In geographical terms alone, the Ringlemere cup is pivotal. Its location extends the string of finds along the coastal strip of southern England and, moreover, fills a ‘gap’ between these western finds and those across the North Sea, in or close to the Rhinelands (Figs 28 & 32). Such a pattern is often viewed literally, the respective finds seen to be marking out routes of trade or contact. But the end-points of the individual life histories of such treasured items as the cups are unlikely to represent straightforwardly a fall-out pattern from the primary communication routes. This is emphasised by the observations made above that the cups have individual qualities, sometimes even betraying individual craftsmanship. The cups themselves have not been exchanged over distance from limited production sites (although clearly some displacement during their use-lives is possible), instead it is the core idea associated with them that has been relatively mobile within a specific geographical sphere.

If the key unifying factor for the cups is their function, is it possible that function too was inherited from the putative ceramic prototypes? Possible, yes; but the fact that unstable handled cups were frequent in the cultures to the south and east (Fig. 28) makes it hard to envisage an identical function to that for our precious cups. The ceramic versions lacking flat bases (which in fact merge into those with flat bases) would be subject to similar constraints in use, and this may have been a key feature that commended the form to north-western communities: instability gave them an element of functional exclusivity. Beyond this, however, it seems more likely that in the process of transmission the specific role of the precious cups derived from specific regional needs.

What might that regional need be? It was far from ubiquitous in north-west Europe and yet recurrent in the Channel-Rhine-Frisian zone for three or more centuries. One striking feature is the close proximity of virtually all of the cups to their respective coast-lines or the Rhine and it would be easy to link them directly to exchange activity. However, I have already argued that the cups were not themselves the object of exchange, so what other link might there be? One possibility is that the specialised role envisaged above for the cups was intimately involved in servicing a specialised communication network focussing on the waterways of the Channel-Rhine-Frisian Coast axis. Propitiatory rites of some sort would almost inevitably accompany hazardous maritime travel and it may be that the cups and their particular mode of use were quickly adopted across the whole zone as a unified response to common dangers experienced by the Channel-bordering communities who were beginning to engage more in maritime contacts.

It has long been appreciated that the early part of the 2nd millennium BC was a time of growing inter-connections on a continental scale. Links between southern Britain and mainland regions such as Armorica, west central Europe and southern Scandinavia were on the increase, although not necessarily prolific in terms of exchanged goods. Recent re-evaluation of the oft-claimed close connections between southern Britain and Armorica in the early precious cups phase (Bush Barrow/Willerby) suggests that they may have been overstated; certainly whatever the nature of the contact it did not lead to any sort of cultural unity between the two regions (Needham 2000b). Small numbers of continentally made daggers and pins were brought across to Britain and several decorated British low-flanged axes were transported outwards, mainly in an easterly direction (most recently considered by O’Connor and Cowie 2001 and Jockenhövel 2004). But in most respects the cultures on either side of the Channel were still ‘insular’. Much of the amber found in the west also belongs to this period, but even though the raw material must have been transported most if not all of the object production seems to have been local (Beck and Shennan 1991).

By the second phase of our cups (c. 1750–1500 BC), early Trevisker and early Deverel-Rimbury Wares, along with Arreton and early Acton metalwork, all have strong parallel traditions on the southern shores. Indeed, Trevisker Ware, although primarily a south-west English tradition, has also been found in Kent (Isle of Thanet), Pas-de-Calais and the island of Île Tatihou off the Normandy coast (Gibson et al. 1997). Hilversum pottery in the Netherlands also has strong echoes of the more western ceramic traditions, particularly Biconical Urns. Of relevance in this context is the Biconical Urn from Wouldham, Kent, in a grave now radiocarbon dated to 3435 ± 40 BP and 3380 ± 50 BP on cremated bone giving a mean of 3414 ± 31 BP; 1750–1640 cal BC (1-sigma; Cruse and Harrison 1983; John Cruse pers. comm.). By this stage bronze of continental origin was coming into southern Britain on a more significant scale than hitherto (Northover 1982; Rohl and Needham 1998, 179). Precious cups and the network they reflect therefore catch the opening up of a newly constituted set of cultural relations which tied together communities in southern Britain, northern France and the Low Countries (but not further up the Rhine) to some degree for the rest of the Bronze Age.

The latter half of the Early Bronze Age is in this respect the beginning of what might be termed the Channel Bronze Age, populated by Clark’s people of La Manche (Clark 2004b, 7). Parallelism in metalwork traditions on the two sides of the Channel throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Ages has been well appreciated since at least the 1960s (eg Briard 1965; Burgess 1968). Subsequently, this has found support in other material in the archaeological record, but the question as to what exactly in social and cultural terms these commonalities represent must await further discussion elsewhere.

One thing that will have become clear from the above discussion is that the Wessex core zone played relatively little part in these developments. Instead, we can suggest that it was southern areas outside the Wessex core that contrived or
monopolised the special Channel-Rhine-Frisian zone relationship. This relationship has been explored to explain why the ‘Wessex culture’ – in the narrow and more useful definition – became ever more isolated towards the end of the Early Bronze Age (Barrett and Bradley 1980, 59–64, 85–90). In this respect, it is unhelpful to think of the precious cups as being an integral part of a Wessex-inspired grave phenomenon; instead they represent different ritual processes emanating from another sphere and only marginally impinging on Wessex-specific rites (cf. Ashbee and Dunning 1960). This emphasises that we should be cautious of assuming that the two Salisbury Museum cups were found in the Wessex heartland, until such time as documentary evidence of their provenance comes to light.

This south coast/Wessex differentiation can be more fully characterised by looking at other contemporary material. One key material is amber, which is present as fine objects in both regions and, moreover, in most regions where precious cups occur. Something must be said first on whether the immediate source of the western amber objects was southern Scandinavia or the eastern coast of Britain. Not only has the latter region been recorded historically as yielding a regular supply of amber nodules washed up on the beaches, but on occasion these could be blocks of some size (Taylor 1980, 45; Shepherd 1985, 204; Beck and Shennan 1991, 17) – perhaps even large enough for the cups? Shepherd saw no reason why both the east coast and Baltic sources could not have been exploited (1985, 210), while Beck and Shennan make the point that any Baltic-type amber objects found inland in Britain would have been of a non-local material, even if from the east coast (1991, 27). The fact that an egg-sized lump of raw amber has been found at East Coulston on the northern edge of Salisbury Plain (Thomas 2005, 217), even if contemporary with Early Bronze Age usage, does not favour one conclusion over the other; instead, it would merely go to emphasise Beck and Shennan’s conclusion (1991, 63) that raw material was imported for local manufacture. This point certainly applies to the few finds from Armorica as well.

In fact, having considered patterns of amber exploitation over a wider area of Europe, Beck and Shennan (1991) concluded that most of the British Early Bronze Age amber would have come from beyond the North Sea. The lack of any concentration of worked amber along the east coast is one factor arguing against this being the primary source; Shennan’s proportional analysis shows that amber is much rarer in explored East Anglian graves than in those of Wessex (Beck and Shennan 1991, 77). It seems unlikely that the material was valued less along the east coast; it would still have been a scarce resource and the Little Cressingham find in particular illustrates association with a pre-eminent individual (Clarke et al. 1985, 275–6). One possibility is that initial acquaintance with amber from the east coast was merely the trigger to generate an appetite for this exotic substance, particularly once there was a desire in Wessex to imitate the complex northern jet necklaces with spacer plates. Against this background one can speculate that a desire grew to venture farther afield to procure the raw material.

Shennan’s thorough evaluation of British prehistoric amber highlighted that all the more complex pieces belonged to the Early Bronze Age (post Bell Beaker) and deduced clearly that they were crafted in the west – Britain and Armorica – rather than close to the Jutish/Baltic sources (Beck and Shennan 1991, 63). He envisaged the high-level craftsmen being attached to, or circulating among, high-ranking individuals in the areas where the rich burials occur, such as Wessex or Brittany (ibid, 64). However, he was also clear that although Wessex, and especially Wilts, have yielded most of the amber-associated burials, the region is not pre-eminent in respect to quantities of amber per grave. Nor does it have a disproportionate representation of ‘special types’ – defined as spacer-plates, fancy pendants, pommels and cups (ibid, 80–1). Some graves rich in amber lie outside Wessex. A revised distribution of amber finds dating specifically to the first half of the 2nd millennium bc is shown in Figure 37.

There is no evident fall-off in the distribution of amber away from the south coast and yet neither is there a single prime centre for amber finds. Instead, Shennan observes that the distribution is patchy with a number of concentrations, some clearly relating to established ritual centres. In fact only three or four graves in Wessex contain enough beads along with a set of spacer plates to have formed a spacer-plate crescentic necklace (Woodward 2002, 1043–4); the usually smaller quantities of amber beads in grave groups may sometimes have been residual portions of necklaces which had circulated and suffered losses or been split up over a long period of time. In relation to the presumed zone of entry along the south coast, Shennan ventured that Hengistbury Head, whence comes a Wessex 1 group with, inter alia, a slotted incense cup, was ‘a point where exotic items such as amber were introduced’ (ibid, 84–5).

Most innovative, however, was Shennan’s assessment of the raison d’être for the ‘trade’ in amber, drawing upon Helms’ ideas on the potential cosmological references made by the material. Helms had previously pointed out that amber can easily be seen in the perspective of elite acquisition of esoteric knowledge – ‘indeed the temptation to do so is virtually irresistible given the strange properties of the material and the unusual nature of its source in the sea’ (Helms 1988, 129). This latter ‘property’ of amber may have seemed to the mariners of our maritime exchange network to be an especially pertinent connection.

Despite his extremely well-balanced evaluation for the most part, Shennan’s conclusion placed too much emphasis on the Wessex-specific associations for Early Bronze Age amber. It is true that Wessex was able to procure a good share of amber due to its prominent spiritual legacy (Fig. 37; Beck and Shennan 1991, 72 fig. 6.1), but the control exercised by the southern coastal communities allowed them to monopolise at least some of the prize blocks of amber, especially those suitable for carving out a cup. Indeed, when larger blocks were available, careful working might create primary off-cuts of sufficient size to manufacture small objects, notably beads. The Hambledon amber pommel and the two amber bracer-ornaments from Armorican tombs would also have each required a modest sized block. It is, moreover, the cups and pommels that Shepherd sees as requiring the ‘most exacting and lengthy process’ in their manufacture (1985, 212).

In considering relative densities of finds, we should never overlook the incontrovertible over-representation of Wessex distributions due to historical factors. The fact that amber has turned up at Ringlemere, just the second find of Early Bronze Age amber from Kent, may be telling in this regard. It is also of interest that northern France, a zone incredibly poor in excavated Early Bronze Age burials, has yielded a large domed
button of amber, from Wimereux, Pas-de-Calais, just across the Straits of Dover (Fig. 37); Blanchet was unsure whether it was of Beaker date or full Early Bronze Age (Blanchet 1984, 95 fig. 42), but the latter seems more likely on the British parallels.

Looking eastwards along our maritime axis, it transpires that there is also a remarkable concentration of Bronze Age amber finds in the south-east of Drenthe province, Holland (around Emmen) – a combination of necklaces (including beads of other materials) found in graves and bog hoards (Butler 1990, 48). This cluster lies just 25km away from the Gölenkamp cup’s findspot (no. 4) in the Spöllberg domain of Germany, which juts into Holland in this stretch of the border.

Although the possible date range suggested by Butler for these amber finds is broad, c. 10th–12th centuries BC, it spans the date of the cup. The find dated earliest in the sequence is the famous necklace from Exloërmond, which includes a mixture of amber, faience, tin and bronze beads and pendants. Two of the amber ornaments are trapezoid pendants with just rare parallels: eight in the Kernonen grave already discussed in relation to the Ringlemere pendant, one from Wilsford G7 and a surface find from Holland (Butler 1990, 54).

There are also two important contemporary finds to the south-west of Spöllberg, again just across the Dutch border. One is a grave group with amber beads, bronze wire ornaments and a bronze cone (?button cover), the other a probable warrior’s grave of the Sögel/Wohlde phase (c. 1700–1500 BC; Butler 1990, 76–8 no. 13, 84–6 no. 15). The striking absence of relevant finds in the Spöllberg itself must surely have something to do with poor recovery rates on the German side of the border.

The implications of the Drenthe amber cluster is that the region was able to procure amber objects over a longish passage of time (though perhaps less than seven centuries) and, moreover, that there was continuity in given practices of necklace deposition. The source of the amber may not have been far distant, since it can be collected on the Frisian coast to the north and even inland in glacial moraine deposits (Butler 1990, 52; Brongers and Woltering 1978, 104–7). We should not therefore presuppose that amber would be regarded as exotic and valuable as it evidently was further west. Nevertheless, it is hard to resist the conclusion that amber consumption and use of precious cups were again connected in this small zone straddling the Dutch/German border.

Amongst other materials relevant to our Channel-Rhine-Frisian network are the decorated tin-bronze axes of British/
Irish origin so well known from southern Scandinavia and northern central Europe (Megaw and Hardy 1938; Butler 1963). The probable hoard of five from the coast at Lydd, Kent (Fig. 38), implies that sufficient were in circulation in the far south by the Willerby stage to allow the permanent deposition of ‘surplus’, a situation which would certainly lend itself to their distribution to the lands beyond the sea (Needham 1988b). The tin content and frequently also the patterns of decoration of British axes would have made them unusual if not mysterious and the deposition of one in the large Dieskau 2 hoard in Saxo-Thuringia (von Brunn 1959) perhaps testifies to the high regard in which it was held.

The occurrence of multiple-axe deposits of Willerby stage in near-coastal locations (Willerby, Trenovissick, Lydd) gives a foretaste of the distribution of the more numerous Arreton stage hoards (Fig. 38). Of interest to us among three or four regional groups is that spread along the south coast; no fewer than seven hoards between Devon and Kent, that from Buckland, Dover, lying just 15km south of Ringlemere. Five more hoards occur south of the Thames-Severn line, four of them lying little inland from the Severn estuary. Looking at the types present in these hoards – now no longer simply axes – there proves to be another highly significant connection eastwards along our maritime network. Nine of 12 of these southern hoards contain one or more bronze spearheads, a totally new type in the British metalwork repertoire. By constrast, of nine hoards in north Wales and its Marches and in eastern England, only one contains a spearhead (Ebnal). The inclusion of spearheads in most of the southern deposits is not a reflection of the introduction of the type per se, for single finds also occur further north. The real significance of this pattern seen in the associations probably lies more in the regional adoption of a custom of hoard deposition which involved spearheads for the first time, perhaps following continental precedents. This would appear to be another direct outcome of the Channel-Rhine-Frisian sphere of interaction.

Unalloyed tin may well also have played a part of these exchanges, but we need to be careful not to overstate its role. Undoubtedly some tin passed east to the Continent; it was used purely ornamentally as studding on the Bargeroosterveld knife pommel and for the tubular segmented beads in the Exloërmond necklace (Clarke et al. 1985, 148 fig. 4.82, 313; Sheridan and Shortland 2004, 267, ill. 21.32). If some tin was also supplied for addition to central European copper, there is
no sign of a significant impact before Reinecke A2 (Pare 2000, 18–20) and at this stage it is most likely that the massive amount of tin required to convert the prodigious central European copper production into bronze was largely based on sources within the region. The true role of western tin and the alloyed bronze objects it made possible may thus have been to stimulate an interest in alloying further east.

Looking further at reverse flows, east to west, it is probable that early in the period concerned here, around the 19th century BC, faience was introduced to Britain from central Europe (Sheridan 2004, 265–6). While it is not yet clear if more than occasional British finds are actual imports, it is now established from typology and composition that the majority must be of indigenous production, so the key transfer was one of specialist technological knowledge rather than manufactured objects. Locally, it is significant that four faience beads accompanied a cremation burial under a barrow at Ringwould overlooking the Channel between Dover and Deal (Woodruff 1874, 24; Grinsell 1992, Ringwould-with-Kingsdown 1). The same burial contained an incense cup of the highly pertinent slotted type discussed above (Fig. 33.3).

Other influences seen in the west drew on the far east of the Channel-Rhine-Frisian axis. Although no Aunjetitz axes as such have been found in Britain, a number of Arreton flanged axes show distinct aspects of style which are best seen as derived from them (Needham 1979, 278–80). The best examples come from coastal areas or not far inland: Ramsgate, on the Isle of Thanet in Kent; Plymstock, Devon; Abbeville, Somme (Fig. 39). A second, squat style of axe within the Arreton repertoire has been linked to axes in north-west Germany (ibid, 275–6; see also Kibbert 1980, type Oldendorf). Without the privileged axis of connections under discussion the geographical distance between the Arreton and Aunjetitz-Baltic spheres would make explanation of these similarities difficult. But yet other, more specific links drive home the reality of a connection along this east-west axis.

One is the Aunjetitz-inspired ribbed armlet from a grave at Shorncote, Gloucestershire (Needham 2000c, 37; Barclay and Glass 1995), but more intriguing are the halberd pendants found in three southern English graves. These are miniaturised imitations of the magnificent metal-shafted halberds of the northern Aunjetitz zone (Piggott 1973; Needham 2000a, 51; Wüstemann 1995) and can have no practical significance other than proclaiming some distant link. They must again be locally manufactured, but represent an alien type and incorporate materials drawn from afar, including amber from the same direction. One of the halberd pendants is from a grave on the coast at Hengistbury Head, Hampshire; the other two from close to Stonehenge. These have been interpreted as prime examples of cosmologically-driven acquisition of materials and ‘knowledge’ (Needham 2000a, 51; 2000b, 187), but could they also have a more immediate significance? The graves contain a rich array of fine ornamental gear and are thought to be those of women. It may not be inconceivable that these were elite marriage partners drawn from the far east for whom the halberd pendants were a symbol of their homelands. One of the individuals (Wilsford G8) was also accompanied by a torc pendant, thought to be imitating the abundant copper ingot-tors of central Europe.

These particular grave groups raise another highly significant connection in relation to Ringlemere. Among the finery in the Manton Preshute grave is also one of the two amber pommels which most closely parallel that from Ringlemere. Both this grave and that from Wilsford G8 contain the gold-bound amber discs that relate to the Ringlemere pendant fragment (Annable and Simpson 1964, 100-1 figs). These important cross-linking finds illustrate that although there are very significant differences between the communities of the Wessex heartland and the coastal zone, they were nevertheless engaged in a socio-economic relationship which was probably of a symbiotic nature.

There is no need to say much about the mechanics of our network here. With the very recent full publications relating to the Dover Bronze Age boat (Clark (ed) 2004a, 2004b), there is a wealth of detail about the practicalities of early sea-faring and the capabilities of the sewn-plank boats that continue to appear in the British Bronze and Early Iron Age. For our purposes, suffice it to say that much opinion is in favour of vessels such as those at Dover and Ferriby being fit for sea-going travel in the element conditions that early mariners will always have sought (if not always found). It would also appear from finds to date, that this new way of constructing boats emerged during the first three centuries of the 2nd millennium (Wright 2004). We can therefore see them as a specialised artefact being developed, just as the cups, for the conduct of certain inter-regional relations which were becoming desirable for the acquisition of exotic materials and knowledge. As Clark says (2004a, 321) ‘even today, the vessels that negotiate the dangerous and alien sea away from the security of land can still excite a relationship that transcends the rational’.
Chapter 8: Networks of Contact, Exchange and Meaning; the Beginning of the Channel Bronze Age

Figure 39 Aunjetitz-inspired flanged axes in the west and two eastern parallels: a) Plymstock hoard, Devon; b) Abbeville, Somme; c) Ramsgate, Kent (after Bronze Implements Index); d) Neuenheiligen hoard, Upper Saxony; e) Aebelnaes, Seeland, Denmark (after Aner and Kersten 1976, 189 no 1318). Scale 50%
Conclusions

The precious cups, then, relate to a specific maritime contact network, not to maritime connections in general nor, indeed, to exchange in general. Although exchanges of materials, objects, skills, knowledge, artisans and marriage partners are likely to have been among the driving forces behind its creation, the network represented a sphere of more exclusive interaction which worked independently of other spheres which bound other sets of communities together. Inevitable and regular exchanges inland in Britain did not carry the precious cup concept with them. Similarly, the long eastern coasts of Britain reveal no equivalent artefact type (discounting the fragments from Northumberland – Chapter 6) and yet the Ferriby boats attest to water-borne contact there in the Early Bronze Age (Wright 2004; Wright et al. 2001). The cups belong therefore to one particular network operating with its own particular ideological and organisational framework. The east coast of Britain must have had one or more different networks with different preoccupations, objectives and sanctions. Prominent in that network, whether by land or sea, was the widespread distribution of Whitby jet (Shepherd 1982; Sheridan and Davis 2002). By contrast the distribution map for Early Bronze Age amber (Fig. 37) shows only a handful of finds north of the Wash.

The precious cups have therefore helped us to identify a specific mechanism within the otherwise generalised evidence for cross-Channel and cross-North Sea exchange. They mark out a set of sea-faring communities who shared a common understanding of how to engage in such ventures and what propitiatory precautions to take. Through that understanding they were able to maintain more exclusive rights to the network and thus ensure the acquisition of exotics for cosmological purposes (Needham 2000b). This was of multidirectional benefit. The amber so prized at this time in southern England and, to a lesser extent, Armorica was actively procured as raw material from the shores of the North Sea (or beyond in the Baltic) for working locally. This may suggest that, once the medium for transmission could be constructed, it was the western communities who were proactive in procurement, rather than simply receptive to available ‘traded’ goods.

Conversely, the decorated bronze axes of western origin, once they became known in the east, may have been actively sought for their special aesthetic and magical properties rather than any functional advantage. Tin was valued in the east, at least in part, as a novel and scarce decorative medium.

The hypothesis of the ritual servicing of a maritime exchange network seems to make sense of these extraordinarily unusual and highly crafted objects – the precious cups – which are both comparable to one another and yet individually ‘singular’ (sensu Kopytoff 1986, 73–7; see also Fontijn 2001). Their singular nature stems from the need to produce something which is highly special and community specific – the sacred object of the group (Godelier 1999). Their comparability stems from a common acceptance of the role these vessels needed to play in ensuring the success of a new venture in fostering inter-regional elite interactions. The communities participating in the network understood the need for some commonalities in order to assure their membership of the club, but this did not necessarily mean that all aspects of their respective cultures were similar or became so. Nevertheless, precious cups can be seen to stand at a turning point in the cultural constitution of cross-Channel relations.

What has emerged from the fieldwork around the gold cup’s findspot at Ringlemere – a sizeable monument, a major monument complex surrounding that, and fine artefacts of another exotic material, amber – on the surface appear to be in emulation of the comparable complexes in Wessex. It may be that the regionally large complexes here and at Broad Down, Devon, do reflect some influence from that direction; an active engagement between Wessex and the southern coastal zone is not in doubt. However, our analysis of artefacts contemporary with the precious cups shows that far from the coastal zone simply emulating a Wessex-led ideology, it was developing its own novel and distinctive character featuring, above all, regionally specific rituals connected to maritime exchange. Perhaps initially stimulated by a desire in Wessex to add amber to its ritual riches, the coastal communities began to look ever more to and across the sea to satisfy certain social needs. But this new outlook on the part of the coastal communities was to last and proved to have a profound effect on the longer-term development of Bronze Age culture in north-west Europe.