Landscape in the Longue Durée

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The value of pebbles in an original affluent society

Only 10 km distant due east from the Pebblebed heathlands on the flat greensand tableland (c. 230 m OD) of Broad Down and Gittisham Hill there is an extensive and tightly clustered group of Bronze Age cairns and barrows. The area is bounded by the river Sid to the west and numerous tributaries of the Axe to the east, principally the Coly and the Yarty. The soils, like those of the Pebblebeds, are poor and thin, affording, at best, rough grazing land. Substantial areas today are covered by gorse and bracken. At least 100 barrows and cairns occur in a continuous 5 km stretch of the narrow ridge dividing the Sid from the Coly that is at most 1 km wide and in many places considerably less. They centre on a circular banked and ditched enclosure, Farway Castle, 60 m in diameter.

From here there are extensive and panoramic views south across the sea, west to the East Hill ridge, north to the Blackdown Hills and to the east across plateau areas of East Devon deeply dissected by valleys. More than 100 barrows have been recorded in fieldwork surveys (Jones and Quinnell 2008: 27). The largest barrows are 25–40 m in diameter and up to 3.5 m high and ditched, others are between 10 and 15 m. There are also numerous small mounds less than 10 m in diameter. The concentration and the size of many of these monuments contrast markedly with the dispersed pattern and generally small size of the cairns on the Pebblebed heathlands.

Antiquarian excavations by Kirwan (1868a, 1868b, 1870a, 1872) and reports by Hutchinson (1880, 1870–81) and R.H. Worth (1899) and R.N. Worth (1880) (see Butler 2000) of some of the largest mounds revealed that they had a funerary use and that all the burials
were cremations of Early to Middle Bronze Age date, periods 3–4. The evidence has been reviewed by Fox (1948) and Jones and Quinnell (2008) and the discussion below draws on these discussions. Kirwan’s Barrow C was originally 21 m in diameter and 1.8 m high. It contained sherds from a food vessel lying over cremated bones. Over it was a flint cairn 6 m in diameter edged with large boulders of flinty conglomerate laid horizontally. A second interment in the cairn 18 feet east of the centre consisted of burnt bones laid on the flints and a comb-impressed long-necked beaker found on its side with an approximate date of around 2250 cal. BC (Needham 2005; Jones and Quinnell 2008: 36). The flint cairn was covered with a layer of burnt earth and extended outwards. The end result was a composite structure with successive constructional phases (Fox 1948: 5). The structure of this Beaker burial contrasts markedly with those of Early Bronze Age date. Both the food vessel and the beaker are very fragmented and incomplete and may have been buried as sherds (Jones and Quinnell 2008: 36).

Barrow A, about 35 m in diameter and 1.4 m high with an encircling ditch, was constructed of alternate layers of blue clay and peaty earth, probably turfs. This was surrounded outside its surrounding ditch by a ring of chert boulders. Under the mound the centre was paved with flints set in clay with traces of burning that Kirwan interpreted as being from a cremation pyre from which there was much charcoal. In the centre of the charcoal there were cremated bones and a finely engraved shale cup of material that probably originated from Kimmeridge in Dorset, dated towards the end of the Early Bronze Age, around 1600 cal. BC.

Barrow E had a small central cairn of flints covering a corbelled cist with burnt bones with fragments of a small copper alloyed dagger of Early Bronze Age date, around 1800 cal. BC. Nearby was another shale cup. Barrow D was very similar, with a central cairn and cist covered by an earthen mound possibly dug up from a surrounding ditch. The cist contained remains of an adult and an infant with a segmented bone bead. A date on the cremated bone is 2020–1860 cal. BC (Jones and Quinnell 2008: 36). Barrow B was about 34 m in diameter and 1.7 m high with a bed of charcoal and calcined bones at its approximate centre, with the rest of the structure probably formed of turfs. Bones from a small, elaborately decorated ‘accessory vessel’ with cover, filled with clean and compact bone, found by a visitor on Kirwan’s spoil heap, has given a date of 1940–1750 cal. BC (32).

Piggott (1938) in a very influential paper interpreted the evidence given above as a link between the Farway necropolis and a wider Early Bronze Age Wessex culture of central southern England that he
understood as arising from an intrusive elite from Brittany. The Farway barrows, like those of his broader Wessex culture, were the burial places of a chiefly elite with long-distance contacts exemplified by the presence of exotic materials and stylistic influences in the grave good assemblages. No equivalent finds of rich burials are known from the Pebblebed heath-lands, although it has to be emphasized that the largest and most prominent cairns have not been excavated and we know nothing about their contents.

Centre and periphery in Bronze Age England?

After Piggott developed the idea of a rich elite living in Wessex with exceptionally rich burials with metalwork and items of exotic origin indicating the presence of a warrior aristocracy, the only really significant change to this general perspective was an insistence on the indigenous rather than the continental European origins of the Bronze Age elite. This became a standard way to interpret the evidence for almost 50 years, repeated in almost every book or discussion (e.g. Ashbee 1960; Renfrew 1976; Megaw and Simpson 1979: 207ff.; Cunliffe 2001; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005: 125).

Piggott (1938) had singled out about 100 elite burials in Wessex, virtually all on the chalk downlands, and these remained the focus of discussion and were linked to another Early Bronze Age elite, with richly furnished graves, in Brittany. They are all dated to a period of 600 years from about 2000 to 1400 BC. The rich grave sets identified by Piggott later came to be interpreted in terms of the control of metals, the command of exotic prestige goods and the consumption of wealth by warrior aristocracies or chiefs. Precious materials were conspicuously buried with the dead in societies that were increasingly complex and stratified. Cunliffe puts it succinctly as follows: ‘the social energy which had been channelled into monument building for the community [during the Neolithic] was now directed to celebrating the power of certain individuals among the elite. The adoption of the “Beaker package” around 2400 BC was simply a stage in this process of social transformation’ (Cunliffe 2001: 248).

If Bronze Age Wessex was the major elite centre during the Early and Middle Bronze Age, East Devon, 130 km distant to the west, was very much a peripheral area in relation to it: a few rich graves in the Farway cemetery, none on the Pebblebeds. But with the proximity of the Channel coast and given the importance of long-distance travel by boat, rather
than overland, East Devon could be considered to be simultaneously well connected in terms of exchange and wider social networks.

Needham has recently pointed to the significance of the English Channel coast in the Earlier Bronze Age, with a series of exceptionally rich graves stretching from Kent to Cornwall along it with evidence of long-distance contacts extending into continental Europe in general and close connections with the rich Breton graves in particular (Needham 2006). He thus displaces the notion of an inland Wessex centre for the elite to a more dispersed distribution of rich burials nearer to the coast. The ‘rich’ Farway burials would thus form part of this overall coastal distribution.

Recent research has indicated that many of the first round barrows built on the chalk downland of southern England were built near to older Neolithic monuments: long barrows, enclosures, cursuses and henges and in areas of fertile land that had never been densely wooded (French et al. 2007). This, the inland heart of Piggott’s Wessex culture, might thus be quite distinct from Needham’s postulated ‘Channel Bronze Age’ with its elite coastal burials. The origins of both in relation to the preceding Neolithic were different.

In the case of the Pebblebed heathlands we have an area that was similar to the Wessex chalk downlands with their dense concentrations of sometimes richly furnished graves in one respect, in that it too was not densely forested (see Chapter 8). However, the cairns are numerically few (the total would amount to just one cemetery area in the vicinity of Stonehenge) and most are small. The area is completely lacking in earlier prehistoric monuments, the only exceptions being Early Neolithic hilltop enclosures. However, even these are situated some distance away. High Peak and Hembury are, respectively, 5 and 10 km distant from the heathland fringe. There are no henges or cursus or other Later Neolithic monuments.

But did an Early Bronze Age elite really exist in central southern England or is it an exaggeration of the evidence – or perhaps even a figment of the archaeological imagination? It is worth noting that the number of these elite burials is tiny, six per year over a 600-year period. The attention paid to them in the interpretation of the character of Early Bronze Age society might be described as an archaeological version of the great man or woman view of history in which the majority of the population is effectively ignored.

As Bradley recently notes, ‘a small selection of exceptional artefacts has come to dominate the discussion’ (Bradley 2007: 153). Cunliffe (2001) gives two examples of these rich burials: Bush Barrow, visible
with and to the south of Stonehenge, and the burial of a woman at Upton Lovell in the Wylye valley to the west. He is hardly alone in doing so – the same two exceptional graves are used over and over again to demonstrate the presence of a rich chiefly elite, possessing gold, weapons and other bronze artefacts, amber, jet shale and faience, etc. All but a few of the other 98 elite Wessex graves are furnished with far fewer ‘riches’. A few of the East Devon Farway barrows, mentioned above, with only an occasional exotic or precious item, fall into this category. Woodward (2000) points out that only a very few of the barrows even around Stonehenge, a supposed centre for a Wessex elite, are in fact rich. Other exceptionally rich graves are widely spread and situated at long distances from each other and occur as single barrows rather than part of cemeteries (Woodward 2000: 105).

Cunliffe and others refer to Wessex as a great trading and exchange hub commanding riverine and overland routes all over England along which the exotic prestige goods flowed. Despite his reservations about the representativeness of the evidence, Bradley still argues that concentrations of richer burials in Europe are closely related to the proximity of metal sources and that communities in Wessex were well placed to control the cross-Channel movement of tin between northwest France and Ireland (Bradley 2007: 156). This seems somewhat strange, since a supposed centre of Bronze Age Wessex, if we place it around Stonehenge, is over 110 km from the nearest coastline and about twice that distance from the tin sources of southwest England. Who could realistically control the movements of metals and materials from that distance?

There is one thing that links together all the discussions of the distributions and relationships of elite graves and those of contacts and exchange routes in either Early or Later Bronze Age Europe. They are somewhat surreal views of the landscape derived from looking at small-scale modern maps. They are truly representative of a modern cartographer’s eye, but we can be sure that Bronze Age populations did not think like that nor did they conceive of Wessex or Europe in the modern way. Wessex itself constitutes a huge and differentiated area, and knowledge of both it and the world beyond would have been improvised, localized and fragmented. ‘Rich’ burials occur in local landscapes with local meanings and need not necessarily be connected together at all in any simple way or in terms of a single interpretative framework supposedly good for Europe in general.

One highly influential model has come to dominate our understanding of society in the European Bronze Age and that is the prestige goods model of tribal societies first put forward by Friedman and Rowlands
(1977) and further developed by Rowlands and Kristiansen (Kristiansen and Rowlands 1998; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005). They argue that the diverse histories of individual tribal societies in Europe are all manifestations of shared structural principles governing their social reproduction. This is dependent on a primary relation with the supernatural in which wealth and group prosperity are regarded as controlled by supernatural spirits, conceived as ancestors of competing lineage groups, who need to be celebrated through offerings and who in turn bestowed prosperity. This sophisticated model integrates consideration of local agricultural production involving tribute relations, the exchange of marriage partners between groups and the exchange and consumption of valuables, whose circulation is controlled by the elites, in an overall model of tribal social reproduction. Different types of exchange are constituted by relations of indebtedness and patronage between local populations and chiefly elites in which the conspicuous consumption of wealth is linked to status and its attainment. This involved the procurement and movement across the European continent of metals and exotic items and presumed prestige goods that became fundamental to the development of political institutions, power and prestige. The conspicuous consumption of wealth indicated by its presence in rich burials represents competition for status between elites and exchange of materials between them in a restricted sphere of exchange from which the general populace were excluded. Thus metals were being exported to continental Europe from England and Ireland while bronzes of continental origin were being imported into Britain as part of a much larger exchange system in which metals and other precious materials were circulating.

Earle (2002), Kristiansen and Larsson (2005) and others have interpreted the European Bronze Age not only in terms of controls on the flows of materials but widespread mobility between chiefly elites in Scandinavia and the Mycenaean world through central and eastern Europe, or in terms of a western European route involving movements of persons, bronze artefacts, cosmological ideas, copper and tin ingots and Scandinavian amber.

According to this model, towards the end of the Early Bronze Age increasing demand for copper and tin seems to have led to a change in trade routes to Scandinavia around 1600 BC, with copper being acquired directly from Cypriot and other sources and tin from Devon and Cornwall. Competitive social elites were engaging in interaction with distant peers and journeying widely.

Long-distance contacts between the Mediterranean world and northern Europe are now quite well documented in terms of both
artefact distributions and shipwrecks containing metals. Shipwrecks in the English Channel from off the Erme estuary in Devon and from Dover demonstrate that the tin sources of Devon and Cornwall were being exploited during the second half of the third millennium BC and the first half of the second millennium BC, with trade and exchange growing in intensity around 1600 BC (see e.g. Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Harding 2009; Van de Noort 2009). In terms of a western European maritime route, the highly valued tin resources of Devon and Cornwall played a key part in links between Scandinavia and the Mediterranean world with its palace civilizations.

Most of the metal in Scandinavia from around 1700 BC was refined and alloyed there and the metal must have arrived in ingots, some of which would have been of tin from Devon and Cornwall (Ling et al. 2013). Flows of metals, etc., being part of a broader and integrated set of cosmological and spiritual relationships and ideas, may have had various and very different expressions in local contexts. Controlling flows of gold and metals, amber from south Scandinavia and other raw materials with high economic and ritual value provided a means by which local chiefly hierarchies and elites could reproduce themselves through exchange. But there was inherent instability in a situation in which economic exchange creates forms of value and the supplies of raw materials and finished items such as bronze swords were both unstable and unpredictable. The social reproduction of status was always difficult to secure in such circumstances.

There is of course a constant danger of anachronistic interpretations in which the presence of gold, metalwork and exotic materials in, it should be stressed, a very few graves in barrows in so-called ‘elite centres’ becomes considered the sole measure of wealth, and therefore prestige, and becomes a measure of hierarchy. We might say that archaeologists have quite literally adopted a gold standard of wealth: a fascination with such ‘riches’ may just be a contemporary preoccupation of archaeologists, a reflection of our own cultural bias in which value is something synonymous with price. Any grave with gold in it is ipso facto considered rich or wealthy, as social capital, but there are many other ways to understand what richness and wealth might be. There is no reason to automatically assume that everyone in the Bronze Age understood wealth in this manner, as will be argued below. Standards of wealth and value are always likely to have been local productions with local meanings.

There have been a number of cogent recent critiques of this model of competitive wealthy elites in Bronze Age Europe controlling and consuming prestige goods in the attainment of personal power and status. In
terms of an analysis of the burials we cannot make the simple assumption that the grave goods found are necessarily either the possessions of or represent the real identity of the dead and their status in society.

Instead it has been argued that we could understand them in terms of relations between the living and the dead (Brück 2004, 2006; Brück and Fontijn 2009; Fowler 2013) in which a social persona was constructed during mortuary rites. Consequently the character of relations that made that person what they were in burial rites were multiply authored by the local communities conducting them, a gathering and bundling of relations. This is essentially the application of a Melanesian model for the European Bronze Age, clearly heavily influenced by the work of Strathern (1988), Battaglia (1990) and others.

Brück and Fontijn put it like this:

[Early Bronze Age communities in different regions and in exceptional circumstances [objectified in ‘wealthy graves’] chose to portray particular people in a way that gave material form to widely shared understandings and beliefs: as such the key concern in these ‘princely’ burials may have been to express dominant cultural values rather than wealth and status.

(Brück and Fontijn 2009: 206)

Fowler notes that ‘the term “elite” holds unqualified connotations of hierarchical power relations over an unspecified and undifferentiated broader community, and terms such as “high status”, “wealthy”, “leaders”, “paramount chiefs”, and “prestige” have become rolled together and also represent only a narrow range of possible interpretations’ (Fowler 2013: 89).

The biographical history of objects deposited in graves embodying social memory may have been important: their landscape origins, the technologies involved in their production and the social relations involved in production and exchange.

Woodward has pointed out that in relation to the rich Wessex graves, two of the most important features of the artefacts found is their colour and texture (2000: 111, 113). The objects when freshly buried were ‘all brightly coloured, shiny, lustrous, smooth, mainly cool to the touch, and neatly shaped … blue and green objects, mainly faience but also incorporating various polished stone pieces would have stood out in strong contrast to the predominant red/gold and black/white schemes apparent among the individual assemblages’ (113). This represents a very different way of thinking about what ‘wealth’ means. The counterpoint
in the prestige goods model has been to weigh metalwork in one grave, compare it with that in another and thus provide a quantitative evaluation of relative wealth. ‘Rich’ burials from the alternative perspective discussed above thus relate to the constitution of personhood relationally in society. Personhood is emergent from networks of social relations and may have little to do with the lived identities of the dead (Fowler 2013: 80). Instead the grave goods found in barrows and cairns may represent the ritual practice of the burial rite itself by the local community. The individual social persona and status of the deceased is not necessarily at the centre of this, or at the very least it is relationally constituted.

Weiner discusses objects that are withdrawn from circulation, or never enter it, as constituting inalienable wealth (Weiner 1985, 1992). Inalienable possessions have absolute value, placing them above the exchangeability of one thing for another. Inalienable objects are a materialization of biographical, historical and spiritual values. They are replete with cultural meanings and values through association with individual owners who have held and used them, ancestral histories and sacred connotations. Early Bronze Age grave good assemblages can be regarded as inalienable in just this sense. Burying objects in a grave was the ultimate act in ensuring that they could no longer circulate or be exchanged among the living, be treated as mere commodities through which status might be acquired. This act was about the veneration rather than consumption of a thing and is indicative of a very different way of valuing things.

In this manner we can regard grave good assemblages as deeply symbolic acts: things were made absolutely inalienable by burying them in the ground. This act of giving things away was a means of keeping or retaining them for ever. Beyond that, these acts took place at a particular place in the landscape associated with a particular social group. In this manner things in burials placed identities in particular landscapes. Society was thus in part primarily reproduced through the loss of things rather than their acquisition, clearly an inversion of the prestige goods exchange model of value.

Strathern (1988) argued that while in contemporary Western societies all the emphasis is on individualism (each individual is considered to have a unique identity, a core of their Being) and owning personal possessions, so you own what you produce, by contrast in Melanesia individuals have no unique core. They are instead constituted by the manner in which they are perceived by others. This is partible or multiple personhood. The corollary is that you don’t necessarily own what you produce, so simple Western notions of exploitation and alienation in exchange relationships no longer apply and notions of wealth and value have to
be rethought. Production is always a social relationship. Both people and possessions, or things, are multiply authored and their past is part of them. Social relations make some potential aspects of a person visible in one context, while hiding others. A person or a thing thus has latent properties and potentialities brought out and made manifest in some circumstances, such as a burial ritual, but not in others. Meaning, wealth and value are constituted by what others think they are. They remain relative and shifting, not absolutes. Exchange relations shift what things mean from one social context to another so that, for example, a pig is the product of a marriage relation between a man and a woman but when it enters into an exchange relationship between men its meaning and value shifts from embodying a husband–wife relation to embodying male relations in the context of ceremonial exchange. In the process its former social value and meaning gets detached and a new one arises. So we might argue, if we liked, that ‘rich’ Bronze Age burials involved the creation of new sets of values and relations between always multiply constituted persons and things rather than simply representing a person’s status and individual wealth. This certainly provides an effective critique of a prestige goods version of the Bronze Age, but the Melanesian alternative is hardly a panacea.

Strathern’s interpretation of what persons and things mean in Melanesia and how this contrasts with Western conceptions of personal identity, wealth and value is entirely rhetorical, a fictional ideal type. One is apparently the simple inversion of the other. Personhood and identity in the contemporary West can be easily understood in a ‘Melanesian’ way. In fact Strathern’s model of the Melanesian Other is simply a version of contemporary post-structuralist thought applied to a Melanesian context and juxtaposed to an old model of Western individualism. Our identities are created in multiple ways, we have no inner core of being, we are as we appear to be to others, our identities are fashioned out of relationships and shift and change, the values of things are relative to the social contexts in which they occur. However, there still remains one very clear and dominant notion of what wealth is based on: commodities and their prices in relation to what people desire.

The general idea that special objects in graves indicate personal or dynastic wealth and prestige implies the spread of specific kinds of value systems along with the objects. However, the values attached to different kinds of things obviously vary. Fowler suggests that changes in ritual activity and material culture during both the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age can be understood perhaps as changing relations of desire arising from new entanglements between people and things: ‘perhaps those
moving notable distances during their lives and those exchanging valued material and objects desired new social partners, new interactions … new knowledges and ideas, new lives for themselves even, rather than new (hierarchical) statuses, generic power or particular possessions’ (Fowler 2013: 90). To put it another way, the endless pursuit of hierarchy and power is only one rather limited desire. Furthermore, ideas of what wealth and value actually are may be expressed in often highly different and culturally variable ways, as discussed below.

An emphasis on the variable meanings, social relations and ritual practices bound up with the deposition of assemblages of grave goods usefully redirects interpretations away from a mantra of Bronze Age elites. We can argue that rich graves are rich in terms of complexity of relations, they objectify rather than necessarily being related to the individual status of the deceased. There is both a density of objects in them and the symbolic entailments and metaphorical associations of these objects (Tilley 1999; Brück 2004). But such a position still has to cope with precisely why there are such significant differences in the Bronze Age, from barrows and cairns that contain nothing to those replete (or ‘rich’) with a whole array of different artefacts and materials, some of which were acquired over huge distances.

Clearly there is considerable differentiation in grave assemblages across Europe. If this is not necessarily a reflection of the individual status of the deceased but his or her social relationships, this implies that those group relationships differed considerably in terms of movement of persons, knowledges, access to materials and relationships to things. To put it at its simplest: some grave assemblages are far more complex than others and this suggests important differences between local communities in terms of the breadth and depth of social ties and dependencies and their ability to acquire and keep things. At the heart of this are two questions: what was of value? What did people value and why? These questions can have no general answer. We need to try and understand the specificity and difference of the past. Rather than applying top-down, ready-made ethnographic models to illuminate the past, an alternative is to try and build an archaeological model of that past from the material evidence to hand.

**Landscape, value and identity**

Anthropological studies of value show over and over again how value is a relative concept, defined and redefined by local communities, each
having its own cosmology and type of value. Things considered valuable in one context may have little or no value for people in another (e.g. Gregory 1982; Appadurai 1986; Munn 1986; Graeber 2001). This is the primary and most important anthropological insight that is worth pursuing. The first premise is that social groups in European Bronze Age societies valued things in different and multiple ways. Giving value to things did not involve an equivalent standard of value applicable everywhere. It was always a local production and has to be understood in the context of a local landscape. Value was something intimately related to the embodied identities of persons in those landscapes.

If we examine Bronze Age barrows and cairns in detail in either Wessex, southwest England or elsewhere in Britain, or at a European scale of analysis, the overwhelming and consistent point to be drawn out of the evidence is that what we witness is a record of difference, not repetition. What is found in one barrow or cairn compared to another is largely unpredictable. The contributions in a recent collection edited by Last exemplify this point strongly (Last 2007), as does Jones’s discussion of Cornish barrows (2005), Jones and Quinnell’s discussion of the Farway barrows and cairns in East Devon (Jones and Quinnell 2008) or Fowler’s (2013) analysis of the Early Bronze Age in northeast England.

The differences are not only related to assemblages of grave goods but to the architecture and histories of barrows and cairns. Some, like the small cairns on the Pebblebeds, are not even places for burial and so are not associated with the dead. Equally they are not even monuments in the sense of being monumental. These differences need to be understood within the contexts of the local landscapes in which they occur. This is unfortunately largely absent in the studies cited above (apart from Jones 2005), in which the individual barrow or cairn treated as an isolate remains the primary entity being analysed and the landscape gets reduced to dots on a distribution map.

The counterpoint to this almost infinite difference is that we simultaneously find broadly similar architectural expressions in different places, such as the circular form of barrows and cairns, and artefacts that resemble each other, partly as a result of circulation and exchange and partly because of a shared repertoire of ideas and knowledges as discussed in Chapters 3, 6 and above. Places were linked at local, regional, inter-regional and European scales. We witness a network of interacting communities and movement of some individuals between them who shared similar artefact types and similar burial practices.
Kristiansen and Larsson (2005) make the very important general point that imported metalwork, such as the copper double axe from Mount Howe discussed in Chapter 6, was not just random artefacts stripped of their original social, economic and political meaning, but can instead be understood in terms of the transmission of knowledges and cosmological beliefs in which economic and political and ritual cosmological and shamanic powers were often intertwined (Kristansen and Larsson 2005: 200ff.). The meanings and symbolism of some types of artefacts were something shared between people, but as often as not would become reworked and transformed in local contexts.

Wealth and value in East Devon

Where does East Devon fit into a wider prehistoric context? Despite its proximity to the tin resources of Cornwall and Dartmoor there is very little metalwork. The pebble cairns that were built occur in a heathland tract unsuitable for agriculture (unlike the Jutland and Wessex barrows they are not swallowing up huge quantities of arable land) and, relatively speaking, even the very biggest are modest in scale.

In terms of a wider European Bronze Age world and a prestige goods model of that world, this was definitely a marginal and peripheral area. However, considered in terms of the availability of land, crops and livestock East Devon was far from being a marginal area in the Bronze Age (see Chapter 8). The soils, particularly those on the Otter sandstone, were easily tilled and fertile, while the heath provided good grazing ground. There was abundant fish, fowl and shellfish to be exploited along the Exe estuary and along the coast, no shortage of timber for constructing round houses, fuel for cooking, mushrooms and nuts and berries and plant foods in the woods, etc. How important were gold, metals, exotic artefacts and so forth in the everyday life of people? What relevance has that concept of value to understanding anything about the past? Were local populations much exercised because they might not have lots of metal to consume, display or bury with the dead or amber beads from Scandinavia to adorn their clothes?

Most things of value to people today, in a market economy, in their everyday lives, are valuable precisely because they have no price, they are too valuable to be priced, and wealth and notions of what is of value are conceptually separated and not linked to prestige. This is because
most cultural values are drawn from social relationships and personal experiences, notions of what makes a good life, and not from general economistic mental abstractions in which value is to be solely understood in terms of the kind created by exchange. Value instead relates to sentiment, thought and feeling constituted relationally through living and experiencing the world with others.

**Pebble affluence in East Devon**

Some time ago Sahlins argued that hunter-gatherers with only basic technologies available in abundance, such as digging-sticks, plenty of easily exploitable food resources and much leisure time, represented the original affluent society, because needs were easily satisfied and very little labour time was required. They were a happy lot and to be envied (Sahlins 1972: 1–39). This perspective, while much debated in hunter-gatherer studies (anthropological and archaeological), has not been considered beyond that specific context, but in fact it has a much wider relevance because this perspective directly addresses the two fundamental questions of what value is and to whom the concept applies. It raises the question of what an affluent society is and what makes it affluent. Once Sahlins had formulated this position dispelling the notion that all hunter-gatherers had a short, brutish and miserable life because they did not have stores of grain and domestic animals to eat, giving them a secure life, the vexed problem became why people should ever start to farm and adopt a ‘civilized’ way of life in the first place. It required a much greater investment in technologies, labour and land and inevitably led to various forms of social inequality and exploitation. As Sahlins notes, wants can be satisfied by producing much or desiring little (Sahlins 1972: 2). We can easily adapt this line of thinking to a consideration of local Bronze Age evaluations of wealth in the Pebblebeds landscape.

Another pertinent anthropological observation needs to be made here. In all studies of exchange it has been noted that items of rank and value are durable things. Because food is perishable it can have only transitory value and always ranks low on a scale of value. It has value (in an economic sense) because it can be converted through exchange to the acquisition of durable things such as shell necklaces and stone axes; things that endure may acquire histories through their exchange that give them further value (Graeber 2001: 44).

If the pebbles amassed in cairns and easily collected from the landscape, requiring no fabrication and little labour investment, are
regarded as a form of wealth then the East Devon Bronze Age society was fabulously wealthy. In fact it had an endless source of durable material wealth unmatched by any other area of Europe. This wealth was used in building cairns and platforms. Pebbles, as far as is known, were not drilled and used as body adornments and no objects were made out of them apart from the two flaked pebbles from Tor Cairn and Jacob’s Well discussed above.

The reason may well be that a pebble transformed is no longer a pebble. It loses its power. This was collective wealth and not individualized. What this society clearly lacked were other trappings of wealth expressed in the form of gold and metals and exotic artefacts acquired through exchange that were being valued elsewhere. Even these kinds of things might be produced anyway in sculptural arrangements of pebbles such as the double axe on Aylesbeare Common, and this was huge in size compared with any petty copper axe in circulation. Indeed the giant pebble axe can be interpreted as a grandiose display of what these people lacked: the metalwork they did not have but which they knew others elsewhere desired. However, unlike the portable artefact their axe was fixed in the landscape and could not be taken away or given to others. This static axe safely remained in place.

In a similar fashion if the Stonehenge bluestones were being transported to Wiltshire along the sea coast of southern England from south Wales to dramatically transform the Stonehenge landscape, they would be passing beneath the cliffs at Budleigh Salterton and past the Pebblebed landscape at about the same time as the small pebble cairns were beginning to be constructed. Perhaps those moving the bluestones sheltered in the mouth of the river Otter on their journey and came into direct contact with the cairn builders, who acquired knowledge of the power of these exotic stones. They found locally, amongst the pebbles, their own tiny versions of the bluestones, and duly incorporated these into their cairns. Again the pebbles substituted for exotic imports and the effort and labour that would be required to obtain them.

The cairns, as we have seen in Chapters 3 and 5, amassed pebble wealth redolent with the power of brightly coloured materials concentrated together in the landscape of pebbles. In them pebble jewels (our category of ‘special pebbles’) were deposited in place, in the landscape. The cairns were great treasure troves in which those things of utmost value, the pebbles, were carefully grouped together, side by side and layer upon layer.

These pebbles represented perfection, completeness, finesse, to the Bronze Age populations of East Devon in just the same way as a
bronze sword might signify these things to others elsewhere. In fact pebbles were a superior form of local wealth, because unlike the sword they could never be made, they could only be found in this landscape of pebbles. Pebbles embodied value precisely because they could not be made and that made them more important than anything that could be made. The colours and patterns on the surfaces of these pebbles were infinitely different from each other, infinitely complex, unlike bronze swords produced from standardized moulds that all looked the same. While swords could be duplicated, pebbles could not. Each was absolutely unique.

Pebbles were the inalienable wealth of the local community, the material media of value, which were symbolically consumed by depositing them in the cairns but the supply never ran out. Pebble wealth burst forth from the landscape: it was everywhere. These pebbles were not exchanged or given away to others, because they were the unique medium through which value was realized and understood in this local context, and that required local knowledge.

Pebbles are, as argued in Chapter 5, above all uniquely transformative stone materials. The pebbles themselves, some with eyes, were perhaps understood as sentient beings with a spirit, animate and alive. The pebbles when dry were dead. They could be animated, brought alive or be born again, by wetting them with water. Thus their value emerged from the transformation, dull to brilliant. In the brilliant state the personality of the individual pebble was displayed, contributing to its magical power, something that was immediately lost when the pebble dried out.

In other societies in the Bronze Age only permanently brilliant and colourful things seem to have been appreciated as powerful things of value in some local contexts: the amber and faience and metals found in some Wessex barrows and graves (see above). These things, however, lacked the kind of power manifest in the transformative potentialities of pebbles, in which value was linked to process.

The symbolic destruction of pebbles at Jacob’s Well made perfect sense in such a local context with its own local conception of wealth. Destroying this pebble wealth made sense locally. This was a rite of destruction forming the other side of the coin from accumulating the pebbles in the cairns. Both were alternative ways of realizing and putting on display the power of pebbles in the local context of a landscape made of pebbles, an act of celebration. Such practices would make no sense and have no meaning or value anywhere else. These were displays in which people showed themselves to themselves and their wealth to
themselves. Through these ritual acts they put on display their embodied identities in relation to the world of pebbles that they inhabited.

Gathering together and destroying pebbles was about the ability to maintain an assembly of practices, knowledges, objects and places, a sacred assemblage of pebbles. Ultimately the pebbles represented the local community in a pebbled landscape and their shared values of care and concern. They formed a medium for the material expression of identity and objectified it.