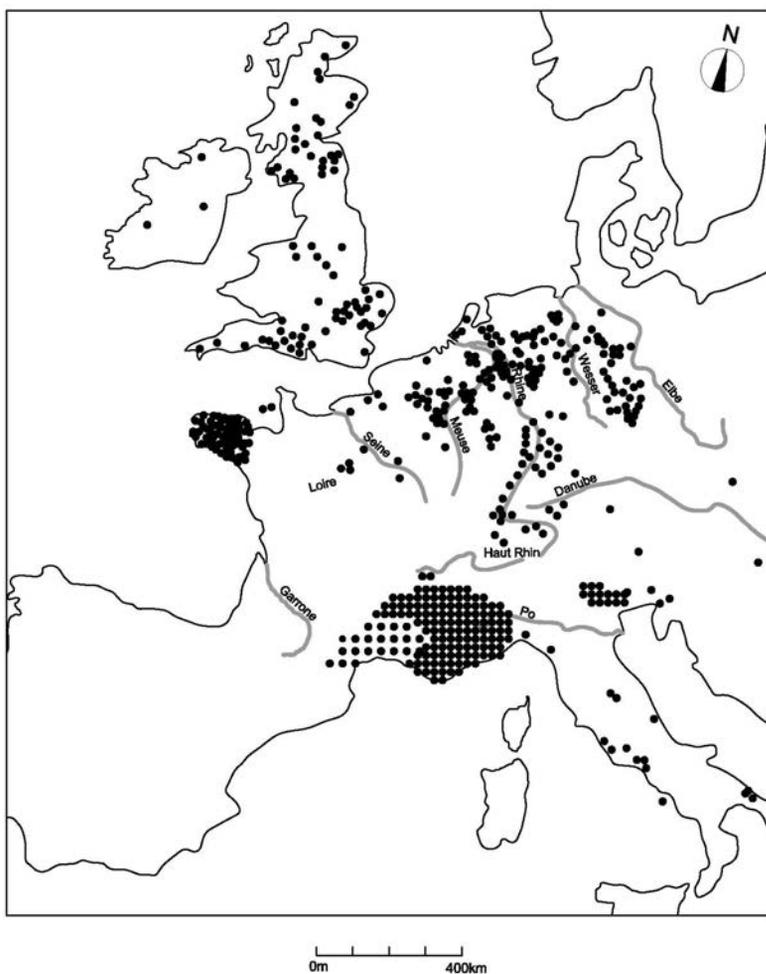


Fig. 1 Schematic distribution map of find spots for Neolithic Jadeite axes, showing the importance of riverine and cross-channel trade routes.

later Bronze Age (see Harding 2000, 92-5; Parker Pearson 1993, 94; 2001, 89), to the east a very different story emerges. Here, the riverine and maritime route used to transport Neolithic jadeite axes into south-east Britain continued in use into the Early and Mid Bronze Age, when it was used on a much greater scale for the transport of metal artifacts down the Rhine, across the Channel and eventually, via the Wantsum

and Swale, into the Thames area and beyond (Muckleroy 1981, 275-285; Northover 1982, 45-72). Northover's important analysis of Bronze Age metal types shows that, during the 'Early Developed Bronze Age', alone of all the British regions, south-east Britain fell within the north-western European 'metal circulation zone', and that the metal alloys used (Metal Type 'S') originated in central Europe, probably the Alps. The Dover Bronze Age boat, radiocarbon dated to *c.*1550 BC, may have been used for the Channel crossing during this period, while in nearby Langdon Bay, a sunken cargo of scrap bronze, dating to *c.*1200 BC to *c.*1000 BC and now on display, along with the Dover Boat, in Dover Museum, suggests the kinds of cargo carried at a later date (Muckelroy 1981, 283-285).

The way that bronze was made is of critical importance in understanding the role of Kent in the bronze trade, which focused as much on scrap as on finished artifacts. Tin is an essential component of bronze, which contains on average 5-10%, and was therefore much sought-after. However, the sources of tin in Europe were few and scattered (Parker Pearson 1993, 84; Harding 2000, 200-1). Exceptionally, Cornwall, with good documentary evidence (see below) and some archaeological evidence, is recognised as the largest known Bronze Age European site for tin ore extraction and smelting, for example from sites at Trevisker and Caeloggas, St Austell (Evans 1881, 419). Following extraction, the tin was transported along the south coast, probably via the Isle of Wight (references provided below), eventually to be mixed with copper or copper alloy, which, as previously discussed, in south-east Britain was derived almost exclusively from central Europe. As a later development lead mined in north Wales was also added, allowing more intricate casting to take place (Harding 2000, 204-7). It can therefore be proposed that a widespread and intricate system of cross-Continental logistics and exchange existed during the later Bronze Age, with coastal Kent occupying a pivotal position at the north European intersection of the main trade routes.

The evidence in Kent is plentiful for cross-Channel trade in bronze in the form of scrap as well as finished goods during the Mid and Late Bronze Age (O'Connor 1980), when trading vessels carrying goods or materials from the Continent appear to have made their way northward by stages from landing places at or near Dover in order to enter the Thames Estuary via the Wantsum Channel and the Swale. The importance of the Wantsum in respect of the bronze trade has been well established by Dr Perkins' detailed work based on the common occurrence of many later Bronze Age hoards discovered on its margins (Perkins 1991, 259-261; 1992, 303; 2006). A similar situation prevailed in the Swale, where a typical example of the many hoards recovered from its margins (see Allen 2000, 173) is represented by a sixth- or seventh-century BC founders' hoard of 32 pieces, including the moulds for making socketed axes, recovered on the Isle of Harty, now part of the Isle of Sheppey.

During the later Bronze Age, many imported and copies of imported Continental artifacts such as flange-hilted swords with leaf-shaped blades achieved widespread distribution in Britain, with the main concentrations again occurring in south-east Britain. Amongst other finished goods of generally later Bronze Age date were central European bronze vessels, otherwise *situlae* or Kurd buckets (Cunliffe 2001, 55), the form and appearance of which had a strong influence on the domestic ceramic tradition in Kent. An illustrative example occurs in the Beck Hoard of 72 bronze pieces found in Minnis Bay in the mouth of the Wantsum, where a beaten and cordoned bronze fragment from just such a vessel was present (Powell-Cotton and Pinfold 1939, 193, plate VI). Also present were two high-shouldered ‘situlate’ jars, the design of which was clearly inspired by bronze *situlae*, along with a complete sword, five sword fragments, a ‘bag-shaped’ sword scabbard chape and many tools and ornaments (Worsfold 1943, 34-35). The complete sword was relatively short (37cm), broad bladed and of a central European type conventionally associated with the Urnfield/Early Hallstatt cultures (early first millennium BC).

It should be noted here that bronze swords of various types were produced in large numbers and were widely traded in western Europe during the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age (see **Fig. 2** for a distribution map of the ‘carp’s-tongue’ type, which were possibly manufactured in south-east Britain). This was probably because they represented valuable and desirable artifacts, each one representing a considerable investment in wealth, time and energy. Swords, above all other high-status goods, appear to have achieved the widest distribution and consequently maps of their distribution provide an effective means of identifying trade routes and the interaction between geographically distant regions in terms of high-status material culture.

The importation of swords into, and possibly out of, south-east Britain, along with the importation of cargos of scrap bronze, suggest that the principles underpinning supply, demand and logistics prevailed in the Bronze Age as much as they do now. Clearly a good return could be expected from carrying cargos of large, high-status artifacts such as swords, beaten bronze shields and bronze *situlae* or cargos of bronze scrap in bulk, or both. Efficiencies of scale appear to have dictated the viability or otherwise of the trade. Smaller finished items such as ordinary socketed axes, razors, palstaves, chisels, spearheads and ornaments were not much traded across the Channel and tended to be region-specific in style and distribution (Harding 2000, 192; Cunliffe 2001, 37). This was probably because it was more cost-effective to manufacture them *in situ* from imported scrap, much of which was stored, probably by itinerant bronze smiths, as buried ‘founders’ hoards’, so many of which have been discovered on the banks of the Wantsum and on the north Kent coast.

Examined in the broad, a comparison of the distributions of individual

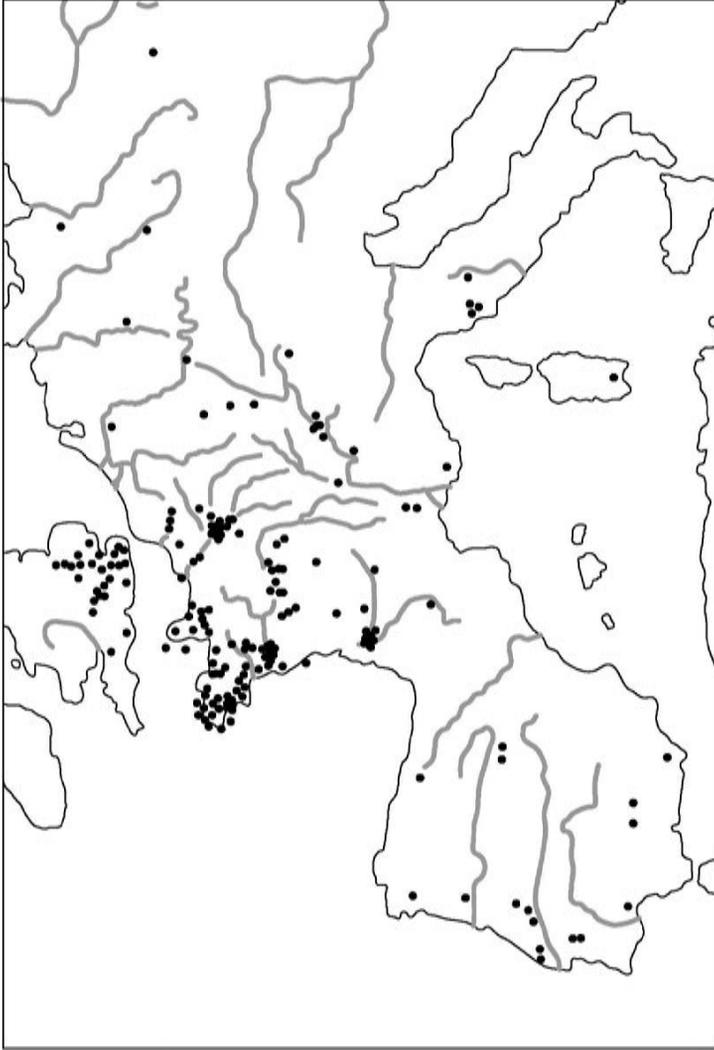


Fig. 2 Map showing the distribution of Late Bronze Age swords of 'carp's tongue' type (from Briard 1965).

artifacts and hoards of the Mid Bronze and Late Bronze Age across the south of Britain (see, for example, Briard 1965; O'Connor 1980; Coles and Harding 1979) suggests that the wealth base shifted decisively from west to east during this period, a major causal factor almost certainly being the growth in importance of the eastern trade route and the wealth it generated. Of the significance of the north Kent coastal hoards in this regard, Lawson (1995, 277) makes the following remarks:

These hoards form part of the evidence of an efficient industry on the north Kent coastal plain and on either side of the Thames estuary which produced prolific quantities of weapons and tools, but which also incorporated a system for the collection and recycling of scrap metal probably both from England and the Continent.

The Late Bronze/Early Iron Age and the further development of the eastern route

As in the case of distribution maps for Neolithic axes and bronze swords discussed above, artifact distribution maps represent critical positive and negative evidence for reconstructing prehistoric trade routes. For the later Bronze Age, such maps show that, by the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age, trade via the eastern route had increased to the degree that south-east Britain, with coastal Kent providing the first point of access, had become part of a major manufacturing and trading area, effectively (excepting Cornwall – see below) the western terminal of the cross-Continental trading zone as described above.

The Bronze Age trade routes by which swords and other high-status metal products, along with metal ores, were transported were only as good as the vessels which used them. Consequently, a study of Bronze Age boats in terms of their seaworthiness is a prerequisite to judging the viability or otherwise of a particular route. It is argued here that Bronze Age boats were such that, even in the usually calmer waters of the Mediterranean, voyages across open sea were avoided in favour of 'coast hopping' (Harding 2000, 181). In the climatic vagaries of the English Channel it is therefore safe to assume that seamen were even more inclined to travel in short, coast-hugging stages. Indeed, from the evidence for Bronze Age boats and their construction so far available, such as the Dover Bronze Age Boat (Parfitt and Fenwick 1993, 77-80; Clark 2004) and other sewn-plank examples (Parry and McGrail 1994, 26-7), it is clear that Bronze Age vessels were too unstable, too prone to leakage and generally too unseaworthy to carry heavy cargos for long-distances in the open seas, especially as they lacked keels and longitudinal strengthening (McGrail 1987, 111). This would almost certainly have precluded the more than 100km-long western route from Cornwall to Brittany as a viable route

for transporting materials in large quantities during the Bronze Age. In contrast, the short journey in calm weather across the 32km of the Straits of Dover using favourable tides and winds can be seen to have offered a relatively safe and reliable means of transporting cargos (although this clearly was not the case with the boat carrying the Langdon Bay scrap bronze discussed above!). The same factors probably dictated that ingots of Cornish tin was shipped by stages along the south coast of Britain to access the European mainland by the same route during the Early and Mid Bronze Age.

Documentary and marine archaeological evidence suggest that the western route only become viable from the mid first millennium BC onwards, when stronger and more seaworthy craft with iron fastenings were available (see McGrail 1993, 200-1). Mention is made of the Atlantic seaboard being used to carry Cornish tin to Continental bronze workers in the *Periplus* of the sixth century BC (quoted in the fourth-century AD *Ora Maritima* by Avienus), by the Greek historian Herodotus in relation to the Cassiterides ('Tin Islands') in the fifth century, and by Polybius in the second century BC (McGrail 1993, 201; Herodotus III, 115; Polybius 1979, 229).

The great value of tin explains why it received such detailed attention from classical commentators. The rewards for a successful voyage were clearly high but, as is argued above, it is unlikely that cargo-laden boats could have made the long-distance crossing of the western Channel with any reliability during the Bronze and Early Iron Age (or at least before the sixth century BC). It is more probable that, to reach the Continent during the Early and Mid Bronze Age, tin would have had to be shipped along the south coast to be carried across the Straits of Dover, with an important staging post being the Isle of Wight, as indicated by the following statement by Diodorus Siculus (v, 22), referring (in the fourth century AD) to the fourth-century BC Massilian explorer Pytheas:

In Britain the inhabitants of the promontory called Belerion [almost certainly Cornwall] are particularly friendly to strangers and have become civilised through contacts with merchants from foreign parts ... They prepare the tin, working the ground in which it is produced very carefully ... they beat the metal into masses shaped like an ox hide and carry it to a certain island lying off Britain called Ictis [later latinised into Victis and similar variants, from which the English 'Wight' derives, see Rivet and Smith 1981, 488-9] ... On the island of Ictis the merchants purchase the natives' tin [and] from there it is taken to Gaul and overland to the Mediterranean (quoted in Cunliffe 2002).

If the quotations supplied by Avienus and Diodorus Siculus are reliable it would appear that tin in ingot form was shipped over to the Continent bronze workers, even as far away as the Mediterranean. Apart from the

documentary sources there is little or no detailed evidence of how the tin, copper alloy (and eventually lead) were combined to make bronze, but, as discussed below, one important destination for Cornish tin appears to have been the Haut Rhin area, adjacent to an important centre of copper extraction and, predictably, of bronze production.

A significant body of supporting evidence for bronze-related trade routes for this broad period exists in the form of Armorican square-socketed axes and their distribution. Such axes, like their Neolithic jadeite predecessors, were non-functional as axes, in this case because they were blunt-edged and made of relatively soft lead-bronze or lead. Like jadeite axes, they are also considered to represent a form of 'exchange unit', in other words, an early form of currency (Coles and Harding 1979, 474-5). They were produced in Brittany up to the fifth century BC or a little later (Cunliffe 1976, 272), with over 36,500 having been found in Brittany and the Norman département of Manche alone (O'Connor 1980, 235-236).

A map compiled by Briard showing the distribution of these axes (**Fig. 3**, shown in Coles and Harding 1979, 475) is therefore of great interpretive potential in identifying important Late Bronze and Early Iron Age production centres, markets and trade routes for tradable commodities. The Briard map shows the largest clusters of these axes in Britain to occur in Cornwall, on the Isle of Wight and, indicatively for the purposes of this study, on the east coast of Kent, where it is proposed that embarkation for the Continent and landfall for tradable commodities coming into south-east Britain took place. A large cluster also occurs in East Anglia, with linear clusters on mainland Europe occurring on the Seine, the Somme, the Meuse, the Rhine estuary area, the Doubs/Haut Rhin and, as previously noted, in and around Brittany, where they were produced.

Assuming that the distribution of Armorican socketed axes delineates the principal markets and trade routes of north-west Europe during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age, it is likely, given their ubiquity and uselessness as tools, that the axes do indeed represent an 'exchange unit', probably adopted as an alternative to simple barter to facilitate the complex transactions occurring along the extensive maritime/riverine trade network covering central and north-west Europe. If so, they can be seen as a transitional stage between barter and the use of currency, because a general agreement as to their value must have prevailed, with Cornwall, Brittany, the Isle of Wight, coastal Kent, the Paris Basin, the Lower Rhine, the Doubs/Haut Rhin and many other areas all being connected by their use to facilitate exchange.

Again assuming the distribution of these axes to delineate major Late Bronze/Early Iron Age trade routes, it may be proposed that much Cornish tin was shipped eastwards to the Isle of Wight and to the south-east coast of Kent and then southwards via the Meuse (also called the

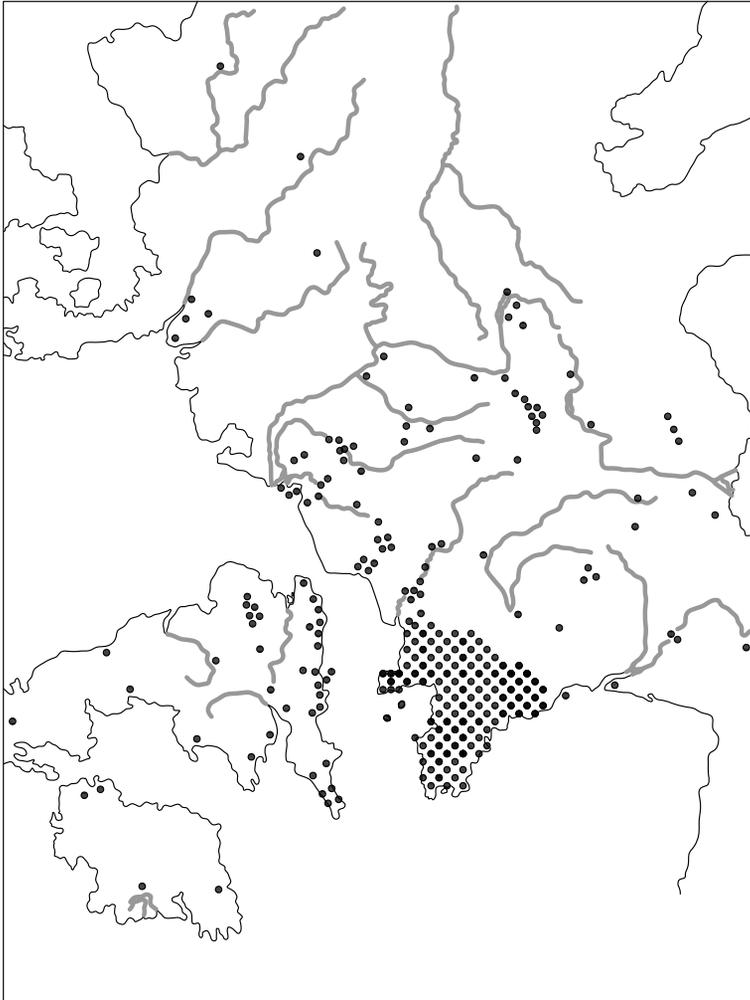


Fig. 3 Distribution map of Armorican square-socketed axes, indicating the major riverine trade routes for tin in Late Bronze Age western Europe (from Briard 1965).

Moselle/Mosel and the Maas), the Seine, the Somme and the Rhine to the Doubs/Haut Rhin area. As previously mentioned, the latter almost certainly represented an important market for tin, probably because of its proximity to the Austrian Alps, north and east Tyrol and the adjacent areas of Switzerland, where large-scale copper mining and bronze production took place (Northover 1982; Harding 2000, 210). Reciprocally, bronze in the form of high-status finished goods as previously described was transported back down the same routes to the important markets of south-east Britain, again via the coast of Kent. Whether directly or indirectly, Cornish tin clearly comprised an important economic asset not just for Cornwall but for south-east Britain and for Kent in particular, which, because of its strategic position, was the main conduit through which bronze flowed.

A recent synthetic analysis of prehistoric settlement and occupation sites on the north Kent coast (Allen 2009) has identified what appears to be a dramatic surge in occupation activity, including the number of settlements and extensive woodland clearance, beginning in the Mid Bronze Age and reaching its height in the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age. From a total of 32 sites examined in the study area, nine dated to the Early/Mid Bronze Age (c.2000 - c.950 BC) and 22 dated to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age (c.950 - c.500 BC). It is argued in that analysis that multiple factors underpinned such a major demographic shift, but that the proliferation of Late Bronze/Early Iron Age settlements resulted, at least in part, from the growth of the eastern maritime and riverine trade route and the wealth it created (eight of the 22 Late Bronze/Early Iron Age coastal sites studied were situated on the western bank of the Wantsum). The important relationship between waterborne trade and settlement patterns is perhaps underlined by the scarcity, during this period, of settlement concentrations situated away from navigable waterways, which is thought to characterise Late Bronze/Early Iron Age settlement patterns in Europe generally (Collis 1997, 62-102). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Kent, where distribution maps show Early to Late Bronze Age metalwork and Late Bronze Age settlements to be clustered almost exclusively on the coast or along riversides (see Yates 2004, 14-15, and **Fig. 4** for Late Bronze Age settlement distribution in Kent)

The Later Iron Age and the collapse of trade on the eastern route

The evidence discussed above suggests that trade related to the bronze industry was a critical factor in the economy of Kent, particularly for the coastal regions, during the Bronze and Early Iron Age. However, as all students of modern history know, major technological changes lead to major economic changes, during which there are winners and losers.



Fig. 4 Distribution map showing the relationship of Late Bronze Age settlements in Kent with rivers and the coast.

The major technological change that affected north-west Europe at this time was the emergence of iron as a plentiful, workable and eventually technologically superior material, from which many artifacts previously made from bronze could be made more efficiently and quickly. More particularly, it was the emergence of a major iron producer and supplier in the Hunsrück/Eifel region (in western Germany and eastern Belgium), with its easily exploitable outcrops of haematite iron ore (Collis 1997, 114-118). This region was already established as a producer of copper and gold but during this period (around 500 BC) the large number of rich burials clustered around the haematite outcrops attest to the great wealth that accrued from the trade in iron. Grave goods of Attic (Greek) red-figure ware, Etruscan beaked flagons and Etruscan two-handled vessels (*stamnoi*) suggest the location of the principal markets supplied as well as the wealth and high status of the deceased (Driehaus 1965; Collis 1997, 118).

Although detailed analysis of this subject is beyond the scope of the present study, the emergence of this new iron-producing centre is thought to have had a dramatic effect on west-central Europe and as far south as the Adriatic, probably because a new trade route using the Ticino, and avoiding the Rhône and the controlling interest of Marseille, was established. 'Trade seemed to be over the Alps, and the movement of goods was now in Celtic rather than Greek hands' (Collis 1997, 113-114, 120-5; see also Wells 1985, 84-86). However, as the evidence described below indicates, in south-east Britain, and in Kent in particular, the effect appears to have been catastrophic. The strategic role of coastal Kent as the principal *entrepôt* on the trade route connecting the Lower Rhine with the English Channel, the Thames and the southern British seaboard diminished rapidly as the European trade in bronze and tin was eclipsed in large part by that of iron. In effect, the trans-Continental trade route in which coastal Kent had played such a pivotal part now terminated several hundred miles to the south-east. It is therefore probably no coincidence in an increasingly iron-dominated society that the fifth century BC saw the demise of the Armorican bronze-lead socketed axe as a probable unit of currency, to be replaced by iron currency bars (Allen 1967, 308-310, 315-316).

The material culture of the emergent power(s) within the Hunsrück/Eifel is termed La Tène A, famously characterised by its elegant, curvilinear style of design and decoration, conventionally thought of as Celtic. The establishment of the new route served the interests of this society, which grew powerful on the back of iron production. However, probably of more economic significance, especially for Kent and south-east Britain generally, was its geographical position, which eventually gave it control of most of the major northern river routes: the Rhine, the Mosel/Moselle, the Meuse/Maas and the Main (which flows into the Rhine from the east),

and eventually the Marne and the regions around the Aisne Valley and the Seine (Duval 1984, 80-1; Lorenze 1985, 110-111). This expanded area was typified during this period by a rich material culture ('the Marnian') that clearly originated in the Hunsrück/Eifel region (Demoule and Ilett 1985, 202-211). In contrast, to the north and north-west, the movement of goods and materials along the Rhine, the Meuse/Maas and the Schelde decreased dramatically, with richly furnished burials of the period being a rarity (Wightman 1985, 14-15).

The recent synthetic analysis of prehistoric settlement and occupation sites on the North Kent coast (Allen 2009) identified an apparently steep decline in settlement/occupation activity during this period, with only seven settlement sites out of a total of 32 sites examined in the study area dating to the Early-Mid Iron Age (c.500 - c.300 BC) and six dating to the Mid-Late Iron Age (c.300 - c.150 BC). Such a decline is consistent with the artifactual evidence for south-east Britain in general and also for Belgium and west-central and northern Gaul, where, during this period, there is a similar scarcity of evidence for settlement/occupation activity, and where few, if any, high-status goods of Mediterranean origin occur (Darvill 1995, 156-7; Cunliffe 2001, 422). Indeed, many archaeologists believe that the consequent isolation of west-central and north-west Europe condemned northern Gaul and Britain to remain essentially Bronze Age in economy and culture until the third-century BC (Cunliffe 1978a, 22; Duval 1984, 82; Darvill 1995, 153).

As domestic iron ore resources were increasingly exploited in both Britain and northern France, the incentive to engage in cross-Channel trade was further reduced, while the western route appears to have continued in use on a much-reduced scale as the demand for tin decreased. By the fourth century BC, the lack of Continental influence on domestically produced artifacts stands in stark contrast to the situation that prevailed during the Late Bronze/Early Age, when such products were commonly based on Continental prototypes:

... the relative lack of inspiration from Continental types of the period from 350 - 100 [BC] is best explained by a large diminution in imports (Cunliffe 2001, 427).

The Late Iron Age: the eastern route re-established

From the late third to the early first century BC, the economic and cultural isolation of north-western Europe began to dissolve, as indicated by the evidence for the re-establishment of trade links between the burgeoning (and increasingly Rome-dominated) economies of the Mediterranean with the regions to the north (see, in the case of central Gaul, Vaussanvin 1996; Cognot 1996). The evidence consists of amphora, fineware pottery and gold ornaments imported variously from Rhodes (Greece), Macedonia,

Pannonia, Campania, Rome, Tarentum (southern Italy), Sicily (the Greek colonies of Syracuse and Agrigentum), Rhode (Iberia) and Marseilles (Duval 1984, 86). Duval's distribution maps for these materials show southern, central, western and north-western Gaul to have re-established strong trade links with the Mediterranean. Other examples in the form of substantial quantities of Mediterranean imports occur, for example, in the Alet pre-Roman settlement, on the north coast of Brittany (Langouët 1984). The considerable numbers of imported wares from north-west Gaul present at a site on Hengistbury Head, on the south coast of Hampshire, indicate that these trade links eventually extended to Britain (Cunliffe 1978b). In Kent, the large Late Iron Age coastal settlement recently excavated near East Wear Bay, Folkestone, suggests that trade had begun to expand rapidly during this period. This settlement probably reached its zenith around 150 BC, with imported pottery including terra negra, terra rubra and butt beakers. More significant, however, in indicating the re-establishment of the extended eastern route to the Mediterranean was the presence of Dressel 1 amphorae of Italian manufacture (Parfitt 2012, 27).

The numismatic evidence, some from the Folkstone site, tells a similar story. In south-east Britain, imported gold staters inspired by fourth-century BC Macedonian designs came into use in the mid third to second centuries BC (Wightman 1985, 19). Although archaic in design, their distribution clearly signals the re-establishment of coastal Kent's role in trans-Continental trade, as Holman's detailed study (2000) reveals:

The distribution of base metal imports clearly demonstrates that their heaviest use was in the 'channel border' area of east Kent where they seem to have been widely accepted. Much of the imported gold, which accounts for 20 per cent of the total coinage in Region B [between the Stour and the Medway/Swale/North Sea] and 21 per cent in Region C [between the Medway, the Darent and the Thames], has been found in the northern part of those regions along the Thames corridor ... the north coast of Kent, particularly from Reculver westward, continues to produce a much higher percentage of gold coins in general, and imported gold in particular, than does Region A [east of the Stour] (Holman 2000, 224).

At a slightly later date, during the second century BC, the spread of potins (bronze coins with a high tin content) northward up the Rhône from Marseilles is also important in signalling the re-establishment of the great Rhône-Rhine trade route and its offshoots, now under Roman domination (Wightman 1985, 19). As Roman influence extended northward, so, it appears, did the viability of the eastern route, as indicated by the following observation by Julius Caesar:

The island [Britain] is triangular, with one side opposite Gaul. One angle on this side, which is in Kent and to which nearly all ships go from Gaul, faces east... (Caesar V, xiii).

Similarly, Strabo writing at the end of the first century BC, states:

There are four crossings which men customarily use from the Continent to the island [Britain], from the Rhine, from the Seine, from the Loire and from the Garonne, but for those making the passage from places near the Rhône, the point of sailing is not from the mouths themselves but from the Morini [the tribe in whose territory *Bononia*, modern Boulougne, was situated] (Strabo IV, 5, 2).

The previously-cited synthetic analysis of prehistoric sites in part of the north Kent coast suggests that the re-establishment of stronger links with the Continent during the Late Iron Age was a significant factor in the rapid increase in settlement/occupation levels, which returning at this time to something like the levels achieved in the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age. Out of the 32 sites examined 20 dated to the Late Iron Age (c.150 BC - c.AD 50), with many Late Bronze/Early Iron Age sites being re-occupied at this time.

In the light of the above it is clear that, during the Late Iron Age, the Kent coast was re-established as a vital part of the trade route connecting south-east Britain with the Mediterranean via the Strait of Dover, the Rhine and the Rhône. As intrinsic parts of the northern part of this route, the Kentish east coast, the Wantsum and the Swale were once again well placed to profit from the resumed trade, as is evident from the numismatic evidence discussed above and from the many examples of high-status Italian amphorae, used to carry wine, and imported Gallo-Belgic fine wares that occur on many Late Iron Age coastal sites in Kent (see, for example, Hamilton 1996, 27). This phenomenon continued into the early Roman period, with 22 out of the 32 sites examined in the previously mentioned study area dating to AD 43 - c.150. However, drastic changes in the coastal settlement pattern appear to have occurred from then onwards, presumably as a result of a major re-organisation by Roman administrators, with only six sites in the study area dating to the period c.AD 150 - c.250 and two dating to the period c.250 - c.400.

Conclusion

It is proposed that the evidence outlined above indicates that a major trans-Continental trade route connected the Mediterranean with south-east Britain via the Rhône, the Rhine the English Channel and Straits of Dover during later prehistory. It is further proposed that coastal Kent, including the Wantsum and the Swale, was a critical part of this route, in effect comprising the conduit through which the great majority of tradable commodities entered and left south-east Britain. This trade, especially at its most developed phases during the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age and Late Iron Age, appears to have generated sufficient wealth and prosperity to

transform settlement patterns in coastal Kent, with many new settlements being established on the coastal margins during those periods.

The evidence is also strong enough to indicate that the trade route acted to draw south-east Britain into a trans-European economic sphere in which rudimentary currencies such as stylised, non-functional axe heads were in common use. In contrast, it is proposed that the virtual collapse of the trade route in the sixth century BC led to cultural and technological isolation in south-east Britain, and that this was a significant factor in the marked decline in the numbers of coastal settlements during the Mid to Late Iron Age, a situation that was only reversed with the re-establishment of the eastern route during the Late Iron Age.

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