

Two Late Iron Age warrior burials discovered in Kent

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Excavations by the Institute's Field Archaeology Unit of a Late Iron Age and Early Romano-British site at Brisley Farm south of Ashford in Kent have revealed a pair of warrior burials (inhumations with weapons) within square-ditch enclosures dated to AD 10–50. Here the excavation director describes this surprising discovery and discusses its significance.

Burials accompanied by weapons have been found only rarely by archaeologists studying the Late Iron Age of southern Britain, as the following quotation indicates:

Before this discovery only nine confirmed warrior burials of this period had been found in England south of the Humber: only four of those had been excavated on archaeological excavations, only three had been found with brooches (one incomplete) and only one with pottery. So the discovery of two more burials with sets of warrior equipment is rare indeed, and for one of them to be associated with a brooch and three pots is unique in Britain.¹

The project

Since 1999 the Field Archaeology Unit (known commercially as Archaeology South-East) has carried out five rescue excavations at Brisley Farm, 3 km south of Ashford in Kent (Fig. 1). The project is developer funded and is keyed into phases of residential house construction.² In June 2001, within two days of our starting to

strip the surface by machine, two square-ditch enclosures (later found to contain the warrior burials) were revealed, and it became clear that this was an unusually complex site. A more refined research strategy was therefore required, one that could be developed during the excavation. Sue Hamilton of the Institute's staff helped to devise this strategy and has been closely involved with the project since it began.³

Death in the Iron Age

For much of the Iron Age, which lasted in southern Britain from c. 700 BC to AD 43, there is little archaeological evidence of the dead. The methods of disposal used probably included deposition in water, excarnation (the exposure of bodies in the open), and the scattering of cremated remains. Inhumation burial does occur, but mostly as a localized rite, for example in east Kent, Hampshire, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall.⁴ In many of these burials the body is crouched and tucked up in a foetal position, a tradition that may be native to Britain and differs from the extended burials more typical elsewhere in Europe. At Mill Hill, near Deal in east Kent, burials start with a single crouched inhumation in

the fourth century BC. This is followed, in the second century BC, by an extended warrior burial furnished with sword, shield and crown, all British in origin.⁵ It is the earliest extended inhumation burial at the site and it marks the introduction of a rite that remained the norm here, although without weapons, for the rest of the Iron Age and into the Roman period.

Two other regional burial rites of significance stand out: the Arras tradition of east Yorkshire and the Aylesford tradition of Southeast England. Both have strong continental affinities, the Arras tradition being an inhumation practice beneath barrows within square-ditch enclosures, similar to those at Brisley Farm, whereas the Aylesford tradition was a cremation rite involving the placing of cremated remains in a grave with pots and other artefacts. The Arras tradition dates to between the fifth and first centuries BC, and is thought to represent a rite adopted from the continent by a native population in Yorkshire. Cremation had been prevalent in the Middle and Late Bronze Age, but was not characteristic of most of the Iron Age. However, the Aylesford cremation rite was introduced into Southeast England from northern France during the late second or early first century BC and is the type of burial rite that one would expect to find at a Late Iron Age site in Kent. Indeed cremation burial was taking place on the Brisley Farm site between about 50 BC and AD 50. But at Brisley Farm and across Britain weapons are not found with cremation burials, with the exception of a single site, Stanway in Essex.

In contrast to these burial rites, warrior burials (inhumations with weapons) are spread geographically throughout Britain and from northern France to eastern Europe, and they occur throughout the Iron Age. In Britain they date to between the third century BC and AD 43, whereas on the continent similar types of burial, for example in the Marne region of France, date from the early fifth century BC. In Britain, 32 such burials are known, 20 of which are located north of the Humber, with a particular concentration in east Yorkshire. Before the discoveries at Brisley Farm, only nine Late Iron Age burials with weapons were known south of the Humber. Their distribution is strikingly dispersed: one each in Norfolk, Essex, Kent (at Mill Hill), the Isle of Wight, the Hampshire mainland, Dorset, Gloucestershire, the Scilly Isles and Anglesey. The excavation of the two burials at Brisley Farm offers one of the first opportunities outside Yorkshire to investigate the relationship of warrior burials and square barrows to the contemporary settlement landscape.

The association of the square-ditch enclosures with the warrior burials at Brisley Farm is unique in southern Britain and the practice may originally have come from the continent. But initial study of the Brisley Farm weapons suggests that they are

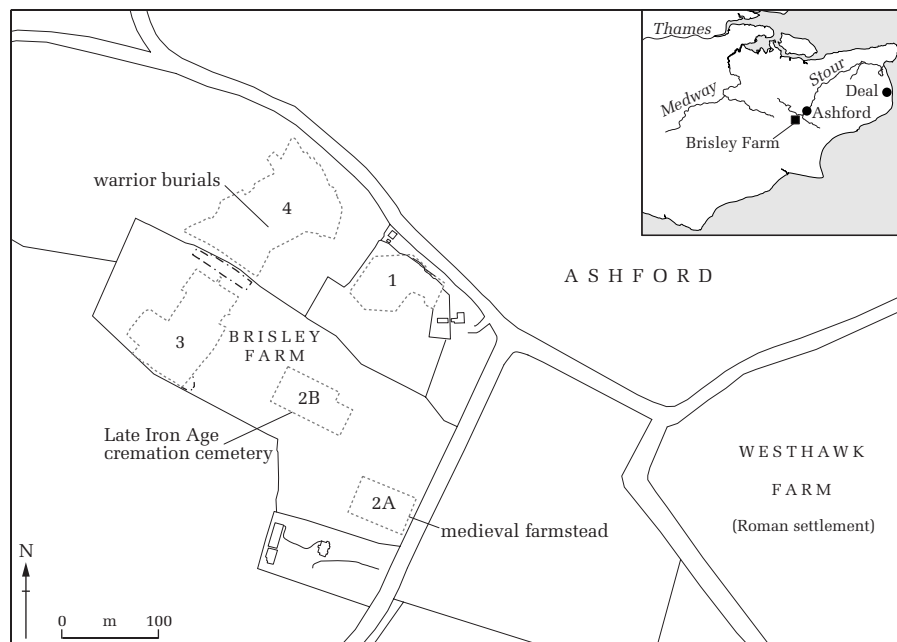


Figure 1 The location of the Brisley Farm site in Kent, showing the positions of the four areas of excavation (1–4) and the nearby Roman settlement at Westhawk Farm.

British in origin and not imported. However, the pottery is all imported, although there is nothing unusual about that in the Late Iron Age. Neither are the graves exceptionally wealthy when compared with some of the cremation burials of the period. Why so few warrior burials have been found is not yet understood, but it is clear that not all who fought with weapons were given this form of burial.

The site

Brisley Farm is located on poorly drained Weald Clay soils at 40 m above sea level, on the watershed between the rivers Medway and Stour in Kent (Ordnance Survey map reference TQ992402; Fig. 1). The land was repeatedly ploughed during the twentieth century, as a result of which the archaeological remains were badly damaged. The acidity of the soil and the fluctuating level of groundwater have tended to blur and merge boundaries between earth fills and the natural underlying clay, making it difficult to distinguish archaeological features. A team of 20 people excavated the 2 ha site from June 2001 to February 2002 against tight deadlines determined by the phases of house construction, and we used plastic polytunnels in order to make possible continuous excavation through the four winter months.

Settlement history of the site

One of the first objectives of the excavation was to sequence and date the evolution of the site and place the two warrior burials within that history. Few sites are known in Kent with the complexity of enclosure that is evident at Brisley Farm, and it provides an opportunity to explore questions of overlap and succession in what was a period of major reconfiguration of settlement patterns in lowland Britain. However, there are few large published Late Iron Age pottery assemblages from Kent with which to compare the results from the Brisley Farm excavations, although current excavations in Kent, resulting from housing and railway development, may soon yield more comparative data.

Post-excavation analyses of excavation data have not yet been completed, but a broad story is now emerging. It is of a landscape already cleared and farmed by the second millennium BC. Only ditches and pits of this period have survived, but their extensive and regular nature indicate a well organized large-scale division of the land. There is then a break of perhaps a thousand years, when no datable features can be recognized within the site boundaries, until the second century BC when settlement activity is evident in the northern part of the site (Fig. 2, north of the axial ditch). During the first century BC and the early part of the first century AD, a new settlement developed rapidly on lower and wetter ground in the southern part of the site, associated with an area to the east, apparently used for cremation-related

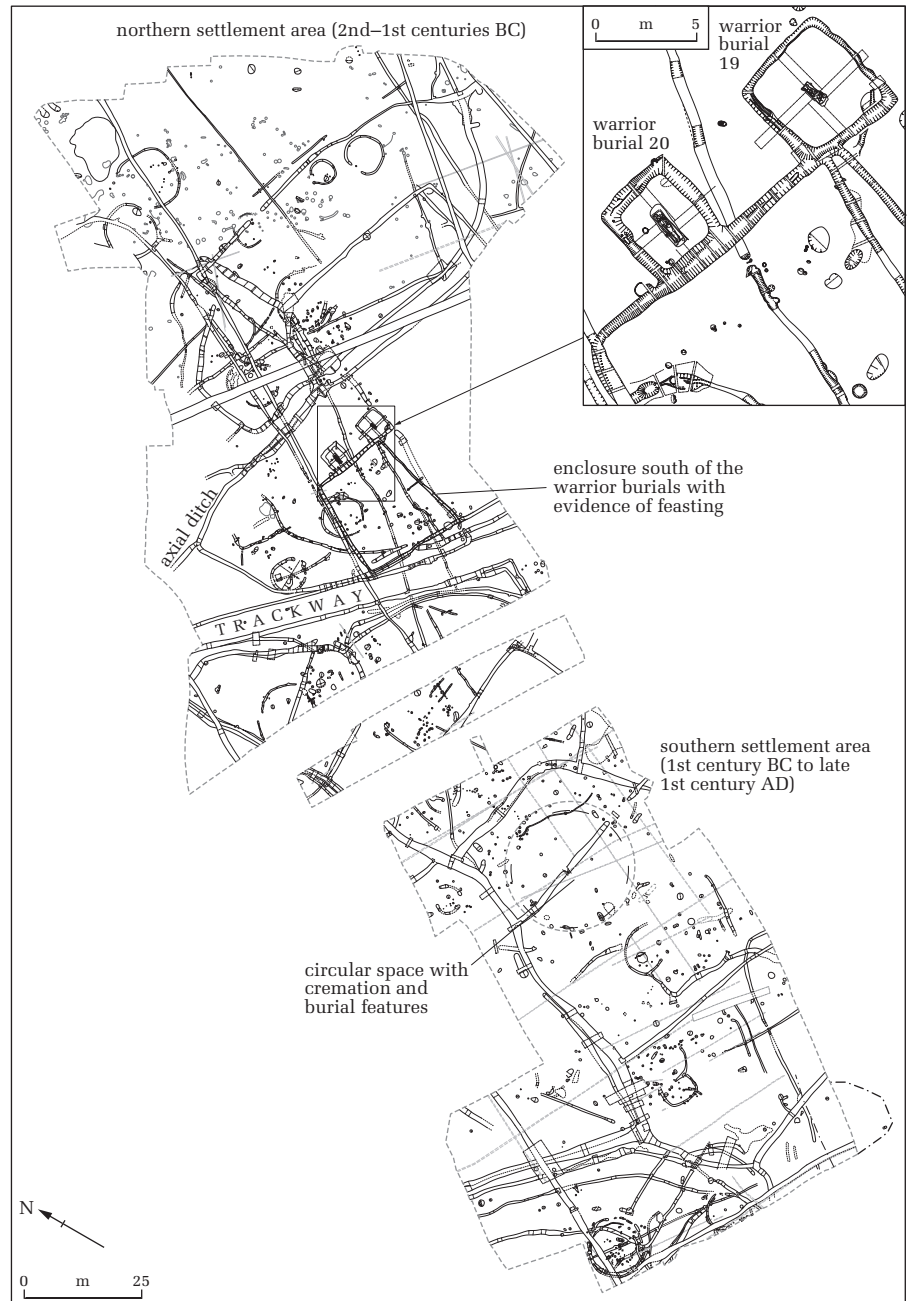


Figure 2 Plan of excavation areas 3 and 4, showing the positions of the Late Iron Age to Roman settlements and of the two warrior burials (inset).

activities and burials (Fig. 1, areas 3 and 2B). Within excavation area 3 there is evidence of a circular space, about 24 m in diameter, around which are distributed cremation burials and other cremation-related features (Fig. 2).

The two warrior burials (referred to as B19 and B20; Fig. 2, inset) lay within, and as part of, an enclosure between the earlier northern settlement and the later southern settlement. On the basis of pottery found in the graves, both burials are thought to date to between AD 10 and AD 50.⁶ Shortly after the Roman conquest (which started in AD 43) an attempt was made to reorganize the southern settlement by dividing it into regular plots and turning what had been a space between enclosures into a trackway

with ditches on either side (Fig. 2). There is little evidence for continued activity in the northern area after the conquest and, despite attempts to reorganize the other areas of the site, activity during the Roman period focused on the warrior burials north of the trackway and in the enclosures south of it. By the early to mid-second century AD the whole site appears to have been abandoned. As a result of either force or economic necessity, the population may have moved to the recently developed Roman crossroads settlement at Westhawk Farm, 750 m to the east (Fig. 1).

The warrior burials

We do not yet know whether the two warriors were local or foreign, or how they

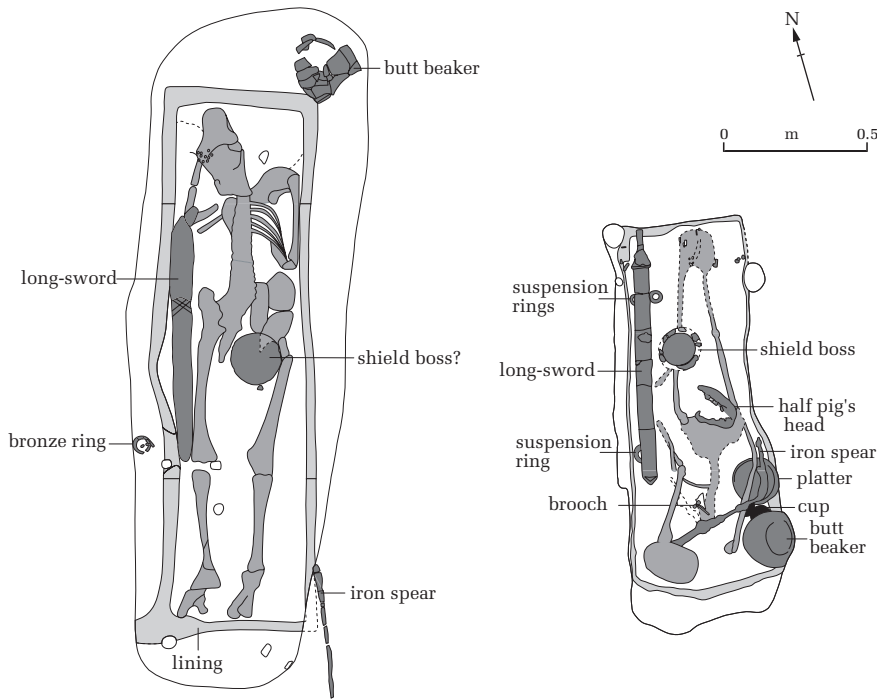


Figure 3 Plans of the grave cuts of the two warrior burials – B20 left and B19 right – showing the location of the bodies and the grave goods (see also Figs 4, 5).



Figure 4 Warrior burial B19, prior to the lifting of the grave goods; the butt beaker, bent iron spear, shield boss and long-sword are clearly visible (horizontal scale bar 40 cm).



Figure 5 Warrior burial B20, looking south, showing the butt beaker (upper right) and outline of the container; the stain of the skeleton is faintly visible (vertical scale bar at left 50 cm).

died. However, we do know that both were male and that they were buried in extended positions, on their backs, with weapons and imported pottery. Both graves lie within square-ditch enclosures (Fig. 2, inset) that are assumed to have defined barrow mounds. Although they appear to be similar, they reveal variations in what might otherwise be regarded as a standard burial rite.

The earlier of the two warrior burials (B20) was the more monumental of the two and, despite the apparent addition of the more hastily constructed B19, which appears to have been part of an enclosure boundary, it was B20 that became the focal point for a rectangular ditched enclosure to the south (Fig. 2). Deliberately broken pottery vessels, and cremated and unburnt animal bone (mostly cattle teeth and jaws), were deposited in a ditch running along the southern side of B20 and B19 (Fig. 2, inset). These deposits suggest significant funeral feasting and the continued veneration at the site of the tombs of the warriors during the early Roman period.

The graves

The grave cuts of both B19 and B20 were centrally placed within the square-ditch enclosures and orientated from north-northeast to south-southwest (Fig. 2, inset). The B19 grave cut (Figs 3, 4) was small, 1.5 m long by between 50 cm and 60 cm wide. The depth of the base of the grave is estimated to have been only 40–45 cm from the original ground surface. The outline of the B19 grave was irregular, and the body, although small, hardly fitted the cut. The burial appears to have been rather rushed or unplanned. By contrast, the B20 grave cut (Figs 3, 5) was large, measuring 2.45–2.55 m long by 80–90 cm wide. The grave is estimated to have been nearly 80 cm deep, with vertical sides and a flat base. Both graves revealed evidence for the body having been placed in some form of coffin-like container, because a blue-grey clay lining was found in both, very irregular in B19 and very regular and coffin shape in B20. The clay has replaced

the decayed remains of some organic material, most probably a wicker or woven container in which the body was lowered into the grave.

The warriors

Warrior burial B19 contained the body of a young adult male. He was only about 1.57 m (5'2") tall, and was buried with his head at the south end of the grave. The body was slightly twisted, with the hips pushed over towards the east wall of the grave and the feet placed centrally, but with the head in the southwest corner. The body was placed in the grave on its back, with the arms lying by the sides of the hips. Warrior burial B20 contained the body of a young adult male of larger stature, about 1.78–1.83 m (5'10"–6") tall. The body is assumed to have been on its back, with the head this time at the north end of the grave, the right arm apparently beneath the head and the left arm across the chest. Both skeletons were very poorly preserved because of the relatively acidic soil and the fluctuating groundwater levels, so exact age estimates or details about pathology could not be established.⁷

The grave goods

Warrior burial B19 was the richer of the two. The first objects to have been placed in the grave, and within the container, were a butt beaker (a type of large drinking vessel for wine or beer), a platter and a small cup (Figs 3, 4, 6). The platter has a maker's stamp (CANICOS-) on it and is known to have been made at Sept-Saulx

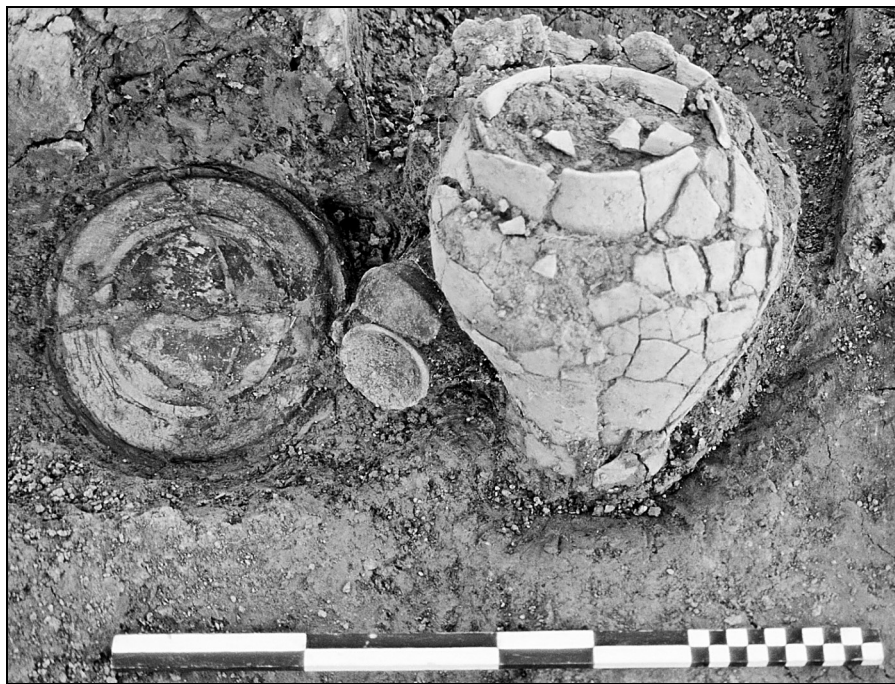


Figure 6 In situ view of the imported platter (left, upside down), cup (centre) and butt beaker (right) in the southeast corner of the B19 grave (scale bar 20 cm).

in the Marne département of northern France, some time between AD 20–25 and AD 40–45.⁸ Close to the platter lay the remains of half a pig's head, although this appears to have been placed in the grave after the platter and the body. Along the left (west) side of the body, a long iron sword with three suspension rings was laid, with the hilt at the feet (north) end. Initial examination has shown that the sword was in a scabbard made of wood and leather,⁹ and may have had a bone handle. A spear, the iron head of which had been bent almost at a right angle, lay across the upper chest and right arm, close to a simple copper-alloy brooch. Over the left knee lay a conical iron shield boss, but the shape of the shield (other than the boss) is not known, because no traces of it survived. At the north end of the grave, five iron nail-like objects were found lying in a line across the level of the ankles.

Warrior burial B20 (Figs 3, 5) was not so richly furnished and probably dates to between AD 10 and AD 30. Accompanying the body within the container was a long iron sword lying down the right (west) side of the body, with the hilt at the north end by the shoulder. It is likely that a shield had been placed over the body, the only indication of which was a circular stain, thought to represent the shield boss, above the area of the upper left leg. Within the grave but outside the container were found a long iron spearhead, thrust into the southeast wall of the grave above the level of the body (and presumably the container), a circular ring of bronze, and an imported butt beaker made between 10 BC and AD 20.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the two graves continued as a focus for feasting and ritual into the late first or early second century AD (possibly into the late second century). This raises questions about the identity of the two individuals and their relationship both to the native society, for whom they were clearly men of great significance, and to the Roman administration, which seems to have tolerated their veneration.

The warrior burials at Brisley Farm belong to a tradition that in Britain dates back to at least the second century BC and is represented by nine previously known examples dispersed around southern Britain. There is also a concentration in Yorkshire, where the warrior burials show close parallels – in their north–south body orientations and square-ditch enclosures – with those at Brisley Farm. It is likely that this burial rite was introduced from the continent, where it has been recognized across a wide area from France to Hungary, starting in the middle of the first millennium BC and fading out with the expansion of the Roman empire. By the time of the warrior burials at Brisley Farm (AD 10–50) the tradition seems to have all but disappeared on the continent.

The unusual nature and distribution of warrior burials in Britain have prompted the suggestion that they may represent refugees from the continent, fleeing the advance of the Romans.¹⁰ However, this conflicts with the presence of native British weapons in the graves, and so the origins or cultural affiliations of the individuals who were buried remains unresolved. We hope that analysis of the human teeth and bone that survived at Brisley Farm may

help to answer this question. What is perhaps more significant is that such burials were probably reserved for a very few select individuals in Late Iron Age society. Is it possible that we are witnessing the appearance in Britain of an elite class comparable to the knights of medieval Europe? Warrior burial, a tradition that arose in northern continental Europe, may have made its last appearance at Brisley Farm on the eve of the Roman conquest.

Notes

1. Personal communication from Dr Ian Stead (a freelance archaeological consultant, formerly on the staff of the British Museum). I would like to thank him for providing data and for commenting on this article while he was still engaged in a full analysis of the metalwork from the two graves.
2. Archaeology South-East is very grateful to the developer, Ward Homes, for financing the excavation, post-excavation analyses and publication of the site.
3. I am grateful to Dr Sue Hamilton for reading this article and to the Institute of Archaeology for helping with additional research and publication costs arising from the excavations.
4. R. W. Whimster, *Burial practice in Iron Age Britain: a discussion and gazetteer of the evidence c. 700 BC–AD 43* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 24, 1981).
5. K. Parfitt, *The Iron Age burials from Mill Hill, Deal* (London: British Museum, 1995).
6. The pottery evidence indicates that B20 is the earlier of the two burials, dating it to between AD 10 and AD 30, whereas B19 is dated to between AD 30 and AD 50, which puts it tantalizingly close to the Roman conquest.
7. Remains of human bones and teeth were recovered in soil blocks and are being studied by Jackie McKinley of Wessex Archaeology; initial *in situ* measurements of the traces of the skeletons were made by Lucy Sibun of the UCL Field Archaeology Unit.
8. Personal communication, Dr Malcolm Lyne (a freelance archaeological consultant).
9. Personal communication from Vanessa Fell of English Heritage.
10. See Whimster (1981: n. 4 above).