

Joanna Brück

## Hoard, Fragmentation and Exchange in the European Bronze Age

### Summary

For a long time the state of Bronze Age deposits in Europe was considered to indicate a pattern of concealment: intact objects were seen as dedications, whereas fragmented bronzes were taken to be hidden raw metals. This article discusses a number of cases of depositions of fragmented objects from the British Isles to show that this dualism and differentiation between the social and practical value of things is highly problematic and should not be automatically assumed of Bronze Age societies. As it turns out, intentional fragmentation can provide clues to the biography of the objects and their owners, the nature of their circulation, the site of their deposition, and the chain of events before their deposition.

Keywords: Britain; Ireland; deposition; fragmentation; exchange; Bronze Age.

Lange Zeit galt der Zustand bronzzeitlicher Deponate in Europa als Hinweis auf das Verbergungsmotiv: Intakte Gegenstände wurden als Weihungen gesehen, fragmentierte Bronzen hingegen hielt man für verborgenes Rohmetall. In diesem Artikel wird gezeigt, dass dieser Dualismus und die Unterscheidung zwischen dem sozialen Wert und dem Gebrauchswert der Dinge höchst problematisch ist und nicht ohne weiteres für bronzzeitliche Gesellschaften vorausgesetzt werden darf. Dazu werden eine Reihe von Beispielen für Deponierungen fragmentierter Gegenstände von den britischen Inseln diskutiert. Es zeigt sich, dass die intentionelle Fragmentierung Hinweise auf die Biographie der Objekte und ihrer Besitzer geben kann, die Art ihrer Zirkulation, ihres Niederlegungsortes und prädepositionelle Handlungsketten.

Keywords: Großbritannien; Irland; Deponierung; Fragmentierung; Austausch; Bronzezeit.

## I Introduction

Hoards have long been considered one of the key sources of evidence regarding the character and organization of exchange during the European Bronze Age.<sup>1</sup> Archaeologists have often drawn a distinction between hoards from dryland and wetland contexts.<sup>2</sup> Collections of broken bronze objects and metalworking debris are predominantly found in dry places. These have frequently been interpreted in functional terms and are described as smiths' or founders' hoards – scrap material which was accumulated for recycling and subsequently hidden for safekeeping, perhaps during periods of social unrest.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, fine bronze objects such as complete swords and shields are usually recovered from rivers, lakes and bogs, and it is widely accepted that such deposits can best be explained as votive offerings to the gods.<sup>4</sup> However, there is an uneasy relationship between these two principle ways of interpreting the deposition of metalwork, and they appear to suggest quite contradictory economic strategies. On the one hand, the accumulation of broken bronzes in founders' hoards suggests that it was the economic value of this material that was paramount and that it was a valuable commodity.<sup>5</sup> This view appears to be supported by evidence for the existence of quite precise systems of weighing in many regions, especially parts of central and southern Europe, suggesting that metals circulated in well-organized systems of commodity exchange.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the deposition of metalwork in wet places and in burials – gifts to the gods and to the ancestors – suggests that the social meanings ascribed to bronze objects were often more important than their economic value.<sup>7</sup> Not only is the destruction of wealth irrational according to modern, economic criteria, but practices such as the deposition of bronze objects in bogs or lakes seem primarily to have provided a means of expressing, maintaining and transforming particular kinds of social identity.

We are faced, then, with a conundrum. Was the Bronze Age economy based on the circulation of gifts or commodities? This is a question that continues to polarize opinion amongst Bronze Age scholars, resulting in dramatically different visions of the period.<sup>8</sup> Classic anthropological models link gift exchange with clan-based 'simple' societies and commodity exchange with class-based 'complex' societies, notably states.<sup>9</sup> As such, our interpretation of the character of exchange has major implications for our understanding of the organization and complexity of Bronze Age societies. This conundrum is perhaps best illustrated by the contrasting models envisaged for societies in different parts

1 E.g. Bradley 1985.

2 Bradley 1990.

3 E.g. Evans 1881; Falkenstein 1997; Huth 1997.

4 Torbrügge 1971; Levy 1992; B. Hänsel and A. Hänsel 1997.

5 Muckleroy 1981.

6 Sommerfeld 1994; Primas 1997; Pare 2013.

7 Barrett 1985; Fontijn 2002.

8 See Rowlands, Bradley and Gosden's discussion in the 'Correspondence' section of *Man* 21, 745–748 and *Man* 22, 558–561.

9 Polanyi 1968.

of Europe: it has often been noted, for example, that bronze artifacts are more frequently deposited in bogs and rivers in western and northern Europe while large, dryland hoards of items that may have acted as ingots, or proto-currencies – for example *Ösenringe* or ox-hide ingots – tend to be found in central and south-eastern Europe, imposing a social evolutionary trajectory from the tribal societies of the north-west to the early states of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the continued popularity of models that presuppose the primacy of commodity exchange in the Bronze Age implicitly results in the imposition of modern, western economic values and practices onto the past. This is a point that has been made before,<sup>11</sup> particularly by scholars who favor ritual motivations for the deposition of hoards, and I will not pursue this further here. Instead, what I want to do in this paper is to unpick the series of oppositions on which the gift-commodity dualism is based. Scholars such as Vandkilde<sup>12</sup> and Bradley<sup>13</sup> have already begun to do this. Drawing on recent anthropological studies that argue that most societies employ a combination of gift and commodity exchange and that these should not be placed in some kind of evolutionary hierarchy, they propose that objects may be transformed from gifts to commodities and vice versa at different stages in their life-cycles. Bradley, for example, has argued that bronze artifacts were seen as commodities when they moved outside their normal area of circulation;<sup>14</sup> stripped of the social meanings they had once been ascribed, they were now viewed primarily in terms of their recycling value and were incorporated into scrap hoards. Noting the prevalence of scrap hoards near the coast and along major rivers in southern Britain, he follows Sahlins<sup>15</sup> in arguing that gift exchange took place between those who shared close social relations, while commodity exchanges occurred between strangers. Vandkilde<sup>16</sup> has made related interesting observations, noting for example that *Ösenringe* – copper neckrings that were deposited in hoards and that are argued to have acted as ingots and units of economic value in the ore-rich regions of central Europe – are found in graves further north, perhaps because the scarcity of metals there meant that these artifacts acquired a social as well as an economic value in those areas.

## 2 The meaning of broken objects

These are useful perspectives, but I would like to go further than this and argue that the distinction between gifts and commodities – between social value and use value – is actually highly problematic and hinders our understanding of Bronze Age exchange. My

10 Sherratt 1993.

11 Barrett and Needham 1988.

12 Vandkilde 2005.

13 Bradley 1990.

14 Bradley 1990, 121–129.

15 Sahlins 1972.

16 Vandkilde 2005.

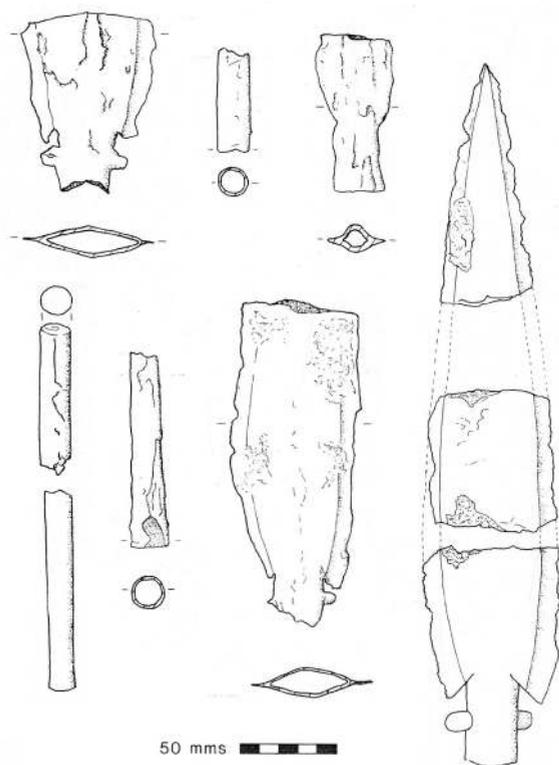


Fig. 1 The Bloody Pool hoard.

own research has primarily focused on the British Bronze Age and the material I will discuss here is predominantly from that region, although I hope that the points will be of relevance to other areas too. The ambiguities that surround the interpretation of broken objects render the difficulties of archaeologically distinguishing gifts from commodities especially clear.<sup>17</sup> As we have already seen, fragmented bronzes in dryland hoards are usually interpreted as ‘scrap’ – old and unwanted objects that have been collected together for recycling and whose original social significance is no longer recognized. However, this is based on a particular way of viewing and valuing broken artifacts – a way that may, in fact, be entirely anachronistic.<sup>18</sup>

There is copious evidence that calls the interpretation of broken objects as ‘rubbish’ into question. Broken bronze objects are well known from wet places. The hoard from the Bloody Pool, Devon, comprises parts of a number of bronze spearheads and ferrules, and was recovered from an area of open water in a bog (Fig. 1).<sup>19</sup> The spearheads have

17 Bradley 1990, 26.

18 Brück 1995.

19 Pearce 1983.

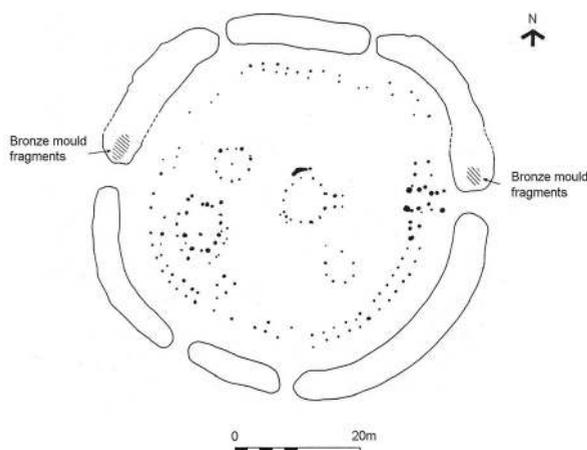


Fig. 2 Location of the dumps of mould debris at Springfield Lyons.

clearly been deliberately cut prior to deposition. Over half of the swords from the River Thames are broken: some had been cut into one or more pieces, probably by means of a sharp blow across the blade, while others had been heated and bent until they fractured.<sup>20</sup> Finds like these are not unusual and can be interpreted as evidence for deliberate destruction. It could be suggested, for example, that the ritual decommissioning of objects and their deposition in places from which they could not be retrieved acted as a means of symbolizing the end of a particular phase in the human lifecycle – perhaps marking the death of the objects’ original owner.

The suggestion that the act of fragmentation may have held social meaning is supported by finds from other locations. Broken objects (including both metal and non-metal objects) clearly form part of votive deposits in dryland contexts too. At Springfield Lyons in Essex, a Late Bronze Age settlement comprising several roundhouses was enclosed by a substantial ditch and rampart (Fig. 2).<sup>21</sup> Two large dumps of clay mould fragments for the production of bronze swords were deposited in the northern terminals of the ditches at the main entrances to the site. These deposits are best interpreted as a means of marking out what were undoubtedly significant points in social space – places where the distinction between insiders and outsiders was highlighted – and it is interesting that objects associated with the transformative process of metalworking were chosen for this purpose: boundaries and entrances are junctions between different social worlds, places that have both disruptive and transformative potential.

20 York 2002, 86.

21 Buckley and Hedges 1987.

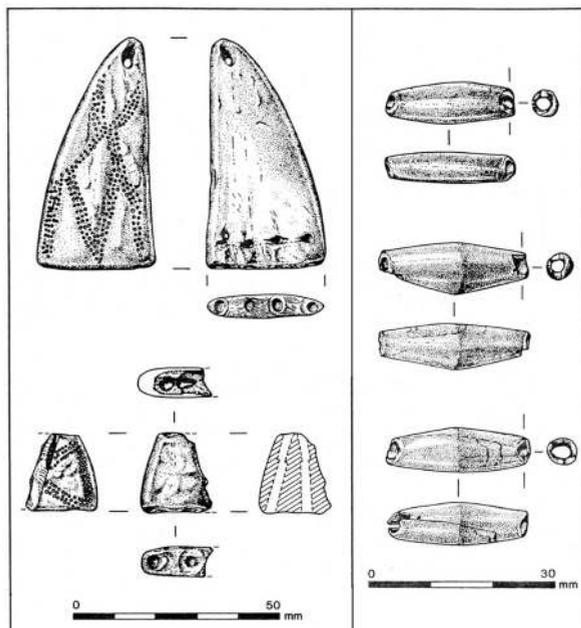


Fig. 3 Parts of an incomplete jet spacer-plate necklace from the burial at Abercairney.

### 3 Broken objects and relational identity

We can suggest, therefore, that broken objects were not always considered ‘rubbish’ in the modern, Western sense of the term: neither the bronzes in the Bloody Pool hoard nor the clay mould fragments at Springfield Lyons were stripped of meaning. But what was the social significance of the act of fragmentation and what meanings may have been ascribed to the fragments of bronze we find in dryland hoards? To explore this, it is useful to examine the occurrence of broken artifacts in British Bronze Age burials. Broken objects of various types were deposited with the dead and these provide useful insights into the potential social processes involved in the act of fragmentation. The deposition of jet spacer plate necklaces in Early Bronze Age burials provides a particularly well-studied example. Rarely were these deposited complete: the cist at Abercairney, Fowlis Wester, Scotland, produced enough beads to form only a small portion of one such necklace (Fig. 3).<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, evidence for wear and for variation in raw material and decorative motifs indicates that assemblages of beads may have comprised objects with quite different histories. At Pen y Bonc on Anglesey in North Wales, two worn jet beads formed part of a larger assemblage comprising a number of unworn beads and spacer plates made of a jet-like material.<sup>23</sup> The curation of old beads indicates that at least

22 Rideout et al. 1987.

23 Sheridan and Davis 1998.

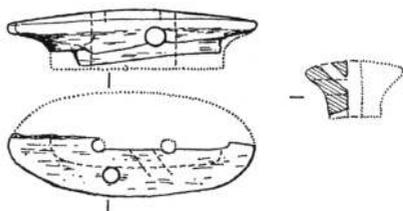


Fig. 4 Broken bone pommel from burial H, Bedd Branwen.

some of these artifacts were considered heirlooms<sup>24</sup>, while the deliberate fragmentation of spacer plate necklaces and the recombination of beads suggests that the circulation of such artifacts gave material form to inter-personal relationships across both time and space.<sup>25</sup> Assemblages of beads may have been brought together and dispersed as part of the mortuary rite, as mourners gave gifts to the deceased or kept significant objects as remembrances.

Jet necklaces are just one example of such practices. Other objects were also subject to fragmentation. For example, the bone pommel from burial H at Bedd Branwen on Anglesey had been carefully snapped in two (Fig. 4);<sup>26</sup> one half of this object was deposited in the grave but the other piece, along with the blade of the dagger to which it was once attached, is missing. Part of the upper body and rim of a Middle Bronze Age pot from the cremation cemetery at Itford Hill in Sussex had been removed; a rim shard from a contemporary settlement c. 90 m to the south matched the fabric of this vessel exactly and may originally have formed part of the same pot.<sup>27</sup> The deliberate breaking of such objects and – in all likelihood – the retention of the missing pieces by the mourners worked to draw attention to the significance of particular relationships between the dead and the living. It was not only artifacts that were treated in this way, however. The bodies of the dead were themselves subject to fragmentation. At Rockbourne Down in Hampshire, the inhumation of a young adult was accompanied by a pottery vessel containing the sacrum of an infant,<sup>28</sup> while five of the seven inhumations deposited sequentially in a deep grave pit at South Dumpton Down in Kent had had their skulls removed, presumably when the grave was reopened for the insertion of a new burial.<sup>29</sup> Part of a pierced and shaped roundel of human skull from a waterhole at Green Park in Berkshire suggests that these fragments continued to have a social life after the mortuary rites were over: the edges of the perforation were abraded, indicat-

24 Sheridan and Davis 1998; Woodward 2002.

25 Barrett 1994, 121–122; Brück 2004.

26 Lynch 1971.

27 Ellison 1972.

28 S. Piggott and C. M. Piggott 1945.

29 Perkins, An Assessment/Research Design: South Dumpton Down, Broadstairs. Unpublished Report. Trust for Thanet Archaeology, 1994.

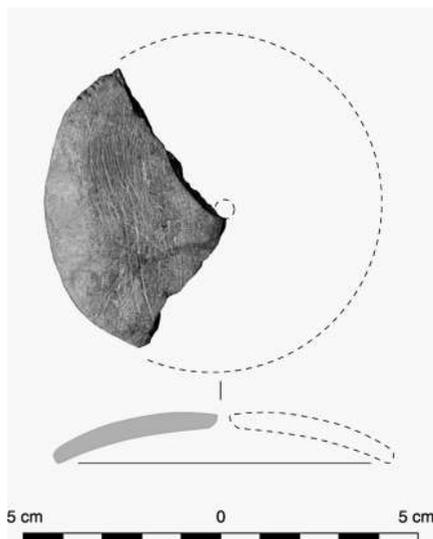


Fig. 5 Worked roundel of human skull from Green Park.

ing that this object was worn, used or displayed for some time before it was deposited (Fig. 5).<sup>30</sup>

These examples suggest that the fragmentation of both objects and people and the circulation and (re)deposition of their constituent elements was a socially significant practice. Destruction did not simply symbolize the death of an object or its owner. Instead, it was a means of dividing an object, over which several people may have had claims, into its constituent elements. In turn, by circulating and dispersing those fragments among the living and the dead, this practice allowed the mapping out of interpersonal relationships, marking, reconfiguring and transforming the identities of the deceased and the mourners. The worn character of at least some of these finds indicates that they had long and doubtless meaningful histories of circulation prior to deposition: objects that had once belonged to significant others facilitated the construction of *relational* forms of social identity.

Anthropological discussions of concepts of personhood can help us make further sense of the fragmentation of objects. Marcel Mauss is perhaps best known for his classic text *The Gift*<sup>31</sup> and studies of Bronze Age exchange have long drawn on his work. In this paper, however, I want to explore the implications of his equally seminal essay *A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self*<sup>32</sup> for our understanding of exchange. This work, along with subsequent anthropological explorations of concepts of personhood, indicates that the distinction drawn between self and other – or between

30 Boyle 2004, 99.

31 Mauss 1990.

32 Mauss 1985.

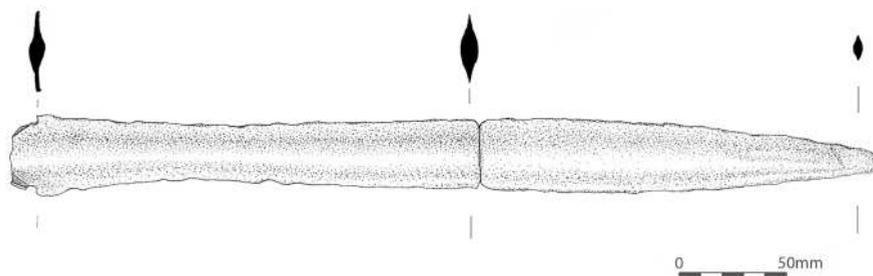


Fig. 6 Two joining fragments from a single sword found 3 km apart in Staffordshire.

people and objects – in the modern Western world cannot always be seen in other cultural contexts. Post-Enlightenment concepts of the self view it as a fixed, bounded and homogenous whole, a primordial seat of consciousness whose limits coincide with the outer edges of the human body.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, in non-Western societies, the person is thought to comprise a fluid amalgamation of substances and elements assembled, dispersed and reconstituted in the flow of inter-personal relationships.<sup>34</sup> Here, the self can be viewed as a project to which the contributions of others over the course of life (for example through marriage or gift exchange) are essential, so that inter-personal links are central to the constitution of personhood. Such relational concepts of the person do not distinguish self from other: objects (and other people too) are key components of the self.

If, as the evidence suggests, this was the case in the Bronze Age, then we can argue that the deliberate fragmentation of artifacts was not a way of denying or destroying their social value but is in fact a reflection of the very significance of those objects. Retaining part of an object that had once belonged to another was an important way of locating the person in a network of social relationships. As Mauss argued,<sup>35</sup> it was the histories of objects that gave them particular power – that animated them and made them inalienable. This is central to the social significance of gift exchange: it is because the gift cannot be separated from the giver that it works to tie people together across space and time in mutually constitutive relationships. Like gifts in other cultural contexts, the worn jet beads from Pen Y Bonc or the broken bone pommel from Bedd Branwen acted as symbols of interconnectedness.

We can therefore suggest that the destruction of bronze objects need not indicate their commodification. How, then, should we interpret broken bronze objects in dry-land (non-grave) contexts? A find from Staffordshire in the English Midlands illustrates

33 Morris 1991.

35 Mauss 1990.

34 Strathern 1988; Battaglia 1990; Morris 1994.

how the histories of fragmented bronze objects were highly significant (Fig. 6).<sup>36</sup> Here, two joining fragments of a single sword were deposited as isolated finds on two hill-tops; the hilltops themselves were inter visible and lay some 3 km apart on either side of the River Trent. One of these pieces was more heavily worn than the other, suggesting different histories of use. Nonetheless, their depositional contexts were so similar that we can suggest that the history and original relationships of the pieces were known – and considered important – even at the end of their lives.

Elsewhere, broken objects were deposited in special locations, suggesting that they were not devoid of history or meaning but instead forged links between particular people, places and practices. In Sussex, Yates and Bradley<sup>37</sup> have recently demonstrated that hoards, including those containing broken objects, were deposited in specific places in the landscape, notably overlooking streams and near burnt mounds (themselves sites that are interpreted as foci for inter-community feasting). At South Dumpton Down in Kent, a pit cut into the enclosure ditch surrounding a Middle Bronze Age settlement produced a number of bronze objects (Fig. 7).<sup>38</sup> On the base of the pit, four axes were arranged in a fan, over which was deposited a piece of tabular flint; several of these had been cast in the same mould. Further up within the pit fill was a fifth axe on top of which lay a bronze bracelet and a broken piece of a second similar object. All of these objects had been very carefully arranged in the ground. Here, as at other Middle Bronze Age settlements in southern England, a deposit of bronze objects – including both new and broken artifacts – was employed to mark the boundary to the site. The stratigraphic position of the hoard suggests that it may have been deposited as part of abandonment rites enacted at the end of the life of the settlement. Again, the symbolism surrounding metalworking – a transformative process in which the cyclical links between life and death are made evident – may have made such objects an appropriate offering in the context of life-cycle rites. A similar interpretation can perhaps be proffered for the broken bronzes and casting debris found alongside human remains in the cave at Heathery Burn, County Durham,<sup>39</sup> a place that may have been viewed as an entrance to the underworld. Together, these examples suggest that the histories of particular objects may have been important in determining where and how they were deposited.

36 Bradley and Ford 2004.

37 Yates and Bradley 2010.

38 Perkins, An Assessment/Research Design: South Dumpton Down, Broadstairs. Unpublished Report. Trust for Thanet Archaeology, 1994.

39 Greenwell 1894.

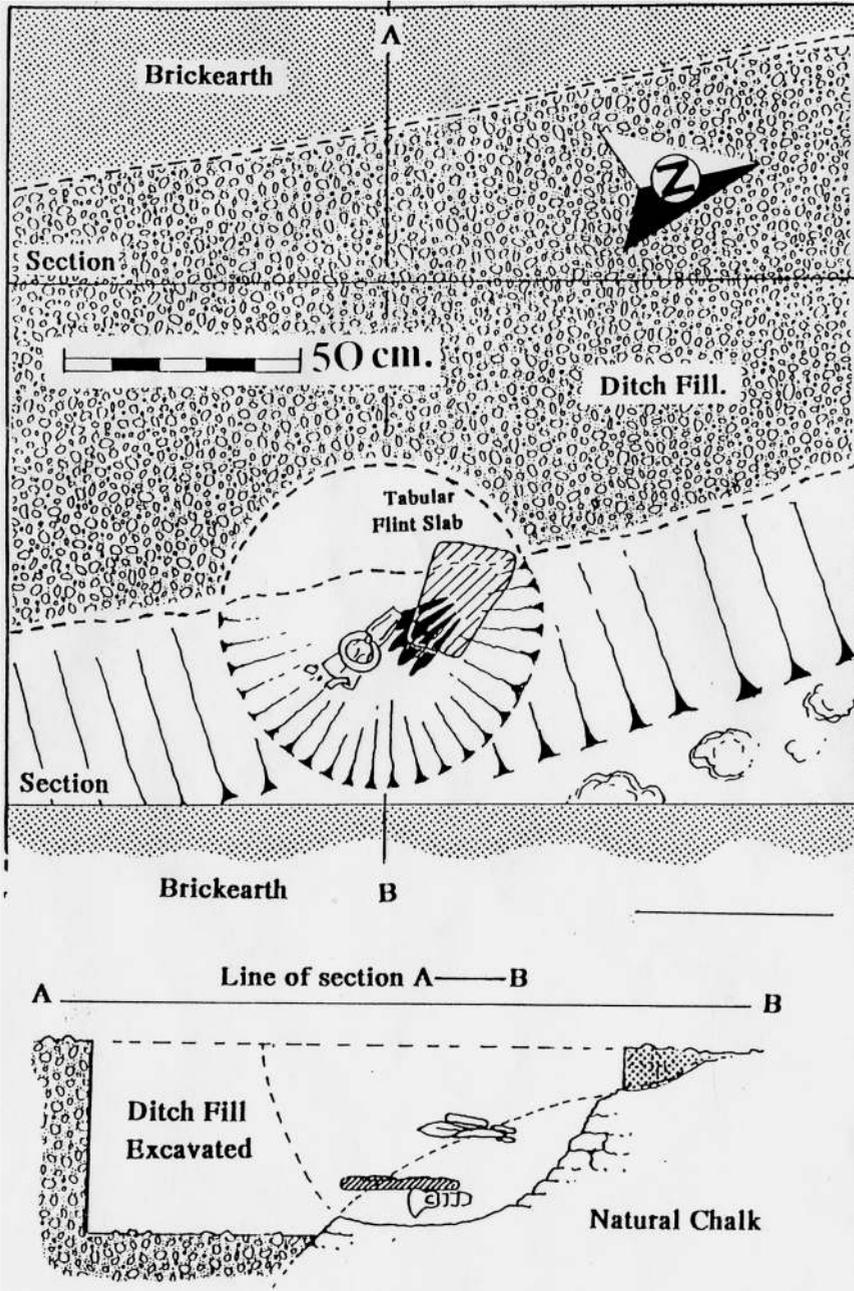


Fig. 7 The hoard from South Dumpton Down.

#### 4 Gifts and commodities

However, how useful is it to argue that all hoards were the result of ritual activities and are hence indicative of a gift exchange economy? A critical consideration of the distinction between gifts and commodities suggests that our adherence to this dichotomy is not, in fact, particularly helpful.<sup>40</sup> Let us begin by characterizing the differences as they are often set out in the literature. Gregory's classic text on the subject describes commodity exchange as involving the exchange of alienable objects – that is, objects whose primary value is economic – for the purpose of economic gain.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, gift exchange involves the exchange of inalienable objects for social gain. Commodity exchange establishes relationships between objects whereas gift exchange establishes relationships between people.

This is clearly an oversimplification, however, and I would like to argue instead that commodity exchange is socially constituted. In the modern, Western world, we tend to differentiate utilitarian value from social value but this is, I think, an error. Our estimation of what is useful is socially mediated: it is a society's particular concerns, values and beliefs that shape people's practical engagement with the world, so that it would be a mistake to strictly distinguish the practical from the symbolic.<sup>42</sup> In our own society, the price of an object is determined by culturally-constructed notions of value: the more 'priceless' an object is considered to be – for example, a Van Gogh painting – the higher its commercial value.<sup>43</sup> As such, although items that circulate as commodities are indeed alienable, it is far from true that they lack meaning. Conversely, it is the price of a Rolex watch that gives it particular social value; we estimate others' social cachet and cultural capital on the basis of the objects they wear and use. In other words, even money itself is symbolic:<sup>44</sup> the economic value of the dollar, for example, is based at least in part on the cultural allure of the United States as people buy into visions of a particular lifestyle. During the Celtic Tiger years in Ireland, the *nouveaux riches* drove expensive Mercedes Benz cars as a means of flaunting their success: here, having money was a mark of modernity, of personal success, of particular cultural values and aspirations. Money must be used in the right way, however. The flashy mansions of highly-paid, but working-class English footballers, for example, are often viewed with distaste by the educated middle classes. The *meaning* of money is therefore what gives it value.

Likewise, commercial transactions generally take place within a social framework.<sup>45</sup> Businesses seek to maintain customer loyalty through reward schemes, while deals between companies are negotiated on the golf course as well as in the boardroom. The

40 Miller 2005.

41 Gregory 1982.

42 Brück 1999.

43 Graeber 2001.

44 Hart 2005.

45 Carrier 1995.

use of money is itself dependent on trust and its value is underpinned by the use of icons of political authority – heads of state and national symbols appear on most notes and coins. Even the most apparently mundane of commercial activities, shopping for food, is as much about cultural identities and social values: whether we buy organic or fair-trade foodstuffs, for example, says a lot about our class background and political outlook. Likewise, as Miller has argued,<sup>46</sup> the very act of shopping is often intensely social: in contemporary Western Europe, women chose particular foodstuffs as a mark of their love and devotion to their families, so that what they buy both reflects and maintains the dynamics of social relations.

Indeed, it is possible to argue that in the modern, Western world, we differentiate between gifts and commodities only because we draw a sharp distinction between people and objects. Gregory's argument that commodity exchange establishes equivalences between objects is thus simplistic: instead, I would argue that commodity exchange today establishes relations between people because it creates a system of values for objects that stand metaphorically for people. In a Bronze Age context, where it was the relational rather than the intrinsic attributes of the self that appear to have been most significant, and where objects often seem to have been imbued with their own life force, the distinction between gift and commodity exchange also cannot be maintained. Instead, people and objects were entangled in long and mutually constitutive histories of engagement.

Some more general comments on the social role of exchange help elucidate this further: exchange is not solely a mechanism for the acquisition of materials and objects that are in short supply. This is nicely put by the anthropologists Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, who say of the activity of barter: "what are exchanged are not things for things ... but mutual estimations and regards."<sup>47</sup> Exchange, then – in whatever form – is a means of upholding and of challenging systems of value – and here I mean value in the social sense.<sup>48</sup> It is about creating a proper order for the inter-personal relationships that are marked and mediated by meaningful objects – a way of maintaining but also interrupting social boundaries.<sup>49</sup> By defining what is desirable and what is not, exchange upholds particular identities and values and undermines others. It is in light of these remarks that we should return to Bronze Age hoards. In Western Europe, at least, the histories of particular objects and the cultural meanings ascribed to them, and indeed to the material from which they were made and the processes involved in their production, appear to have been significant in determining where and how they were deposited: this was the case for both complete and broken objects. Hence, it is hardly surprising that hoards that we might traditionally have interpreted in functional terms can sometimes be found in surprising locations: for example, the hoards of Armorican socketed axes

46 Miller 1998.

47 Hugh-Jones and Humphrey 1992, 17.

48 Parry and Bloch 1989.

49 Hugh-Jones and Humphrey 1992.

– items often interpreted as ingots or proto-currency – from Marchésieux in northern France were deposited in a bog,<sup>50</sup> the sort of context that might usually be interpreted in ritual terms.

Finally, it is surely now time to reconsider the possible significance of items such as Armorican axes and *Ösenringe*. There is no need to invoke models that view these as alienable commodities exchanged purely for economic gain. Instead, as others have also argued, items such as these referenced categories of object that undoubtedly had particular social significance. It is possible that they indicate not an early form of depersonalized market exchange, but might instead have been used in special purpose transactions.<sup>51</sup> Ethnographic studies provide useful potential analogies: on the island of Seram in Indonesia, for example, large quantities of porcelain plates and shell armllets are given on marriage transactions by wife-takers and wife-givers respectively.<sup>52</sup> These categories of object stand for the particular qualities brought to the marriage by husband and wife: body and blood, form and substance. It is the creative conjunction between these elements facilitated by the act of exchanging these objects that ensures both biological and social reproduction. Although the sorts of relationships that were constructed via the circulation of items such as *Ösenringe* in the Bronze Age remain unknown, it is surely time for us to think afresh about other ways of understanding the significance of these and similar artifacts: doing so will help us re-evaluate our understanding of the character, context and significance of exchange in the European Bronze Age.

50 Verron 1983.

51 Dalton 1965.

52 Valeri 1980.

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**JOANNA BRÜCK**

Joanna Brück (PhD, Cambridge, 1997) is Reader in Archaeology at University of Bristol. Her primary area of research is the archaeology of the British Bronze Age. She is particularly interested in the treatment of the human body and concepts of the self; depositional practices and what these reveal about the meanings and values ascribed to objects; and the relationship between space and society including domestic architecture and the changing organisation of landscape.

Joanna Brück  
University of Bristol Office 2N12  
43 Woodland Road  
Clifton, Bristol BS8 1UU, England  
E-Mail: joanna.bruck@bristol.ac.uk