

## Exploring Status and Identity in Later Iron Age Britain: Reinterpreting Mirror Burials

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Iron Age mirrors are very much a British phenomenon. Only a handful have been recovered from pre-Roman contexts in Continental Europe (see Déchelette 1913; Schwabe 1933; Keller 1965; Wurm 1972; Echt 1999), whereas fifty-five have been found in Britain and Ireland and a further two of British type in Continental Europe (Joy 2008a: table 1.1, 2010). British mirrors are made of bronze or iron, or a combination of bronze and iron components. Although they are found in watery and settlement contexts, the majority, nearly thirty, have been recovered from graves, dating from the fourth century BC to the end of the first century AD (Sealey 2006; Joy 2008a: ch. 8). Many mirrors deposited in graves are elaborately decorated (Joy 2008b). This decoration is a typically British late development of so-called Celtic art (Fox 1958; Stead 1996; Jope 2000; Garrow, Gosden, and Hill 2008).

For such a familiar object, interpretations of mirrors beyond the artistic (see Joy 2008b) have been surprisingly limited. Mirror burials have been viewed as the female equivalent to male warrior burials. As mirrors are relatively rare and often impressive objects, well-made and sometimes beautifully decorated, they have been seen as indicators of status and mirror burials are most often interpreted as the graves of wealthy or high-status women (e.g. Fox 1958: 84; Finlay 1973: 86; James 1993: 69; Cunliffe 2004: 78). A significant number of well-excavated discoveries have been made in recent years (see Brewster 1980; Rook *et al.* 1982; Farley 1983; Dent 1985; Fitzpatrick 1997a; Fulford and Creighton 1998; Parfitt 1998; Hill 2001; Johns 2006; Burleigh and Megaw 2007) and analysis of this data has shown that this dominant interpretation may be overly simplistic; that it does not reflect diversity in the burial data (Joy 2008a: ch. 10). As a regional case study of later Iron Age burial practice, the archaeological evidence is reinterpreted in this paper.

## 1 RE-EXAMINATION OF THE BURIAL DATA

Until relatively recently it was not possible to examine and interrogate the deposition context of mirrors beyond basic interpretations because many finds came either from poorly recorded nineteenth-century excavations, or were chance discoveries. However, recent excavations and subsequent archaeological examination of the find spot of a number of metal detector finds, especially from south-east England, has greatly increased the quantity and quality of information available. Table 21.1 lists all known mirror burials and possible mirror burials in 2009.

**Table 21.1.** Mirror burials (mirrors possibly from burial context marked Burial?).

Mirror	County	Context	Reference
Arras I	East Riding	Inhumation	Stead (1979)
Arras II	East Riding	Inhumation	Stead (1979)
Aston	Hertfordshire	Cremation	Rook <i>et al.</i> (1982)
Billericay I	Essex	Burial?	Smith (1909)
Billericay II	Essex	Burial?	Smith (1909)
Billericay III	Essex	Cremation	Weller (1974)
Birdlip	Gloucestershire	Inhumation	Staelens (1982)
Brecon Beacons	Powys	Cremation	Davis and Gwilt (2008)
Bridport	Dorset	Inhumation	Farrar (1956)
Bromham	Bedfordshire	Burial?	Unpublished
Bryher	Isles of Scilly	Inhumation	Johns (2006)
Chettle	Dorset	Burial?	Unpublished
Chilham Castle	Kent	Cremation	Parfitt (1998)
Colchester I (Lexden Grange)	Essex	Cremation	Fox and Hull (1948)
Colchester II (Hyderabad Barracks)	Essex	Burial?	Sealey (2006)
Desborough	Northamptonshire	Burial?	Smith (1909)
Dorton	Buckinghamshire	Cremation	Farley (1983)
Garton Slack	East Riding	Inhumation	Brewster (1980)
Great Chesterford	Essex	Burial?	Fox (1960)
Jordan Hill	Dorset	Burial?	Smith (1909)
Lambay Island	Ireland	Inhumation	Rynne (1976)
Latchmere Green	Hampshire	Cremation	Fulford and Creighton (1998)
Llechwedd-du	Gwynedd	Burial?	Fox (1925)
Nijmegen	Netherlands	Cremation	Lloyd-Morgan (1981)
Old Warden I	Bedfordshire	Burial?	Spratling (1970)
Old Warden II	Bedfordshire	Burial?	Dyer (1966)
Pegsdon	Bedfordshire	Cremation	Burleigh and Megaw (2007)
Portesham	Dorset	Inhumation	Fitzpatrick (1997a)
Portland I (the Grove)	Dorset	Burial?	Smith (1909)
Portland II (the Verne)	Dorset	Burial?	Whimster (1981)
Rickling	Essex	Burial?	Sealey (2006)
St. Keverne	Cornwall	Inhumation	Jope-Rogers (1873)
Stamford Hill I	Devon	Inhumation	Cunliffe (1988)
Stamford Hill II	Devon	Inhumation	Cunliffe (1988)
Stamford Hill III	Devon	Inhumation	Cunliffe (1988)
Stamford Slack	East Riding	Inhumation	Dent (1985)
Wetwang Village	East Riding	Inhumation	Hill (2001)

Like burials with weapons (Collis 1973; Hunter 2005), mirror burials are found in the majority of the regional burial traditions of Iron Age Britain (see Whimster 1981) (Figure 21.1). They have been found in inhumations under square barrows in the East Riding, stone-lined cist graves from Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, earlier cremation burials in south-east England, and more localized burial traditions from western England such as the south Dorset or ‘Durotrigian’ burial rite and inhumation burials from Gloucestershire. A British mirror has even been found in a grave outside Britain at Nijmegen, the Netherlands (Dunning 1928; Lloyd-Morgan 1981).

Four chronologically and geographically distinct concentrations of mirror burials can be identified:

- East Yorkshire—where five iron mirrors have been found in inhumations dating to the late fourth—late second century BC
- Cornwall and Isles of Scilly—where two decorated bronze mirrors dating to c.120–80 BC have been found in stone-lined cist inhumations
- South-east and southern England—where decorated bronze mirrors dating to c.75–15 BC have been found in cremation burials



Figure 21.1. Distribution of mirror burials.

- Western—this is a less unified group comprising a small number of large, decorated, bronze mirrors deposited from *c.*AD 40–75 some of which are from inhumations.

### 1.1 Position of mirrors in the grave

There is little consistency in the position and orientation of mirrors in graves, perhaps because mirror burials follow particular local and regional burial rites. The majority of mirrors were deposited flat in the ground. However, there is little overall correlation across the group in terms of orientation. Both the Chilham Castle and Bryher mirrors were deposited horizontally with their handles pointing north-west (Parfitt 1998: 345; Johns 2006: 16). The Dorton mirror handle pointed east, the Portesham and Wetwang Village mirror handles were facing south-east and the Wetwang Slack mirror handle pointed in a northerly direction. As is shown in Table 21.2, where it has been noted, the majority of mirrors were placed decorated side down in graves (Spence-Bate 1871: 502; Farley 1983; Johns 2006). Although not from a burial context, the Holcombe mirror was also placed decorated side down at the bottom of a pit (Fox and Pollard 1973). This was not a universal trend, however, as the Portesham mirror was deposited with the decorated face upwards (Fitzpatrick 1997a).

There is a potential correlation between the positions of mirrors in relation to the person in the grave. For example, an association between mirrors and the head can be noted. The Bryher mirror was positioned to one side of the head of the grave occupant (Johns 2006: 16). At Wetwang Slack the mirror, a pin, two horse-bits, and the ‘bean-can’ were located behind the head (Dent 1985: 90) (see Figure 21.2). The mirror from the Lady’s Grave at Arras was found below the head of the deceased (Stillingleet 1846; Greenwell 1906; Stead 1979). The Aston mirror was in an upright position on the opposite side of the grave to cremated human remains (Rook *et al.* 1982: 19). There is a clear association with the cremated bones and especially the head as fragments of human cranium were deliberately selected from the cremated bone and positioned at the edge of the grave facing the mirror.

In addition to the head, a number of other mirrors have been found with the reflective surface positioned in relation to the waist or hip. At Garton Slack the

**Table 21.2.** Mirrors deposited decorated side up and decorated side down.

Mirror	Decorated side up/down	Context	Context Description
Bryher	Down	Inhumation	Possibly covered in a bag secured with a spiral ring
Dorton	Down	Cremation	In a wooden box alongside cremated remains
Holcombe	Down	Settlement	Found at the bottom of a pit. It was probably wrapped in cloth or leather
Portesham	Up	Inhumation	No evidence of covering but with a brooch attached to handle terminal loop
Stamford Hill I	Down	Inhumation	In a grave also containing a bronze brooch

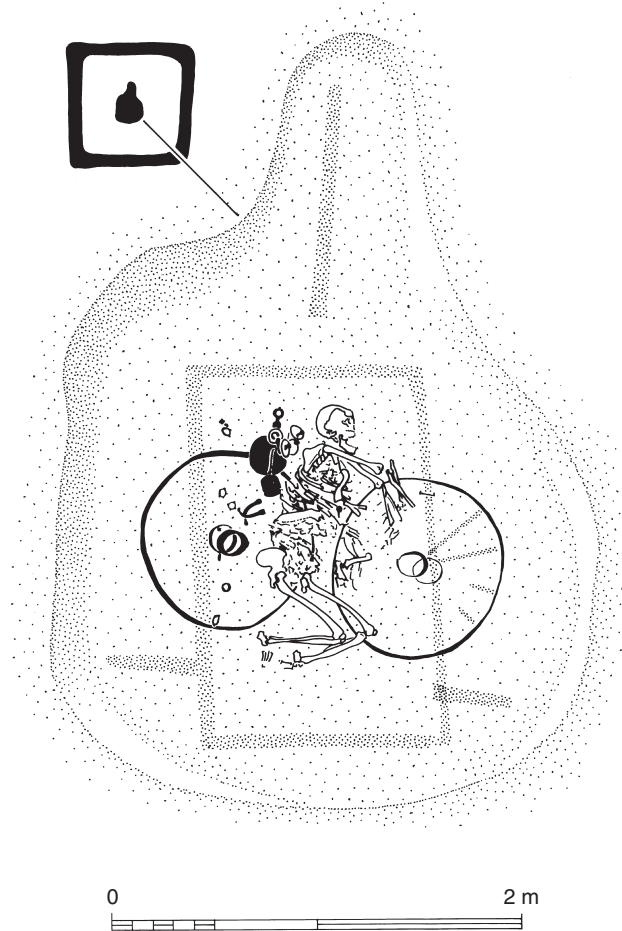


Figure 21.2. Plan of the mirror grave from Wetwang Slack (© Trustees of the British Museum).

mirror was supported in the left hand at the hip (Brewster 1980: 228). At Wetwang village the mirror lay across the lower legs of the deceased (Hill 2001: 2). The Portesham mirror was placed near the waist or chest with a toilet kit in close association. It is known that sets of toilet instruments such as tweezers and ear-scoops, often on a ring or brooch (Hill 1997: 98), were possibly suspended in some fashion at the waist (Fitzpatrick 1997a: 56). In the case of the Portesham mirror—it could be that as these items were associated with personal appearance—the mirror was positioned similarly to the toilet implements as a symbol of its purpose and significance as a ‘technology of the self’ (see Hill 1997).

If we consider the mirrors found in cremation burials, there is a clear association between the cremated human remains and mirrors. The Dorton mirror was contained in a wooden box along with cremated human remains. The reflective surface of the plate was uppermost, orientated towards the bone within the box.

Although the exact position of the Latchmere Green mirror in the grave is unclear, the excavators speculated that it was placed over the top of an urn containing the cremated remains (Fulford and Creighton 1998: 331).

In summary, mirrors are not orientated towards cardinal points but rather they are positioned in the grave with reference to the human body. Two key trends have been identified:

- mirrors positioned with reference to the human head
- mirrors positioned at the waist or pelvic area.

## 1.2 Prominent locations in the landscape

Some mirror burials are in prominent locations in the landscape, often located towards the top of a slope or escarpment, overlooking river systems (Spratling pers. comm. 2009). With the exception of the mirrors from Billericay, Essex, and the small group from Birdlip, Gloucestershire these mirror burials do not occur in cemeteries but are separate, distinct, single deposits. For example, the Chilham Castle mirror was found high on the North Downs of east Kent at 105 m OD, overlooking the river Great Stour and only 50 m from a prehistoric trackway (Parfitt 1998: 343). The Dorton mirror burial was located on a ridge of Dorton Hill at 103 m OD, offering extensive views of the Vale of Aylesbury (Farley 1983: 271). The Latchmere Green mirror burial was located on the south-facing slope of a low hill at 75 m OD. The burial overlooks several river systems including a tributary of the Thames (Fulford and Creighton 1998: 331). The Pegsdon burial overlooked a small stream (Burleigh and Megaw 2007) and Old Warden II was found on Quint's Hill (Dyer 1966: 55). The Birdlip mirror was buried on the side of a hill with extensive views of the Severn valley (Staelens 1982: 21). A quick survey of the location of broadly contemporary, prominent cremation cemeteries from southern England (Evans 1890; Stead 1967; Stead and Rigby 1986, 1989: 80–6; Fitzpatrick 1997b) reveals that the locations of cemeteries vary and do not follow the same pattern as mirror burials. For example, many are not isolated; they are located close to settlements.

With the possible exception of Birdlip, none of these burials was marked by a burial mound or tumulus. This pattern is restricted to burials in southern England. Mirror burials in east Yorkshire and south-west England are found in cemeteries, which are located according to the traditions of those regional burial rites. This pattern may suggest that mirror burials in southern England had a different significance from those in other regions. The potential remains for the reflectivity of mirrors to act to extend the relationships that could be structured around them beyond the realms of 'normal' human physical experience (see Schweig 1941; Saunders 1988, 2002; Addey 2007). For example, owning a mirror was said to be one of the traits of a 'magician' in the Roman world (Janowitz 2001). 'The ancient Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, Mayans, Incas, and Aztecs buried their dead with metal or stone reflectors, to hold the soul, ward off evil spirits, or allow the body to check its appearance, before taking the final trip to the after-life' (Pendergrast 2007: 1–2). This is not an attempt to imply that this is the manner in which mirrors were used in an Iron Age context. However, mirrors or the people who used them, may have been perceived as different or dangerous because of

their reflective properties, perhaps explaining why mirror burials in southern England were isolated, or they may have been burials to achieve a particular goal for the wider community, hence the prominent location.

### 1.3 Mirrors, sex, and gender

Despite a lack of corroborative archaeological evidence, there has been a widely held assumption in the literature that mirrors were made for and buried with women (e.g. Fox 1958: 84; Finlay 1973: 86; James 1993: 69; Cunliffe 2004: 78). The association with women and mirrors is drawn from the classical world (Fitzpatrick 1984: 186) and our own cultural preconceptions. Etruscan and Greek mirrors have been linked to women. For example, there are images on cinerary urns showing female figures holding mirrors (Izzet 1998: 211; Echt 1999: fig. 65). Some Etruscan mirrors were also inscribed to indicate female ownership (Izzet 1998: 211). Mirror burials are also seen as the female counterpart of 'male' burials with weapons (see Cunliffe 2004: 78–9; 2005: 557). Assigning material culture to particular sex/gender categories based on our own cultural stereotypes and preconceived notions of gender and sex is highly problematic. Sex and gender should not be so easily interchanged. Wider discussions of gender (e.g. Butler 1990; Gero and Conkey 1991; Butler 1993) have yet to penetrate Iron Age research (Hill 2006: 171) and the result is that discussions often tend to be based on simplistic ethnocentric and androcentric assumptions (Fitzpatrick 1984: 186).

Table 21.3 presents the archaeological evidence for sexing of individuals from mirror burials (see also Johns 2006: table 15). Mirror burials discovered in the nineteenth century said to have originated from female burials will be discussed below. Of the recently excavated inhumation burials containing mirrors, only three were found associated with anatomically female remains: Garton Slack (Brewster 1980: 228), Wetwang Slack (Dent 1985), and Wetwang Village (Hill 2001). According to the excavation report, the human remains from Portesham could only be classified as 'probably' female (McKinley in Fitzpatrick 1997a: 54). The human remains from Bryher were poorly preserved and DNA tests were inconclusive (Johns 2006: 1).

Cremated bone is difficult to sex (see McKinley in Fitzpatrick 1997b: 64–5) and it was only possible to sex two of the recently excavated cremation burials containing mirrors. The Aston mirror was found with cremated bone from a 'probable' female, although S. Stead (in Rook *et al.* 1982: 19–20) states that all of

**Table 21.3.** Sexed mirror burials.

Mirror	Inhumation/Cremation	Sex Determination
Aston	Cremation	'Probable' Female
Chilham Castle	Cremation	'Possible' Female
Garton Slack	Inhumation	Female
King Harry Lane Grave 13	Cremation	? Male
Portesham	Inhumation	'Probably' Female
Wetwang Slack	Inhumation	Female
Wetwang Village	Inhumation	Female

the sexually significant bones were missing. The Chilham Castle mirror was also found associated with the cremated bones of a 'possible female' (Parfitt 1998). The sexing of both these graves proved inconclusive and it is important to consider how much the determination of sex was influenced by the presence of a mirror in the two graves.

There are a number of mirrors which may have originated from female burials but the documentary evidence is inconclusive, or the claims in the literature cannot be substantiated because the skeletal material is now lost. The mirror from the so-called Lady's grave at Arras was said to be the burial of a woman (Greenwell 1906: 284–5). The sex of the skeleton found associated with the second mirror from Arras is also unrecorded. Unfortunately both of these mirrors were found during the nineteenth century and the human remains are now lost and it cannot be determined if the burials actually contained female human remains or they were labelled female because they contained mirrors. The mirror handle from West Bay was found in the grave of an elderly woman with staining from a bronze object on her jaw bone, assumed to have been caused by the mirror (Farrar 1956: 90). However, the remains of a middle-aged man were also found with the mirror and the elderly woman. It is not certain that the bronze staining on the woman's jawbone derives from the mirror; it could originate from one of a number of other bronze objects which are now lost. The Birdlip mirror was found in one of three graves, two containing males and one containing a female. It has always been assumed that the mirror originated from the female burial (Bellows 1881; Staelens 1982) but the documentary evidence of the Birdlip burials is poor and the mirror could conceivably have been associated with one of the two male skeletons (Johns 2006: 70). The three mirrors from Stamford Hill (Bate 1865) and the mirror from St Keverne (Jope-Rogers 1873) (Figure 21.3) are all said to originate from female burials but all are discoveries made in the nineteenth century and were poorly recorded. Once again the burials may have been sexed as female because of the presence of a mirror.

As yet no mirror has been categorically proven to have been found alongside the remains of an anatomically male individual, although a Roman-style mirror was found associated with a 'probable' male cremation at the King Harry Lane cemetery, near St Albans (Stead and Rigby 1989: 103). The exclusive association between females and mirrors has recently been questioned because of the discovery of the Bryher mirror in a burial which also contained weapons but unfortunately could not be sexed (see Cunliffe 2004: 79; Johns 2006: 70–1). The existence of a mirror and weapons in the same burial cross-cuts perceived gender divisions. The Bryher burial is highly unusual but it may not be unique. The iron mirror from Lambay Island could also have originated from a grave containing a sword and a shield (Rynne 1976: 242–3; Raftery 1984: 209–10; 1994: 200–1). The same could be said of the remains from Bulbury if the artefacts are interpreted as originating from a single grave (rather than the two suggested by Cunliffe 1972: 362), although based on the artefacts found, it is perhaps more likely that these objects originate from hoards.

In summary, it is only possible to state that all mirror burials to be sexed so far are female but, because of the relatively small sample, there is insufficient archaeological evidence to argue that mirrors were buried exclusively with females. This association should be proven on a case-by-case basis rather than be assumed. The

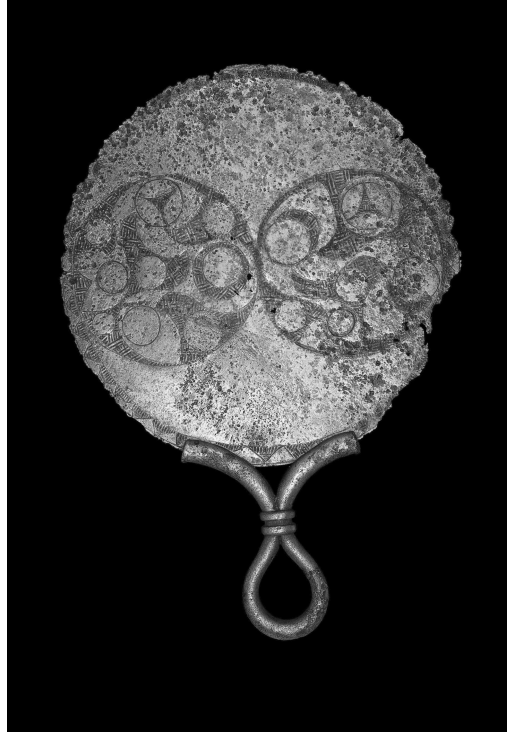


Figure 21.3. The St Keverne mirror (© Trustees of the British Museum).

danger is that as this assumption is repeated it becomes self-reinforcing (see Díaz-Andreu 2005: 38); because a burial contains a mirror the grave occupant must be female. It is also not possible to relate Iron Age gender categories to biological sex in the same way we do in our own society. Discoveries such as the Bryher burial which contained a mirror and weapons, call into question current, often simplistic, assumptions concerning sex and gender.

#### 1.4 Mirrors deposited in covering

Some mirrors were deposited wrapped in covering or contained in a wooden box. This is known in the southern Urals where wrapped mirrors have been discovered in Kurgan graves (Morgunova and Khokhlova 2006: 312). Of the mirrors found in cremation burials in the south-east, the Dorton mirror was contained in a wooden box alongside cremated human remains. The Chilham Castle mirror was possibly buried inside a cloth bag bound by two brooches. In East Yorkshire at Wetwang Village the mirror was wrapped in animal fur (Hill 2001: 2). The mirror from Wetwang Slack had impressions of wood adhered to it and the Garton Slack burial could also have been contained in a wooden box (Brewster 1976: 110) as there was evidence for the decay of organic remains underneath the mirror on excavation

(Brewster 1980: 228). In the Scilly Isles the Bryher mirror was contained in a textile bag, possibly fastened by a spiral ring (Johns 2006: 18). Although not from a grave, the Holcombe mirror was wrapped in an organic covering, possibly a leather pouch.

Some other mirrors such as Portesham and Pegsdon were found with a brooch attached to the terminal loop of their handles. Visual examination of other mirrors has revealed wear on the terminal loop of handles which would be consistent with a brooch, or another kind of fastener, being secured to the handle. The patterns of wear on the terminal loops of the handles suggest that some mirrors were covered in life, not just when they were deposited. Fox and Pollard (1973: 23) indicated that wear on the terminal loops of mirror handles occurred when they were suspended upside down in round houses when not in use. Here it is argued that wear was caused by brooches/fasteners used to secure covering or wrapping around mirrors. Coverings could have acted to protect the mirror surface. If, as suggested above, the reflective surface of a mirror was perceived as harmful or dangerous, the covering may also have acted as a protective barrier between the reflective surface and the outside world (Giles and Joy 2007).

### 1.5 Mirrors associated with ‘mature’ adults

Recent studies have shown how different kinds of artefacts can be found in association with individuals of particular ages (e.g. Sørensen 1997; Sofaer Derevenski 2000). Identity can change with age (Lucy 2005: 58). Mortuary remains are the furnishings of death rather than simply echoing social relations in life (see Barrett 1994: 116) but they also represent meaningful social categories and identities (Sørensen 1997: 101). Table 21.4 details evidence for the determination of age at death of individuals buried with mirrors. It shows that with the exception of Latchmere Green, which contained the remains of an adult and a child aged less than five years old, all mirror burials where age at death could be determined are of adults. Most are relatively old for the Iron Age. The burial of an adult and child in the same burial is not unique to Latchmere Green and has been identified in other cremations from south-east England (see Fitzpatrick 1997b).

**Table 21.4.** Age at death of individuals buried with mirrors.

Mirror	Inhumation/Cremation	Age Determination
Aston	Cremation	‘Older but not Old’
Bryher	Inhumation	20–25
Chilham Castle	Cremation	Under 30
Garton Slack	Inhumation	20–25
KHL Grave 13	Cremation	‘Adult’
Latchmere Green	Cremation	Adult > 30 Child < 5
Portesham	Inhumation	26>45
West Bay, Bridport	Inhumations	‘Elderly Woman’ ‘Middle-Aged Man’
Wetwang Slack	Inhumation	‘Young Adult’
Wetwang Village	Inhumation	35–45

## 2 MIRRORS AS HIGH-STATUS OBJECTS BURIED WITH THEIR OWNERS AS PROVISION FOR THE AFTERLIFE

In this next section the dominant interpretation of mirrors as the property of high-status or wealthy women, buried with their owners as a provision for the afterlife, is interrogated. The assumption that mirrors were exclusively buried with women has already been addressed; discussion will concentrate on questions of status and ownership.

Criteria such as the quantity of grave-goods, the existence of imports or the number of artefact types have all been put forward as indicators of 'status' in past research (e.g. Haselgrove 1989). However, grave-goods are not always good indicators of status in life: the dead do not bury themselves (Parker Pearson 1999: ch. 4). With this in mind, these indicators are utilized to examine the following question: how are mirror burials different? Mirror burials do not form a homogenous group; they are not the same across the country. Mirror burials follow regional burial rites: the type, arrangement and number of grave-goods varies considerably; mirrors are found in inhumation and cremation burials; and inhumations are crouched, extended, and orientated in a number of different ways. It is therefore not appropriate to question the relative status of mirror burials as a group. They can only be compared with other burials from the same identified local burial traditions. Three of the five East Riding mirror burials included the remains of vehicles. In East Yorkshire vehicle burials stand out in terms of the number of grave-goods in each burial. They are relatively rare and the group from Wetwang Slack, for example, were buried under unusually large barrows, which were set apart from the main cemetery (Giles and Joy 2007: 16). In contrast, the two other East Riding mirrors (Arras II and Garton Station) contained relatively few grave-goods. The St Keverne and Bryher burials contain more grave-goods in comparison to other graves from the Cornish cist grave burial tradition. The Bryher burial in particular contained a broad range of different types of artefact, some of which like a mysterious tin object are very unusual. The south-eastern mirror burials, with the possible exception of Dorton, cannot be counted amongst the graves with the highest number of grave-goods from that region. These graves have been identified by Stead (1991) as 'Welwyn' type, often containing large quantities of pottery some of which are imports. If the mirror is removed from the equation, the majority of mirror cremation burials from south-eastern England contain at most a couple of brooches and a small number of pottery vessels. A large number of south-eastern cremation burials contain this mix of grave-goods (see Fitzpatrick 1997b). The majority of mirror burials from south-east England therefore cannot be regarded as significantly 'different': the only indicator of difference is the presence of a mirror. The Portesham mirror burial stands out from other 'Durotrigian' burials because it contains the most number of grave-goods of any burial yet found in south Dorset (see Woodward 1993). A number of the objects also indicate links to wider social networks; the pan in the grave was a Roman import and one of the brooches is unusual for the Iron Age period because it is made of brass, not bronze.

From this brief overview we can see that some mirror burials are unusual and different from others within the same regional burial rite. The association between

mirrors and vehicles in East Yorkshire could be important, although two mirrors were also found in burials which did not contain vehicles. The mirror in this circumstance is not the only indicator of difference. The St Keverne and Bryher burials stand out from other Cornish cist burials, as does the Portesham burial in south Dorset. Interestingly, mirror burials from south-eastern cremation burials do not fit this general pattern. If the mirror is removed from the equation then many of the burials are like a large number containing a few pots and possibly brooches. In this case the mirror is the only artefact that makes a burial stand out. Although many mirror burials stand out significantly from other burials within the same region, this is not universal reinforcing the argument that mirror burials should be assessed within a regional context and the motivations behind burying individuals with a mirror may have been very different over time and between regions. For example, the fact that the East Riding mirrors are made of iron, undecorated, and some are buried with vehicles marks them out as different from the other mirror burials, perhaps indicating they are part of a different practice. The mirror burials which occur over much of southern England could be viewed as a broad social phenomenon, interpreted differently locally.

Funerary rituals do not just reinforce the existing social and political hierarchy, they are a forum in which relationships and identities can be renegotiated. For example, some of the objects in the Hochdorf princely grave were probably made for the burial, while others were refurbished prior to burial (Olivier 1999). Were these actions to reinforce the status of the Hochdorf 'prince', or to renegotiate the position of those who buried him? The answer was probably a little bit of both. Whilst it is not argued here that no mirrors 'belonged' to the individual they were buried with, this interpretation is overly simplistic and denies agency to the artefact. Following the interpretation that a mirror served as a provision for an individual in the 'afterlife', the mirror is seen as socially passive. It is argued that mirrors and other grave-goods do not simply reflect the status of the individual they were buried with (see Giles and Joy 2007: 21), but that their inclusion and positioning within a grave actively generate the social position of that individual, as well as particular individuals, or groups amongst the mourners present at funerary rituals. A mirror may well have belonged in some way to the person it was buried with without being 'owned' in the sense that we would understand it. 'Ownership' may also have been intimately related to the life-history of the mirror. A mirror may also have been associated with the people who made it or used it at some point in its life-history. These people may not necessarily have been buried with a mirror.

It is important to ask, why was a mirror buried at a particular time with a particular person? Was it past its usefulness or just entering another phase of its life-history? The mirror could have been an emblem of a particular social role enacted (or to be enacted) by the person it was buried with. Alternatively, there may have been no other suitable person in a community for it to be passed on to. If it was received as a gift then many different obligations and relationships would have been tied to that gift (see Gregory 1982; Weiner 1985; Appadurai 1986a, 1986b; Mauss 1990; Thomas 1991; Weiner 1992 for discussions on gifts, commodities, and inalienable objects). We still know little about how Iron Age society was organized. It has recently been argued that society probably operated at the scale of the household or community rather than the individual (Hill 2006: 175).

The mirror burial could therefore have been representative of the community or household, and its links to the wider community.

In summary, burying someone with a mirror was a significant act as specific individuals were singled out for unusual burial. It is argued that the motivations for doing this were not always the same over time and between regions and a general interpretation of a high-status female burial is inadequate.

### 3 DISCUSSION

It has been argued so far that current interpretations of mirror burials are inadequate and that the motivations behind burying an individual with a mirror were likely to have been more complex. It has also been suggested that mirror burials should be interpreted from a local and regional perspective. However, these observations do not account for some of the similarities observed in the burial data which have already been outlined. If mirrors were not all placed in graves for the same reason, why are there similarities such as the orientation of the mirror in graves and burial of mirrors with mature adults, in burials from different regions separated sometimes by a hundred years?

Visual examination of over thirty mirrors has revealed that the majority show signs of wear, which suggests they were not made solely for burial (Joy 2008a: ch. 5). Patterns of wear indicate stress and breakage at the juncture between the handle and plate and on the terminal loops of handles. Some mirrors were also repaired. The wear at the juncture of the handle and plate can be explained if mirrors were, as one might expect, held by the handle with the plate unsupported, allowing the reflective side of the plate to be viewed without obstruction. As suggested above, the wear on the terminal loops of the handles can be accounted for if a cover or wrapping was secured with brooches or some other kind of fastener. These wear patterns indicate that mirrors may have been in circulation for extended periods, particularly if they were covered for long intervals. Numerous anthropological examples demonstrate how the lives of objects and people can become intertwined (e.g. Battaglia 1990; MacKenzie 1991; Hendrickson 1995; Hoskins 1998). Objects like people can be seen to accumulate life-histories (see Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999), act as a medium through which people are able to tell their own life-story (Hoskins 1998), and become so entangled with the lives of specific individuals that they can extend their renown as they are exchanged and used (Gell 1998: 222–3). There is no reason why the lives of some Iron Age objects were not equally eventful. If mirrors were used for a number of years it is possible that they accumulated life-histories, acquiring connections with the people who made and used them and specific events that could have been referred to and manipulated in different ways when mirrors were placed in graves.

The particular form of a mirror also dictates how they relate to the human body and structures the kinds of relationships that can be formulated around them. We encounter objects in active situations. A mirror has a handle and a reflective plate. The handle allows the mirror to be held without obscuring the plate. These material properties can be interpreted in multiple ways. A mirror can be used

alongside other objects like shears and tweezers to alter physical appearance. The use of a mirror allows direct, individual control over physical appearance. The reflective plate allows one to see forwards and backwards, acting to expand human perception. The plate can also be used to harness or capture light. It is possible that mirrors served an 'everyday' function to monitor physical appearance. The reflective qualities of the plate could also have been ascribed more prophetic 'ritual' qualities. There is no reason why these different potential 'uses', structured around the mirror's material form, were mutually exclusive.

Pulling all of this information together, it is possible to suggest that the physical properties of a mirror and its potential uses could account for some of the similarities noted in the burial data. It has been demonstrated that mirrors are often found orientated with reference to the human body, specifically oriented towards the head or the hip/waist. Mirrors are made to be held by the handle to examine your reflection; the relationship between the mirror and head in this instance is clear. As a result of their reflective properties, mirrors must have been used to help alter physical appearance; they may therefore have been linked with other objects such as tweezers, which were sometimes worn on a belt, perhaps explaining why some mirrors were found at the waist or hip. It was also noted that many mirrors were deposited in a covering and that due to wear patterns on mirror handles, they must have also been covered during life. This covering could have acted to protect the reflective mirror surface. It could also have acted as protection from the potential powerful properties of the reflective surface when the mirror was not in use. The type of covering used and the way it was then interpreted could have been different for each mirror. For example, wrapping or covering a mirror as part of a funerary rite could be seen as analogous to burying the body with clothing secured with a brooch (Giles and Joy 2007: 22).

It was also noted that burials in southern England were often isolated and occurred in prominent positions in the landscape. This is in contrast to mirrors from Cornwall and East Yorkshire which are found in cemeteries. Experience in the present is dependent on an understanding of the past (Connerton 1989). Iron Age people were aware of the past and past peoples (see Stead 1998) and they were actively involved in how they themselves would be remembered in the future (see Joyce 2003: 105; van Dyke 2003: 194). Memories can be formulated and shaped by artefacts (Jones 2001) and the landscape (Schama 1995; Campbell 2006). Jones (2001: 349) observed that the efficacy of objects is not confined to the immediate effect they have on people but also the effects preserved in memory. The overall effect of mirrors, and the relationships they objectified, could have been preserved in memory alongside the location in which they were deposited. This social memory (see van Dyke and Alcock 2003) could have been perpetuated and retold as people passed the place of burial along terrestrial or riverine route-ways, the prominent location of the burial serving as a visual reminder. The south-eastern mirrors were interred in cremation burials and perhaps the act of cremation in a visible and prominent spot was of more significance than the burial itself (see McKinley in Fitzpatrick 1997b: 55).

Finally, it was noted that mirrors are most likely to be buried with mature adults. We need to be careful not to impose our own understanding of age construction onto other societies as age identities are social constructions (Lucy 2005) and we do not know how age identities were constituted in Iron Age society.

There are also problems and biases associated with the methods employed to determine age at death using human skeletal remains and data can become skewed (*ibid.*: 48–9). Despite these reservations it is possible to infer from the data, all of the individuals buried with mirrors were at, or past, the sexually reproductive stage in their life cycle. The association with reproduction could have been emphasized by the inclusion of a child in the Latchemere Green burial. Identity can be intimately related to sexual reproduction, gender, and the ways in which perceptions and expectations change throughout the human life course depending upon ‘biological and social points of view’ (Sofaer Derevenski 1997: 876). This could offer an alternative explanation as to why mirrors were deposited at the waist or hip. They could have been orientated towards the sexual organs of the deceased possibly indicating an association between mirrors and sexual reproduction, between mirrors and fertility or possibly infertility, or perhaps representing continuity of the family line. It may also have been inappropriate to inter a mirror with an individual from a different age category.

To summarize, a number of different potential relationships can be structured around a mirror. These could have been manipulated in different ways through time and across regions. They may be a better explanation of commonality in data, or variations on a theme, than a universal explanation of mirror burials.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, mirror graves are present wherever there is a tradition for burial, although they are not common. Four chronologically and geographically distinct concentrations of mirror burials have been identified: East Yorkshire; Cornwall and the Scilly Isles; southern and south-east England; and a ‘western’ group. Burials are not homogenous and follow regional rites. Outside East Yorkshire, the association between mirrors and women cannot be substantiated, although it must be stressed that an association with men cannot be proven either. They are most likely to be buried with mature adults. Where the orientation of mirrors is recorded, they are not orientated towards cardinal points but rather with respect to the human body. They are placed near the head or hip. Many mirrors were covered when deposited. Examination of wear patterns indicates that some were covered in life, not just at the time of burial. Patterns of wear, polishing, and evidence of repair, indicate many mirrors had an extended life history before they were deposited. Mirror burials in southern England are most often isolated and positioned in prominent locations in the landscape.

Rather than indicating a universal function or significance, common themes in the burial of mirrors could have occurred over time and between regions because of the material properties of mirrors. These material properties structured the kinds of relationships formed around them, which have been interpreted differently between regions and over time. The particular life-history of a mirror also affected how they ended their lives. These factors lead to variations on a theme within the data. People were buried with elaborate objects like mirrors for multiple reasons and they were not just a passive reflection of status. What is

clear is that these objects played an active role in graves in the creation and reformulation of identity in the later Iron Age.

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