Introduction

This book is based on research conducted for a PhD examining Iron Age mortuary practices in England's southernmost counties (Lamb 2018a). The archaeological record for this part of Britain attests to the existence of a range of practices involving human remains during this period of later prehistory. Some of these practices would appear superficially similar to present day rituals, whereas others would be considered macabre by modern standards. Yet, despite the contrasting nature of some of these practices, they co-existed alongside each other for centuries. Similarities between the archaeological record of southern England and elsewhere in Britain, Ireland and the continental areas closest to Britain also suggest that a range of similar practices existed in these neighbouring regions. It is these practices and connections which are the focus of this book.

This is certainly not the first study to examine mortuary practices from this area of Britain. Indeed it is perhaps the most intensively studied region of the country, not just for the Iron Age but for other periods of prehistory also. Nor is this book the first in recent years to examine Iron Age mortuary practices in Britain. On the contrary, the past two decades have seen the completion of a number of studies, many of which are far more ambitious and novel than the research presented here. As such, this book makes no claims to be a ground breaking study. Many of the ideas discussed in this book are indebted to far more capable researchers, whilst the data examined in the following chapters are the product of the hard work of multiple generations of field archaeologists. It is hoped that this book can make a small contribution to our understanding of the Iron Age in this part of Britain, and better contextualise Iron Age mortuary practices in southern England within their local and regional frame.

Death is a biological fact that all human societies must deal with. The responses to death, however, differ greatly between communities. The European Iron Age is a particularly fascinating period to examine mortuary practices due to the variety of data (and at times lack of data) available to study. This includes widely distributed practices, such as the 4th and 3rd century BC tradition of inhumation burials in flat graves, adopted by communities from north eastern France to Hungary. Other Iron Age practices were much more localised, such as those of Brittany, but still show evidence for contacts with communities elsewhere. There are also regions where mortuary practices cannot be recognised in the archaeological record during certain periods, such as in parts of southern Germany at different times between the 5th and 1st centuries BC.

Britain is, in some ways, a microcosm of the wider European picture, with a range of practices, some widespread, others highly localised, and many communities engaging in practices that left no trace in the archaeological record. Until the 1970s, Iron Age mortuary practices were considered an important piece of evidence to help link the British and continental Iron Ages. Two insular burial groups, the 5th century BC to 1st century BC/AD Arras culture inhumation burials of the East Riding of Yorkshire, and the 1st century BC to 1st century AD Aylesford culture cremation burials of south eastern England, were viewed as being introduced from the Continent. The burials in these groups were considered aspects of cultural packages that also enabled British Iron Age chronologies to be related to the continental schemes. In addition to the Arras and Aylesford cultures, the 4th/3rd century BC to 2nd century AD inhumation burials of south western England (Isles of Scilly, Cornwall and Devon) were also considered as having potentially been introduced from Brittany (cf. Whimster 1977a, 82).

Starting in the 1960s, the continental origins of the Aylesford and south western inhumation burials were increasingly questioned (Birchall 1965; Stead 1976; Whimster 1977a;b). This occurred within a wider shift within British Iron Age archaeology that stressed the need to examine the archaeological record in social and economic terms. Emphasis was now placed on what socio-economic roles objects had played in Iron Age British societies, rather than seeking to locate their continental origins. This paradigm shift proved effective. It helped to provide a better idea of how Iron Age societies actually functioned between different parts of Britain, and demonstrated the variable, regionalised nature of the archaeological record. At the same time, however, this emphasis on the local character of Iron Age material contributed to British Iron Age researchers becoming less likely to consider how the British material compared and contrasted to continental (and Irish) data. The reasons for this shift have been examined in detail by Tom Moore and Xose-Lois Armada (2011), and include other factors such a decline in the emphasis placed on foreign languages in the United Kingdom's educational systems during the 1970s and 1980s.

Since the start of the century there have been greater efforts to contextualise the British Iron Age within a wider continental frame (e.g. Moore and Armada 2011; Webley 2015; Bradley *et al.* 2016; Pitts 2019). This has occurred at the same time that continental researchers have sought to incorporate British data into their studies (e.g. Paris 2018; Vannier 2019; 2020). It is within this research context that the work which forms the basis of this book was undertaken. The decision to investigate England's southernmost counties was based firstly on the availability of suitable quantities of sufficiently high quality data to enable a study to be undertaken. Secondly, recent decades

have also seen the completion of significant syntheses of mortuary data for elsewhere in Britain (e.g. Tucker 2010; Giles 2012; Harding 2016; Roth 2016; Bricking 2022; Legge 2022), Ireland (McGarry 2008a; O'Brien 2020), and northern France after c.550 BC (e.g. Pinard *et al.* 2009; Barral *et al.* 2010; Cahen-Delhaye and De Mulder 2014; Vannier 2019), thereby permitting comparisons between the data from southernmost England and these other regions.

The third reason for examining southernmost England is that there is evidence for contact between Iron Age communities and groups living elsewhere in Britain, the near Continent, and potentially Ireland. This suggests that similarities in mortuary practices between southernmost England and these other regions may have been more than simply coincidence, arising instead from shared ideas and ritual frameworks. The idea of common ideas between communities was a key consideration when conducting this research. Comparing and contrasting patterns in the archaeological record can be informative in its own right, but by itself does not advance our understanding of why these similarities exist. A key aim of this research was therefore to investigate the origins of these practices, their social role, and their ritual significance for the communities who practiced them.

It is these circumstances and conditions which thus led to this study being undertaking; the renewed emphasis on examining Iron Age Britain within a wider frame, the availability of data and syntheses of data, and the proximity of southernmost England to continental Europe and evidence for external contacts.