One of the major interpretive challenges faced by archaeology is how to extrapolate from similarity and difference in assemblages of material culture to the form of social relationships which produced them. Can similarity in style be mere coincidence or is it a symptom of shared ancestry? Does difference signal that social relations were weak? Or, were differing styles deliberately deployed to establish and police distinct social boundaries, over which contact was prolific? In finding answers to these questions, context is surely everything. In the case of this volume, the context is the short stretch of water, only some 20 miles across at its narrowest point, which divides Britain and Ireland from the continent. At various times over the last hundred years of archaeological research, the Channel has been characterised as a ‘bridge’, over which the colonisers came, or as a ‘barrier’, leaving the prehistoric communities of Britain and Ireland isolated. In *Continental Connections*, the editors set out to move beyond such simplistic either-or scenarios, to chart the different forms of contact, exchange and migration that took place in order to present new understandings of the relationships that crossed the Channel. It could be argued that after a period in which prehistory has favoured smaller-scale studies, renewed interest in cross-Channel connections perhaps also marks that the research on which the volume builds is being carried out in a new context.

The papers in the volume span the time Ireland (c.16,000 BC) and then Britain (c.6000 BC) became island landscapes, to just before the arrival of the Roman Empire. Six papers are period specific, charting the evidence for contact across the Mesolithic (Warren), the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition (Anderson-Whymark and Garrow), the Neolithic (Scarre) and the Bronze Age (Wilkin and Vander Linden). The Iron Age is then handled in two papers. Webley analyses the evidence for influence travelling both ways in the early Iron Age and Joy discusses ‘Celtic art’ after 400 BC. Two further research papers set the scene at the beginning of the volume, introducing the geography of sea level changes (Sturt) and seafaring technology (Van De Noort). The coverage of the volume is therefore fairly comprehensive, as is the range of evidence drawn upon. The volume also includes an introduction and a conclusion from the editors.

In the introduction by Garrow and Sturt, the aims of the volume are outlined, within which three key critiques of previous approaches are raised. Alongside the desire to move beyond the aforementioned bridge versus barrier models, the impact of modern political boundaries is raised and the interpretative challenges of how to gather evidence for contact from material culture are raised. Sturt’s paper focuses on the paleogeography of Britain and Ireland and begins by briefly sketching out an overview of archaeological considerations of submerged landscapes. The varied methods used to evaluate past sea levels are then explained, in an accessible manner, making clear that rising water was not just swallowing land, but changing “river formation, shoreline configuration, water depths and associated ecosystem[s]” (page 16). The paper concludes with a discussion of how to integrate this wealth of geographical information with the archaeology. The concept of ‘maritories’, a suggestion from Stuart Needham, is drawn on to begin to break down
the conceptual separation of land and sea, to put them “on an equal footing” (page 23). A similar line of argument is taken in Van De Noort’s paper, who critically discusses prehistoric seafaring. Neither a rare venture into a liminal zone or an everyday activity, he stresses that the sea can be at once both familiar and unknown. The majority of the paper is dedicated to surveying the evidence for boats and vessels in European Prehistory, making the case that there is much to be learnt from examining the technologies of prehistoric boats and their seaworthiness. Van De Noort also presents the Morgawr, an experimental reconstruction of a sown-plank boat, created following examples dating from the Bronze Age. While this reader would have liked to have seen figures of some of the different types of vessel discussed, the paper does end with a photo of the Morgawr on its maiden journey.

The rest of the papers each focus on cross-Channel connections in a particular period. Warren’s paper covers the period over which the Channel was created, from the repopulation of the British-Irish Isles after the Late Glacial Maximum (from c.12,700 cal BC) up to the later Mesolithic (5/4000 cal BC). After raising issues of terminology, sea levels, sea travel, population size estimates and scale of analysis, the paper discusses the evidence divided into four chronological periods (12,700–9,500, 9,500–8,000, 8,000–7,000 and 7,000–5/4,000 cal BC). Here the central theme of many of the papers is raised, regionalisation and the extent to which regional identities can be extrapolated from regional patterns in material culture, in relation to stone tools. Warren stresses that absence of evidence is not evidence for absence in this case, and suggests that perhaps stone tools were not used as a medium for the ‘material celebration’ of contact (page 54). Anderson-Whymark and Garrow’s paper covers the millennia either side of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, asking why it took more than a thousand years for farming to cross the 20 miles between France and Britain. The paper starts with a reflection on the writings of Childe and Piggott, to demonstrate the continuing legacy of the cultural historical approach on the different models for the arrival of the Neolithic in the UK. They argue that we should resist the urge to over simplify and, in the place of conflicting indigenous adoption vs. colonisation models, they suggest the presence of six temporal and spatial interaction zones stretching to both sides of the Channel between 5200 and 3600 cal BC. Much of the evidence discussed in the paper will be familiar to the reader (e.g. Ferriter’s Cove, Achnacreebeag and the much lauded chronology from Whittle et al.’s (2011) Gathering Time). With DNA results on the horizon, and the tendency of this evidence form to smooth out more subtle small-scale variations (Deguilloux et al. 2012), papers such as Anderson-Whymark and Garrow’s are important reminders of the complexity involved with investigating the transition to farming and the need to think carefully about how different scales of evidence (both spatially and temporally) are adequately and appropriately combined.

Scarre focuses his consideration of Neolithic cross-Channel connections on comparing funerary monuments, particularly two sites producing early dates (Coldrum in Kent and Broadsands in Devon). After an initial similarity either side of the Channel in the earlier part of the 4th millennium cal BC, monument forms diverge for the rest of the Neolithic. Two useful explanatory concepts are suggested; ‘transmission’, in which direct contacts carried ideas and traditions from one group to another, and ‘translation’, the ways in which new ideas and traditions are maintained, altered or promulgated once they cross into a new context. Scarre cautions against focusing on origins, the ‘transmission’, at the expense of investigating subsequent developments, the ‘translation’. Wilkin and Vander Linden examine the Bronze Age cross-Channel relations, focusing primarily on the period between 2500 cal BC and 1500 cal BC, but beginning with a discussion of contact within the Britain and Ireland in the early 3rd millennium cal BC. During this period, the communal feasting and large gatherings typified by large monumental complexes, and use of grooved ware pottery, gave way to the spread of Bell Beakers from the continent, long considered to represent a ‘re-opening’ of Britain to the continent (page 104). The fragmentation or increased regionalisation of the Bell Beaker
phenomenon after c.2,300 cal BC (across its Continental, and British and Irish distributions), and a corresponding increase in the movement of goods, people and ideas are debated. The authors conclude that this apparent contradiction illustrates increased and more tangible, direct connections across the Channel.

The final two papers focus on the Iron Age. Webley challenges the pervasive view that Britain and Ireland were isolated from the continent during the Iron Age. He argues that a focus on decorated metal work has been misleading, and points similarities in the artefacts of daily life (such as iron tools, loom weights and combs) to argue that cross-Channel connections were neither limited nor restricted to elites. The article continues with a comparison of settlement, funerary and ritual practices across different regions and concludes there is strong evidence for continental connections in a range of spheres. In the final paper, Joy draws on new examples of Iron Age art, made available through the Portable Antiquities Scheme, to debate the development of ‘insular’ artistic schemes in the final centuries of the 1st Millennium cal BC. The difficulty of distinguishing between copies and imports, and, by extension, direct and indirect contacts between Britain and the Continent is raised. The paper concludes that context of use, particularly its ability to inform on how objects may have manifested social contacts, is essential to resolving the relationships between Britain and the continent at this time of great social upheaval. The volume ends with a conclusion from Sturt and Garrow, which neatly summarises the issues raised by the papers. Key issues for archaeologies of ‘connectivity’ are outlined: its visibility in the evidence, the physical setting, the temporal and spatial scales of analysis and its representation in archaeological narratives.

Two themes develop strongly across many of the papers and the conclusion, the need for a precise and high resolution chronology, and how to determine the appropriate scale of analysis, neither of which is easily resolved and will require detailed and considered research over the years to come. However, this volume provides a very useful summary of both current evidence and approach, as well as a review of past arguments and debates, and should stimulate further debate and research. Continental Connections not an attempt to see a unified Britain and Ireland in the context of a whole continent, such labels are thankfully challenged, but represents a renewed confidence that the detail of the who, what, when and how of cross-Channel contact can be revealed.

References


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The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor.