Chapter 1

Introduction

This book explores a well excavated region of southern Britain over a one thousand year period towards the close of prehistory. The aim is to provide an interpretative social account that synthesises information from various aspects of life. This is achieved by approaching the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age from the same theoretical and methodological frameworks, finding patterns that cross different types of evidence within each period.

A key approach is to compare periods that shared very similar environmental contexts, much in the way of daily routine, and had archaeological records subject to very similar subsequent processes. This comparative approach is useful in teasing out practices that resulted from specific social and ontological differences.

The study is split into four main periods: the Late Bronze Age (LBA); Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age Transition (Transition); Early Iron Age (EIA); and Middle Iron Age (MIA). The chronological basis for dividing evidence into these categories is provided in Appendix 1, with a focus on defining the LBA/EIA Transition of c.800-600/550 BC. The period assessed covers c.1150-150/100 BC.

Significant differences in the treatment of the material world in these different later prehistoric periods question the underlying social and conceptual structures that guide practices. Constrasting social and ontological positions between periods are further highlighted as different aspects of the physical world are treated in similar ways within each period, but differently between them. This includes metalwork and other objects; houses; settlements; monuments and other landscape features.

A methodology is sought to tie these periods within one theoretical perspective, rather than following the traditional method that approaches and interprets Bronze Age and Iron Age separately, each with different issues, datasets

and historiographies. An exploration of the relationships between personhood, community and the material world has proved useful in this respect. This demonstrates that periods with later prehistory can be contrasted by differences in world-views, social relationships and ontologies. These contrasts have resulted in different archaeological records, and although datasets and theoretical issues differ significantly between periods, useful comparision is not insurmountable.

All disciplines are split up into a series of smaller units, with research projects typically focused within the boundaries of one of these. Archaeology is no different, and indeed at certain points in our history archaeologists have been obsessed with categorising objects, people, times and places into mutually exclusive groups; the most famous is the Three Age System. While the boundary between the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age is commonly blurred, the same can rarely be said for the Bronze Age and Iron Age, despite recent work shining a light on the little understood centuries between these longer periods (e.g. Madgwick and Mulville 2015; Needham 2007a; O'Connor 2007; Sharples 2010; Waddington 2009; Waddington *et al. forthcoming*).

The nature of Bronze Age evidence is in many ways quite different to that belonging to the Iron Age, and this has historically led research along different paths. The later Bronze Age has had a focus on metalwork, and more recently landscape. Much effort has been spent refining metalwork typologies, dating and distributions, and interpretative issues have surrounded prestige goods, exchange and deposition. Research on the British Iron Age is typically more regionally focused, with data usually based on settlements and hillforts. Interpretative issues in Iron Age studies have taken a different direction, looking at enclosures and boundaries, settlement economics, and structured deposition. Table 1.1 provides a summary of these differences.

Table 1.1. Evidential and interpretative differences between the later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Later Bronze Age	Early and Middle Iron Age
Landscape Metalwork Deposition	Settlement Structured Deposition
Landscape Enclosure (field-systems)	Settlement Enclosure/Boundary Theory
Metalwork Typology and Assemblages	Settlement Typology
Monuments: MBA–Barrows; LBA-None	Monuments: Hillforts
Social complexity through prestige goods	Social complexity through settlement hierarchy
Exchange Theory/Gift giving	Settlement economics/resource management
Cosmology – Sun, Water, Bronze	Cosmology – Fertility, Regeneration, House
Defined and dated through metalwork	Defined and dated through pottery
Metalwork: Distributions	Metalwork: Art and Decoration
Ethnographic analogies	Historical sources
International	Regional

However, in other respects the later Bronze Age and Iron Age were quite similar: throughout the period people were living in roundhouses in small settlements and farming the surrounding landscape. Although this study has in fact highlighted substantial differences in the constitution of social identities between the periods, this is best demonstrated by an inclusive and comparative analysis.

The dataset comprises some 676 houses; information on the remains of at least 383 human individuals; 444 'special deposits'; 58 animal bone assemblages of over 150 identified NISP; over 1600 small finds (excluding pottery vessels and metalwork); and over 4850 pottery vessels with decoration and/or enough surviving profile to reconstruct the diameter of at least the rim or carination.These were from some 197 individual settlements and hillforts with enough excavated evidence to characterise, as well as numerous smaller sites, field systems, linear ditches, pit alignments, burnt mounds, islands and bridges. This information almost entirely derives from published sites. Also included are over 950[1] LBA metal objects from 572 findspots; and 445[2] metal objects dating to the EIA and MIA from 235 findspots or settlements.

The study covers c.5,750km^2, comprising the Upper and Middle Thames Valley and a sample of the surrounding topographies (Maps 1.1-2). The area can be split into the gravels of the Upper Thames Basin, adjacent to the south-eastern edge of the Cotswolds; the Corallian Ridge and Vale of White Horse that sit between the southern side of the Thames and the Berkshire Downs. The Berkshire Downs, and the Chilterns on the other side of the Goring Gap, provide the boundary for the Upper Thames. The Middle Thames gravels form part of the London Basin, bounded by the North Downs on its south-eastern side.

Much excavation has been undertaken in this region, especially on the gravels in advance of quarrying and redevelopment, and sites have generally been published to a very high standard. The Thames itself has also been subject to significant dredging programmes, resulting in the recovery of substantial quantities of metalwork, human remians and other finds. The quality, quantity and accessibility of the dataset is the primary reason for choosing the Upper and Middle Thames Valley as the study area. While many of the interpretations about social organisation and ontologies are applicable to other regions of Britain, particularly the Midlands, there are other key differences in the archaeology between the Thames Valley and other adjacent areas. These are discussed in the relevant chapters.

The thesis begins with an exploration into how communities and social identities are constituted, the role that material culture plays in this, and how we can understand the relationship between the treatment of the material world and creation of communities. The following four chapters are arranged by period, discussing different types of evidence and drawing patterns between these, providing interpretative accounts of social organisation, and focusing on how different social strategies would result in different archaeological records. One of the primary themes of this book concerns how perceptions of the past are intertwined with the constitution of communities, and how this affects the treatment of material culture.

Comparisons are frequently made between periods. Given that there is much continuity between the EIA and MIA, some EIA evidence is discussed in the MIA chapter, and *vice versa*. These period analyses are brought together in the final chapter which charts changes in the archaeological record for different types of evidence. This is followed by a discussion on the processes and causes of the social change that occurred between the Bronze Age and Iron Age.

Appendix 1 outlines the framework followed that led to the sites and features being phased into one of the four periods. Each site was reappraised in light of this discussion. This was especially necessary given the lack of a standardised nomenclature relating to the LBA/EIA Transition, and that this period is commonly subsumed into either the LBA or EIA. Other appendices include a discussion on how we can reconstruct roundhouses from their archaeological signatures; a reassessment of the settlements of Cotswold Community/Shorncote Quarry and Reading Business Park/Green Park; and the dating of field systems. This is followed by lists of data.

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[1] This figure excludes ingots, lumps and other metallurgical debris
[2] This figure excludes unassociated spearheads, some of which might date to the Iron Age, and small unidentifiable fragments found on settlements
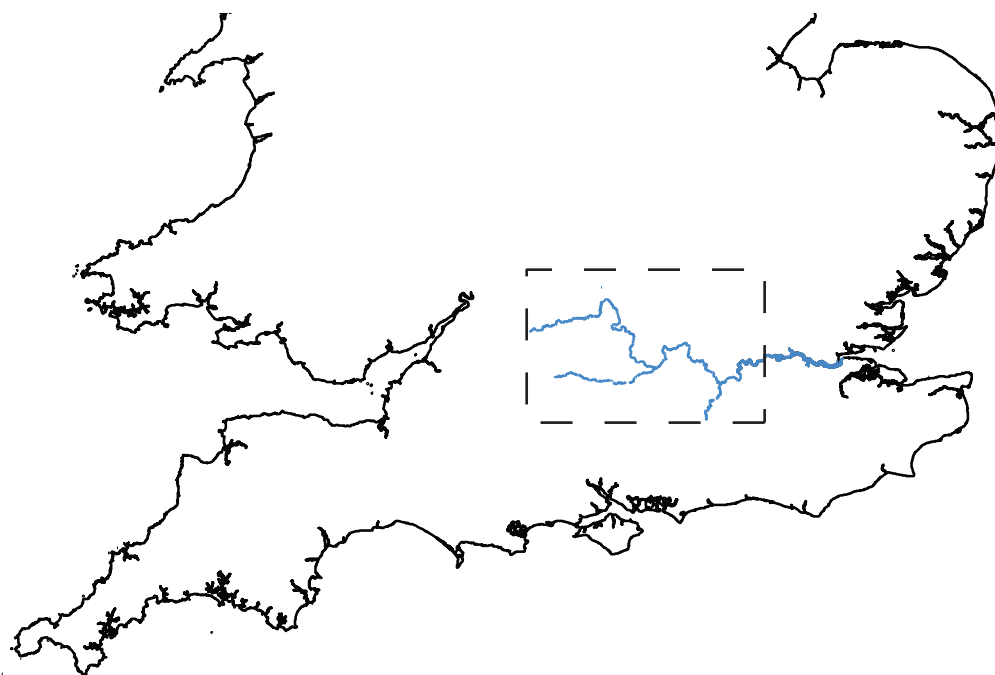
Map 1.1. The study area within southern Britain
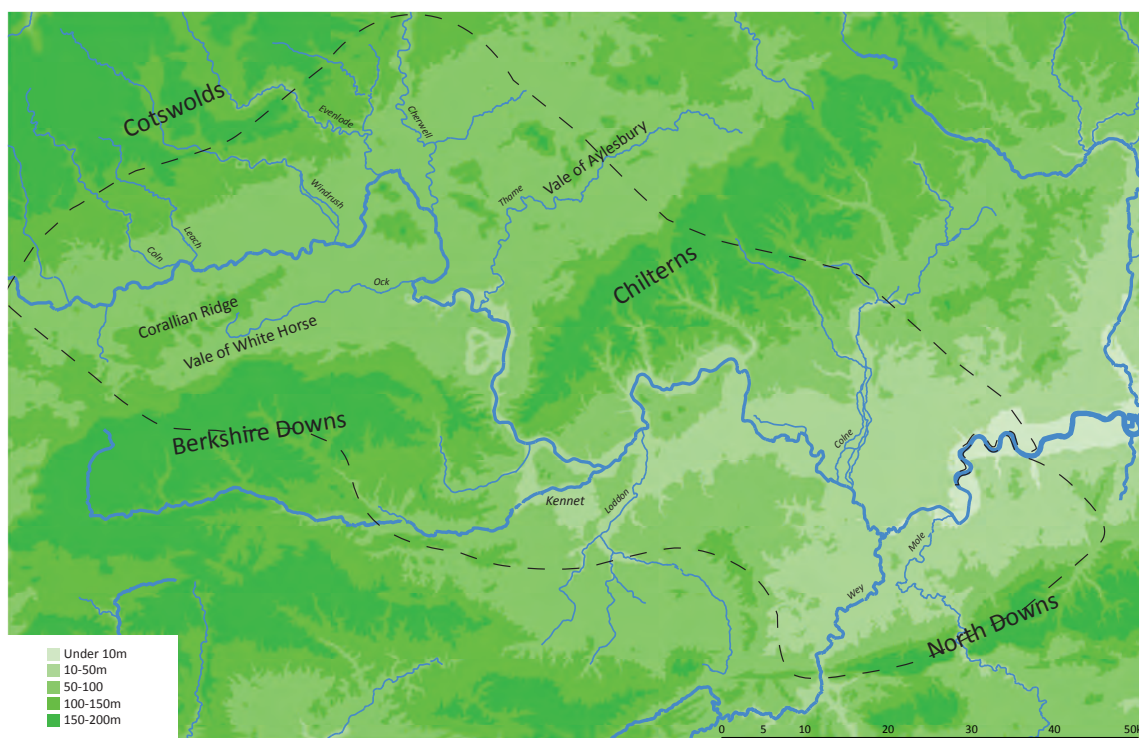
Map 1.2. Topography of the study area