Introduction

The first century BC was a time of great upheaval in the Roman world; individuals freed themselves from the bonds of the Republic and fought openly for power. Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Caesar: all in their own way had the blood of the Republic on their hands. Finally, after generations of sporadic civil war, a new consensus began to emerge among the poor and the senatorial class alike; a consensus which could support the rule of one individual, so long as the pill was not made too hard to swallow. Thus Caesar's heir rose to become Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and the Principate began. Oligarchy gave way to autocracy.

At the same time a transformation was taking place in Britain. Over the first century BC and the early first century AD individuals rose to prominence here, too. Certain groups buried their dead using new rituals which left lasting monuments to their memory; some were interred with an opulence hitherto unseen in Britain. Meanwhile the living adopted new architectural values, giving up traditional circular norms and residing in rectangular structures instead. Alongside this, new political centres emerged, generally referred to as *oppida*. Finally, the anonymity of prehistory gave way to the arrival of the individual, made present not only by cremated bones in the ground, but also by names on coins and references in the annals of Rome. History begins.

The Roman revolution was well documented by classical contemporaries, but the literary sources for events in Britain are scarce in the extreme. However, even from these a transformation can be seen to match the changes in the archaeology. In the 50s BC, when Caesar visited Britain, he painted a picture of a country divided up under a large number of chieftains. Four 'kings' were named for Kent alone, and only under pressure from the Roman legions did the British tribes unite together under one war leader: Cassivallaunus. Yet within one hundred years the political landscape of Britain changed significantly. A series of dynasties developed and became archaeologically visible in south-east Britain. One was based in the south of England around Hampshire and southern Berkshire, whilst another was focused north of the Thames in Hertfordshire and Essex. By AD 40 one of these men, Cunobelin, predominated and was hailed in Roman annals as 'King of the Britons' (Suetonius, *Caligula* 44.2).

This book traces the rise to dominance of these dynasties of south-east Britain. The inscribed coinage of the Britons has often been used to reconstruct 'histories' for later Iron Age Britain. Accounts have been constructed which tell of the rise and fall of kings and territories, as A killed B to be succeeded by C, based upon the distribution of coin types and a few historical references (e.g. Richmond 1995).

Whilst I will do this in part, the principle aim is not an attempted reconstruction of a political-historical narrative in the sense of names, dates and territories. The main thrust of the work is an examination of the perceptions of individuals in the Iron Age, and the nature of their authority and power. How was a consensus achieved which supported the rise of these new dynasts of south-east Britain? To what extent was this the culmination of longer-term processes in Britain, and to what degree was the might of Rome a causal factor in this change?

This book uses a wide variety of evidence from several disciplines, but the primary focus is on the nature and interpretation of imagery, and how it was used by individuals to shape people's thoughts and deeds. Although various media are examined, it is coinage which provides the central material for this discussion. Whilst many of the coins discussed are illustrated, a basic knowledge of the development of coinage in Britain is essential, so I have included a short introduction or 'survival guide' as an appendix to help make clear a subject which can at times appear to be extraordinarily obscure.

The first chapter examines the situation in Britain in the years prior to Rome's interest in the island. It looks at Britain in the second and early first century BC, as hillforts began to disappear in some regions, gold reappears in the archaeological record in the form of torcs and coins, and imports from the Mediterranean world reach Britain's shores. The nature of these changes and an alternative way of looking at them are discussed.

Chapter 2 shifts the emphasis towards the use of visual media, particularly coinage, to represent individual authority. The imagery used during this period on the gold was extremely conservative, repeating images from the past with minimal adaptation or alteration. Everyone would have been familiar with this visual language. It was open and accessible, and as we shall see it had a very clear and precise meaning. This imagery is discussed in detail in order to set the scene for the revolution which was to follow.

The first two chapters bring Britain up to the time of the Gallic wars and Caesar's invasion of south-east Britain. The third chapter assesses the historical evidence, and sees significant changes taking place in the immediate period following the invasion, as demonstrated clearly in the numismatic record. These are interpreted as relating to the post-conquest settlement of Caesar in the region, and the establishment of a series of client kingdoms (more properly termed 'friendly kings'). Two dynasties thereon came to prominence in the south-east of Britain, and the rise of these families is very briefly outlined.

From the mid to late first century BC there were radical changes in the use of the imagery on coin. Writing appeared which few people would have been able to read, and a plethora of new extraordinary images appeared which few people would have been able to interpret. Imagery became exclusive and excluding and was one of the tools in the struggle for power that took place, leading to the rise of these dynasties in south-east Britain. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate this new imagery; chapter 6 deals with the language of power; and chapter 7 draws together these themes with other archaeological evidence including *oppida*, burial and the construction of temples.

The conclusions reached suggest that many of the changes in Britain were the direct consequence of a series of individuals redefining the nature of their power in the light of the development of the Principate. This influence is not the gradual indirect influence of Roman traders or commerce from northern Gaul, but is the consequence of Roman imperialism and direct contact between the elite in Britain and the elite of the Principate.

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The Middle to Late Iron Age transition

In the Middle Iron Age (*c.* 300–100 BC), many areas of central-southern Britain were dominated by hillforts. This was a pattern which had characterised the landscape for hundreds of years. But around the late second century or early first century, something happened. Many of these sites went out of occupation. The gates of Danebury, Britain's best studied hillfort, were put to the torch, and occupation at the site was scaled down. At around the same time selected sites on the south coast began to receive imports from Gaul and the Mediterranean. Another new arrival was the appearance of gold, absent here since its last appearance in the Late Bronze Age. It came first in the form of imported coin, then as locally manufactured derivatives. Finally new forms of settlements emerged, which we have taken to collectively calling *oppida*, though as we shall see in this book the nature of many of them was very diverse. These are the main changes which along with developments in burial rites have been taken to characterise the transition from the Middle to the Late Iron Age.

The story I wish to tell is of the changes which took place in Britain from the re-establishment of visible links with the continent in the late second century until the annexation of the south-east of Britain by the Roman Emperor Claudius in AD 43. The story is one of the rise to power of a series of dynasties in south-east Britain. Did these emerge gradually from the Middle Iron Age (MIA), or did they represent something fundamentally new? The hillforts of southern Britain were conventionally seen as central places and residences of a warrior elite, in which case the emergence in the Late Iron Age (LIA) of powerful dynasties could be seen as a gradual development arising out of the MIA. Yet recently this picture has been questioned and the world of hillforts is now seen as a far more egalitarian and less hierarchical place, which makes the power shift involved in the rise to dominance of a couple of dynasties over a period of one hundred years or so a far more remarkable event. It is therefore necessary to start with the MIA to paint a picture of a society which was about to change significantly, and that is the aim of this chapter. It will focus on the mid-second to mid-first century BC in central-southern Britain, where our evidence for renewed continental contact begins.

The processes of change in Iron Age Britain: Cunliffe's model
The author who has done the most to frame our narratives of this period is Barry Cunliffe. His *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (Cunliffe 1974) became the standard textbook, and with several revised editions still remains the clearest introduction to later prehistoric Britain. He has also excavated many of the sites which are crucial to

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any discussion of central-southern England. However, over the last few years a
critique has developed which has questioned some of the aspects of Cunliffe's
reconstruction of Iron Age Britain. Yet so far no coherent alternative framework has
been composed pulling together the evidence into a convincing narrative of compar-
able scope. So the best place to start would be to recap the way the Iron Age has
generally been perceived, before moving on to question certain aspects of this
reconstruction and suggest a few alternative ways of looking at things.

The most prominent landmarks of the southern British downlands in the early part
of the first millennium BC were a series of extensive hilltop enclosures (e.g. Bindon
Hill). Few have been excavated, but generally they have been conceived as serving
large-scale communal activities such as stock control and perhaps occasionally
storage; only meagre traces of occupation have been found at them. Complementing
these was a series of much smaller, tightly defended sites, or 'residential fortlets',
where dense evidence for occupation has been found (e.g. Lidbury and Highdown
Camp). These sites existed within a landscape which was increasingly divided up by
major linear earthworks. However, both these kinds of site fell into disuse in the sixth
century BC as a new type of site emerged: the hillfort.

Throughout the sixth and fifth centuries a large number of hillforts were created
and abandoned across the landscape, in what appears to have been a period of
instability, until in the fourth century things seemed to settle down with the further
enhancement of some of these sites to become 'developed hillforts'. Whilst the
detailed chronology of many of these is far from precise, it appears that they had a
relatively even spacing, and so perhaps each controlled its own relatively small
domain. They were characterised by having a capacity to store agricultural produce
beyond the immediate needs of their resident community; providing a focus for
lambing and calving activities; having elaborate defensive features well beyond the
actual requirements for defence; and also being centres for manufacturing and trade.
Cunliffe saw these changes in terms of the coming together of the functions of the
earlier hilltop-enclosures and fortlets under the control of a single competitive elite.
Possibly this was a consequence of an elite taking over the ownership of land and
livestock. He viewed abandonment of the earlier sites and the creation of new
settlements on virgin locations as a symbolic act in establishing the new order
(Cunliffe 1984:30). The period of upheaval in the sixth and fifth centuries when some
hillforts were constructed and rapidly deserted, could represent an unstable phase as
this new social order established itself.

One of the most prominent features of the Early and Middle Iron Age was the
creation of a large number of storage pits. From the sixth century onwards many
were found at Danebury, and within them various kinds of votive offerings:

> The implication seems to be that a development in the belief-system was
> taking place, quite possibly associated with intensified production, which
> might in turn be linked to the enhanced value of corn as a commodity for
> social control. Thus the model which would seem to contain the evidence is
> one which sees land holding/corn production as the medium for the

> manipulation of power, in contrast to the farmstead wherein lay individual
> power.
> (Cunliffe 1995a:98–9)

From the fourth century the grain storage pits at Danebury were supplemented by a large number of four- and six-post structures, significantly enhancing the site's storage capacity. This seems to suggest a further intensification in the productive systems, the rise in storage capacity being matched by an increase in the deposition of discarded material. But why?

> The simplest approach would be to regard it as the logical development of the
> model which sees the manipulation of agrarian surplus as the means by which
> the power of the elite was maintained. If agrarian products were concentrated
> in the fort, through the mechanisms of tribute and clientage obligation it
> would have been necessary to recycle the surplus in a manner which
> generated new products for redistribution down the social hierarchy.
> (Cunliffe 1995a:99)

This form of social organisation appears to have had a remarkable degree of success in reproducing itself over several hundred years. Occasionally certain hillforts were created and abandoned, but by and large this way for society to organise itself continued relatively unchanged. However, within this hypothetical reconstruction of society lay several factors which potentially jeopardised that stability: population increase and decline in soil fertility. As intensification took place so the potential holding capacity of the land was approached. The chalk downs of southern Britain had only a relatively thin soil and such intensive use could not be sustained for very long without significant alterations in agrarian management. The archaeological evidence suggests a rise in the importance of sheep, possibly in an attempt to improve the soil with new manuring practices; however, even the teeth of the sheep suggest that the quality of the pasture was deteriorating. Danebury had seen steady growth and intensification, but there comes a point when limits are reached and resources get harder to obtain from the locality, thereby creating potential stress. Perhaps these concerns and shortages were one factor behind the increase in propitiatory rites carried out within the hillfort in the later period. Perhaps also the stress revealed itself in increased raiding as competition for limited resources increased. The end of the classic hillfort phase at Danebury saw the destruction of the entranceway by fire and pits filled with slingstones.

Hillforts, in this reconstruction, can be considered as central places where an elite controlled and redistributed resources. This kind of picture was thought to fit in well with the classical conception of 'celtic society' which was based around clientship:

> An aristocrat would formalise a relationship with a peasant farming family,
> usually by investing with them a number of his own cattle. They would
> maintain the herd on their own land and pay a tithe, usually in the form of
> produce. This simple economic system had embedded social relationships
> within it: on the one hand the aristocrat had a vested interest in the safety of

> his client, while the client could be called upon to serve his patron when the
> need arose. Thus an aristocrat with a large number of cattle to invest was able
> to acquire a considerable surplus of consumables, which he could dispense at
> feasts, in this way gaining status, while at the same time he could call upon an
> army of followers, whenever he wished to lead an expedition or to stake a
> claim. The greater his following the greater his status – and the more chance
> he had of acquiring further loot in the raid . . . it meant that warfare, at least
> on a raiding level, remained endemic.
> (Cunliffe 1988:89)

These, therefore, were the internal stresses which the hillfort-dominated landscape
of central-southern Britain faced in the late second century BC, according to conven-
tional wisdom. Yet around 100 BC a series of rapid and substantial changes took
place. While many of the non-hillfort settlements continued in occupation (e.g.
Gussage All Saints), many of the hillforts did not, or else they underwent significant
change (Cunliffe 1995a:100). From hillforts collectively serving many of the func-
tions of the community, there appears to be a trend towards centres with discrete
roles. Specialist centres developed which articulated exchange relations with Gaul,
most obviously at Hengistbury Head. Extremely well defended 'farmsteads' ap-
peared such as Suddern Farm, continuing the tradition of excessive defensive display
from the hillforts. Specialist production sites emerged (Droitwich, Glastonbury),
and finally over the next century a series of disparate sites which have been labelled
oppida appeared, which were classically conceived as trading sites and perhaps elite
residences. This is our Late Iron Age landscape.

Internal stresses may have been a factor in weakening the existing system, but
external agency has also been invoked to try and explain these changes. In Cunliffe's
view this included the arrival of Mediterranean goods. In the late second century BC,
Hengistbury Head began to receive larger quantities of imported material than had
been seen hitherto in Britain for generations. This was seen as a consequence of the
Roman transformation of southern Gaul into a full Roman province, and the
consequent increase in Roman trading activity, procuring raw materials in the form
of metals and slaves in exchange for wine, amongst other items. This was a form of
core–periphery model which dominated discussion of the Late Iron Age in the 1980s
and early 1990s.

> It may be that access to a new range of prestige goods provided the elite with
> a mode of display which replaced raiding as a means of establishing and
> maintaining prowess. The symbols of that system – the hillforts – could then
> be abandoned and the function of redistribution could be transferred to more
> convenient locations on route nodes where major land routes crossed rivers.
> The enclosed *oppida* which developed in these valley sites are thus explained.
> (Cunliffe 1991:544)

From here on the development of south-east Britain has been related to ever-
growing closer contact with the Roman world. The indirect contact along the south

coast was disrupted by the Caesarean conquest of Gaul in the 50s BC and Caesar's visits to Britain. Thereafter routes focusing upon the Thames estuary developed and significantly increased in importance in the very late first century BC.

This is a very brief outline of the principal changes, combined with some of the ideas which have attempted to explain the transformations taking place in southern Britain in the Middle to Late Iron Age. Nonetheless, over the last decade a critique has developed within Iron Age studies that has challenged many of these notions. Indeed whilst I have used Cunliffe's narrative as an example, his writings over the last decade have themselves continually been modified and his latest work in the 'Danebury environs project', and in the Anglo-French research initiative looking at links between Armorica, the Channel Islands and southern Britain, has opened the way for a series of significant reinterpretations to be made, which we shall come to presently. But this exercise has provided us with an introductory framework which we can now seek to sustain or modify as our evidence takes us.

Aspects of the critique of the existing model

This kind of framework has been the subject of critical review, and below a few aspects of this which have a bearing on the Middle to Late Iron Age will be addressed.

One practice which has been criticised is the use of generalised models relating to the social structure and organisation of 'the celts'. What had happened was that the literary evidence from an extremely diverse range of sources was collated to construct an image of a 'celtic society' with a shared language, temperament and social structure. This form of society was viewed as dominating much of temperate Europe until its conquest by Rome; only in Wales, Scotland and Ireland did celtic society survive and struggle through into the Medieval period. This construct was used by many to colour the archaeological evidence from Iron Age Britain and the continent. This practice went back a long way, but the archaeological diversity of 'celtic societies' led some to wonder whether it was justifiable (cf. Collis 1985; Hill 1993). Also the literary sources used ranged over a thousand years and a thousand miles, from northern Italy in the fourth century BC to early Medieval Ireland. Whilst the use of such literary evidence and analogy should not totally disappear, the critique insisted that the archaeological evidence must take primacy, and any use of analogy be treated far more critically and carefully. The trend now is to explicitly explore cultural diversity across Europe in order to counteract the weight of generations of archaeological literature creating a mythical image of a unified 'celtic culture' (e.g. Cumberpatch and Hill (eds.) 1994).

When the first ten years of excavation at Danebury were published (Cunliffe 1984b), the site was interpreted as being a central place from which a social elite ruled; the scale of the defences supported the notion of raiding and endemic warfare which filled the classical depictions of 'celtic society'. However, removed from a reliance upon the literary sources, the prompt publication of this data led to a series of alternative reconstructions of the evidence. For example Stopford (1987) thought

that Danebury could be interpreted as being a seasonal communal gathering point where specific activities took place which bound together disparate individual house-holds. Hill (1996), on the other hand, questioned the very notion that there was any evidence for an 'elite' resident in the hillfort; examining some of the non-hillfort sites in the vicinity, he questioned whether there was any significant difference between hillfort and non-hillfort sites in anything other than sheer size. Generally it seemed that opinion was moving towards viewing the Middle Iron Age as having a far less ranked society than was once believed. Cunliffe tacitly considered these possibilities in one of the later Danebury volumes where he conceded that a broader-based leadership might exist, but nonetheless he chose to retain the idea of a residential elite (Cunliffe 1995a:89-101).

So do we have evidence for 'an elite' in Middle Iron Age hillforts? The problem is that archaeologically the evidence for a hierarchy of buildings within Danebury is absent. Around the edge of the hillfort were a series of roundhouses, perhaps forming small individual compounds. Cunliffe (1995a:89) calculated that there was space for about 22 in all. Nonetheless none was marked out by architectural features or material culture as being particularly different from the others. Admittedly only 57 per cent of the interior area had been excavated and so a 'chieftain's house' might have lain undetected. But equally Danebury is the largest-scale hillfort excavation to have taken place, and if clear evidence for ranking is not present here then we must consider the possibility that the representation of hillforts as residences of 'the elite' is by no means clear cut.

Another issue which has been questioned is the interpretation of the defences of hillforts as indicative of a 'warrior society'. Whilst the role of display and status has never been in much doubt surrounding these earthworks, a view that this role was perhaps far more significant has been suggested by Collis (1996). For example, at Bury Wood Camp, the size of the ditches clearly decreased as one got away from the entrance. The same feature recurs on some other smaller defensive sites in Wessex, such as Gussage All Saints (Wainwright 1979) or Oswelbury (Collis 1970; 1996:88). Other aspects of certain defences also seem peculiar. At some of the smaller sites in Wessex such as Mitchelldever Wood, Oswelbury (Phase 1) and Hurstbourne Tar-rant, the ditch appears to be on the inside of the bank instead of the outside, which is hardly a defensive measure. Since the evidence for banks is generally poor on ploughed-out sites this may have been the case at many others as well (Collis 1996:88). A possible parallel for this kind of enclosure comes from the royal sites in Ireland: Navan, Tara and Dun Ailinne (Raftery 1996).

A further idea which has been challenged is the notion that a small number of imports from Gaul and the classical world could lead to such profound changes in the settlement system and social structure. Haselgrove had been one of the key authors to promote the core–periphery model of Iron Age Britain (Haselgrove 1984b), and yet he has subsequently drawn back from this aspect of the model. Working in northern France, he attempted to quantify the number of Dressel 1 amphorae arriving in the territory of the Remi and Suessiones in north-east Gaul. He concluded

that there really were very few arriving there each year, and these must surely have exceeded the numbers going to more distant Britain in the early first century BC (Haselgrove 1996b:173).

Each of these revisionist ideas has its merits, but they have yet to be worked into a comprehensive, coherent narrative which describes and attempts to explain the process of change in MIA–LIA Britain. It is certain aspects of the later period I want to try to deal with here. So what consequences does this critique have for the MIA–LIA transition? The perception of a less hierarchical MIA has significant implications for the Later Period. This study deals with Britain from the late second century BC to the Claudian annexation of AD 43. By the end of this period a large paramount kingdom had developed within the south-east, dominated by Cunobelin. Traditional accounts have explained this as being the consequence of military expansion and conquest, fitting neatly into the old idea of a celtic warrior society. Prestige goods from the Roman world enhanced Cunobelin and his predecessors' ability to attract followers and maintain their dominant positions until they died. When hillforts were viewed as the home of local tribal chiefs and defensive centres in a society dominated by conflict, the transition from Middle to Late Iron Age appeared unremarkable. New contacts with the Mediterranean world simply enhanced the ability of some to rise to dominance over others, leading to the development of larger territorial units. The problem now is that with the removal of the warrior society, and the defensive nature of hillforts, and the hierarchy resident within them, the Middle to Late Iron Age transformation becomes an even stranger, more bewildering phenomenon. Where then did these Late Iron Age dynasties that culminated in the rule of Cunobelin come from? How did they emerge from their Middle Iron Age past?

One of the key elements in this story, which is frequently left out, is gold. Gold had been known in the Bronze Age, but the sum of all the gold found in the Early and Middle British Iron Age (outside Scotland) is one gold ring from East Yorkshire, and that has been lost (Jope 1995). This is decidedly unimpressive. But from the mid to late second century onwards gold re-emerges in the archaeological record of southern Britain in the form of coin and torcs. Both the gold *per se* and this new form of material culture, coin, were alien to Britain. As such they would have been invested with the kind of values and mystery commonly associated with goods from a distant land (Helms 1988). Finds of gold coins have been found in far more locations than Dressel 1a amphorae, and yet the potential of this medium as being a significant causal factor in the changes seen in the last two centuries BC has not been significantly addressed. It would not be too unreasonable to assume that these new forms of material culture in some ways featured in the articulation of power relationships, through either their display or exchange. In which case it is worth exploring the potential impact of their arrival a little more closely than has been done hitherto. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine what is known of the structure of authority and kingship in later Iron Age northern Europe, and how the re-emergence of gold in Britain can be tied in with other significant changes taking place in the archaeological record.