

Metallurgy and Society

*Martyn Barber (English Heritage)
& Helen Wickstead (Kingston University)*

The 'Wessex Culture', as with culture-history generally, carried a presumed correspondence of spatial and social boundaries, with implications for how archaeologists wrote about 'trade'. In the second half of the twentieth century the equivalence of social and spatial boundaries no longer seemed self-evident, and new perspectives on exchange relations emerged. In this paper we examine how archaeologies of exchange relate to notions of the social and spatial boundedness of 'Wessex' phenomena. Our discussion of exchange is based on investigation of Early Bronze Age (c. 2500-1500BC) metalwork and metallurgy. We ask: what kinds of exchange can be inferred from the surviving material and the contexts from which it has been recovered?

Metal and the knowledge of how to work it was clearly on the move during this period. The raw materials used to produce the distinctive bronzes known from graves, hoards and other contexts are alien to much of southern Britain, yet finds are widespread and increasingly common as time passes. But why and how were they being acquired and circulated? What changes can be identified over the course of the Early Bronze Age in the ways that metal and metallurgy was understood, valued, circulated, used and deposited? Is it possible to associate these changes with the traditional temporal divisions such as that between Wessex I and II, or do the data suggest alternative affinities, different kinds of boundary work?