

## **Late Neolithic and Bronze Age connections with Europe**

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[Adapted from seminar notes by **Jake Weekes**, *Kent County Council*]

Stuart Needham's paper situated the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age South East within its broader international context. In purely geographical terms, it is a very important part of Britain in relation to contact between the island and the near Continent: the fulcrum, in fact. It is not the only conduit for contact with the continent, but is surely one of the most important. In fact, if the South East is not a point of major contact at any given point in prehistory, we might well wonder: why not? In this broad context, it is clear that there were increasing and continuing contacts and interactions leading to significant cultural changes from the early Beaker stage onwards.

Needham asserted that the pre-Beaker late Neolithic period (c.3000–2450 BC) is in fact characterised by a distinct lack of cultural affiliation with Europe in the South East as throughout Britain (which must be significant, given its proximity); Grooved Ware and henges, for example, are not found on the continent, so there would appear to have been a real insularity at this time, and the South East region is significantly situated in respect of this. The focus of material culture affiliation during this period seems rather to be towards the north and west of Britain and Ireland. South-east England at this time was positioned towards the border of its cultural grouping. European groups also seem to be quite self-contained in terms of their cultural manifestations, and we should begin to explore what this means for contemporary attitudes: what archaeological traces might there be for what we might call such a 'borderland' mentality? There are a few hints of contact but nothing like we see in the following periods.

Jumping to the Middle Bronze Age we find a total contrast. South East England ended up (i.e. not by design) lying at the heart of a culture-zone in general terms. A certain set of cultural phenomena seem to unite this zone. The people of southern Britain and North West continental Europe seem to have 'taken in the sea'. A distinction can thus be drawn between an Early Bronze Age 'maritory' and a Middle-Late Bronze Age 'Channel Bronze Age', the latter characterised by greater overall cultural convergence; one self-evidently evolved into the other (Needham forthcoming). This development certainly seems to have embodied a changing attitude towards the sea, and this must relate in turn to there being an increased sense of purpose for crossing the sea on a more frequent basis, and increased cultural contact.

In the Early Bronze Age we can now postulate this tract of sea as a zone of privileged maritime interaction (this is the maritory), probably accompanied by and indeed constructed through ritual sanctions, including propitiatory rites relating to coastal and sea passage. The early Beaker period (what could, perhaps, now be termed the Chalcolithic) has contacts which prelude these developments, but they may wane towards the end of the third millennium before beginning to strengthen again. Around the turn of the millennium resumed east-west contact is evidenced by Barbed Wire and Globular Beakers, the exchange of morphological decorative ideas. In the western Channel there were some north-south contacts (e.g. Armorican *vases à anses* in southern England). Later in the Early Bronze Age (post-1750 BC) this overall maritime region becomes more unified, to judge for example from the stylistic links between Trevisker Ware, Biconical Urns, Eramcourt Urns and Hilversum ware. The site at Tatihou in Normandy, for example, can be seen as a 'little bit of Devon' in terms of

whole feature and material culture range. This more unified pottery zone prefigures Deverel Rimbury generality in the region. It should still be remembered however that we are not talking about a totally unified culture, and that there are more localised differences to consider. This is also reflected in the metalwork assemblages of the latest phase, where the closest affiliations for British material are seen in the North West continental Muids area, but a lack of spearheads in hoards from the coastal zone of France again appears to suggest more individual aspects of local 'identity'.

The earliest pulses of contact can be posited in the early Beaker period (*c.*2500–2300 BC), suggestive of small groups of people moving between Britain and the Continent. By 2300–2150 BC (Fission horizon) southern British links are focussed to east (amber, flint daggers, battle axes, necked Beakers, riveted daggers) and to west (gold, copper, tin). Contact was apparently dwindling southwards across the Channel. The later growth and development of Beaker culture in Britain would seem to be due largely to acculturation within indigenous peoples, and obvious continental connections appear to be a few 'exports' of British/Irish metalwork, reciprocated with occasional continental influences on insular metalwork (such as the adding of grooves to dagger blades – for example at Teddington and Aylesford - testify).

Overall then, there is evidence of radical change, beginning in the Beaker period, in terms of the relationship of south-east England to Europe. It is this question that we have begun to explore in this paper, but which needs to be investigated much further.