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## Creating a research agenda for the Bronze Age in Britain

For the first volume of the Bronze Age Review, the editor invited senior scholars to draw on their experience and expertise and write on what they would like to see happening in Bronze Age research in Britain in the future. They were asked to look as broadly as they can and explore issues and areas of study that they feel are currently missing or underdeveloped. The aim is to provide a period of open consultation until 31 January 2009 with suggestions, comments and proposed new chapters to the editor who can be contacted at [broberts@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:broberts@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk). The authors will subsequently revise their articles for inclusion in a volume published by the British Museum Press.

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# Prospects and potential in the archaeology of Bronze Age Britain

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## Abstract

This paper argues that although our discipline focuses increasingly on thematic research programmes, period-based approaches remain a valuable way of understanding the particularities of the social practices we study. Different aspects of the archaeological record - including settlement, burial, landscape and material culture - are examined in turn to identify a series of possible questions for future research.

## Why study the Bronze Age?

Although the Neolithic and Iron Age are the most popular areas of study in British prehistory today, the last ten years have seen an encouraging upturn in the number of those with a research interest in the British Bronze Age. Some might argue that the maintenance of traditional period-based specialisms runs the danger of creating inward-looking communities of scholars who fail to recognise the real periods of change in the past (cf. Bradley 2001), and many archaeologists now eschew such specialisms in favour of problem-oriented approaches that address particular themes over longer timeframes. While this approach has its appeal, it remains true that a broad understanding of the wider cultural context within which a particular set of practices emerged is indispensable. In my own research, for example, I have found that some of the activities that took place on the abandonment of Bronze Age settlements make sense only when compared to certain elements of contemporary funerary rites (Brück 2006a). In other words, the meanings created in one arena of practice may be drawn on, elaborated and subverted in other contexts because they form part of a more general understanding of how the universe and its constituent elements work. In the sense, then, that categories of archaeological analysis can never be more than heuristic devices, I would therefore argue that in certain cases, at least, a continued interest in the 'Bronze Age' as a topic of research is both warranted and valuable.

Of course, some might suggest that the Bronze Age has already lost its identity. Barrett (1994a) has argued that the Earlier Bronze Age is simply the latest manifestation of 'Neolithic' forms of lifestyle, while the Later Bronze Age sees the emergence of the sorts of organised and domesticated landscapes that characterise the Iron Age and later periods. With this broad division into 'Earlier' and 'Later' prehistory cleaving the Bronze Age in two, there has been something of a 'Neolithisation' of the Earlier Bronze Age, while many of the interpretative frameworks applied to the Later Bronze Age are strongly influenced by studies of the Iron Age (see also Bradley 2001). Certainly, few volumes have focused specifically on the Bronze Age in recent years – particularly in comparison with the Neolithic and Iron Age; indeed, papers addressing aspects of the Late Bronze Age were recently published as part of a volume entitled *The Earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent* (Haselgrove and Pope 2007), suggesting that the significant continuities across the first millennium BC in particular aspects of the archaeological record continue to challenge traditional period-based research frameworks. The question therefore remains: do we still have a Bronze Age that can be

identified as a coherent entity with its own character and, as such, should researchers in this area attempt to develop their own unique set of research questions and theoretical frameworks?

Part of the answer lies, I believe, in the obvious and oft-discussed point that the raw materials required to produce bronze are not widely available: the long-distance connections so evident throughout the Bronze Age mean that the social relations, concerns and cosmological systems of Bronze Age communities were, in fact, quite different to those of the Neolithic and the Iron Age – even though good evidence for long-distance exchange can be identified during periods such as the Late Neolithic. This is recognised in recent research that addresses anew the character and organisation of Bronze Age exchange, a topic that has languished since the 1980s due, perhaps, to the apparently insoluble contradiction between gift- and commodity-based economies (see Rowlands *et al.* 1986). Drawing on the work of anthropologist Mary Helms (e.g. 1988), recent research by Needham (2000) and Van de Noort (2006), for example, considers the social and political significance of both exotic objects and the activity of travel itself. They argue that foreign objects (and those who travelled abroad to obtain them) were imbued with cosmological potency, providing one of the underpinnings of temporal power (see Kristiansen and Larsson 2006 for a similar discussion of exchange relations in continental Europe and Scandinavia). Many questions remain, however. To date, there has been a focus on the role of exchange in the reproduction of chiefly power (see Brück 2006b). Certainly, exchange facilitated the creation of an order of value that allowed the worth of people to be estimated (a process that took place throughout Bronze Age society and not solely at the top). However, it also provided a means of thinking through other forms of inter-personal relationship, social boundaries, and the temporal cycles and spatial relations that underpinned social and material reproduction. Perhaps more importantly, the dichotomy between gifts and commodities requires critical re-evaluation (cf. Carrier 1995): this is based on the modern Western distinction between economy and society, and I would argue it has hampered rather than enhanced discussions of Bronze Age exchange.

Indeed, if recent studies of the British Bronze Age have tended to avoid the problematic issue of exchange, it is also true that research has lately tended to focus on social interaction, tradition and change at the level of the local (a point that Bradley 2001 also makes). Dissatisfaction with the structural-Marxist models of the 1980s (which tended to produce broad-brush and, one might argue, androcentric models of the evolution of warrior societies) has meant that some writers (myself amongst them) have moved to the opposite end of the spectrum, taking an all too insular approach that focuses on the details of the British evidence without reference to Continental developments. Notwithstanding important exceptions (e.g. Needham *et al.* 2006; O'Connor 2004; Sheridan and Shortland 2004), a greater level of familiarity with overseas material is surely required amongst scholars working on British Bronze Age material, particularly amongst the younger generation. Doubtless this trend is in part a result of the move away from artefact studies to a focus on monuments and landscapes (B. Roberts, pers. comm.); research on Bronze Age material culture inevitably requires scholars to address overseas connections in a way that studies of landscapes, for example, do not. This is an issue we shall return to below.

## Settlement

The remainder of this paper will outline some of the themes and questions that I see as constituting particularly obvious and intriguing gaps in our knowledge. Much of my own work has focused on Bronze Age settlement and it is to this that I shall turn first. To date, syntheses of this material have largely focused on southern England (e.g. Barrett 1994b), and there are serious inadequacies in our understanding of the character of Bronze Age settlement

in many other areas. In southern England, settlements appear to be ephemeral prior to the Middle Bronze Age when their archaeological visibility increased dramatically (Brück 2000). Clearly, this is not the case in other areas, for example Orkney and Shetland, where stone-built houses are well-known from the Early Bronze Age (e.g. Whittle *et al.* 1986). However, the significance of such regional variation in terms of the broad social and economic trajectories represented by this evidence remains poorly understood and, as others have pointed out, models of social change over the course of the Bronze Age tend to be based on the evidence from southern England (e.g. Barrett 1994a). Certainly, our knowledge of certain regions is very sketchy: in some areas, few Bronze Age settlements are known, and specialist projects addressing these gaps (such as the Welsh Roundhouse Project: Ghey *et al.* 2007) are required. Doubtless, the publication of Pope's doctoral research on roundhouses from central and northern Britain (2003) will do much to enhance our understanding of regional differences in the character of these buildings. However, many questions – for example regarding the organisation of settlement space in different regions – remain. On parts of Dartmoor, for instance, enclosed settlements comprising large numbers of stone-built roundhouses, many of which may be contemporary, provide strikingly different evidence to the single-household settlements prevalent in most areas (e.g. Butler 1991, 143-145). Elsewhere, too, possible 'villages' of closely-spaced roundhouses have occasionally been identified, for example at Horcott Pit in Gloucestershire (D. Mullin, pers. comm.). Clearly, such differences have significant implications for the sorts of communities that constructed and used these sites.

In chronological terms, a thorough overview of Late Bronze Age settlement is urgently required, and this would make a perfect topic for a PhD. Until the late 1980s, the Late Bronze Age settlement record was something of a vacuum; with the increase in developer-funded excavation, the number of settlements dating to this period has increased dramatically, although as yet no synthesis of this material has been carried out. It is clear, for example, that a number of different types of site appear, including dark-earth or midden sites, and enclosed sites such as ringforts and hillforts, as well as single- and multiple-phase open settlements. The nature of these differences has yet to be precisely determined and their significance remains open to debate (Needham 1993; Brück 2007). Factors such as dating, function and social status may each have played a role; certainly, the possible link between the emergence of settlement hierarchies – if this is what these inter-site differences represent – and the development of social hierarchies requires further examination. Just as crucially, the character and dating of Late Bronze Age hilltop settlements remain poorly understood. Given Needham's recent contention that hillforts did not appear until after 800 BC (2007, 55), evidence for earlier activities on hilltops must be thoroughly reassessed.

## Burial

British Bronze Age burials have long been a focus of research and continue to enjoy much attention (see, for example, papers in Last 2007). In recent years, such material has benefited from the application of new theoretical frameworks as well as novel scientific techniques. For example, the current Beaker Isotope Project (<http://www.shef.ac.uk/archaeology/research/beaker-isotope>) is employing isotopic analysis of human remains to explore patterns of population movement during the earliest part of the Bronze Age. The work of Woodward and colleagues (Woodward *et al.* 2005) on the life histories of Early Bronze Age grave goods including studies of their source, use wear and patterns of fragmentation will transform our understanding of the role of these objects in funerary rites. Programmes of radiocarbon dating combined with detailed contextual analysis have facilitated a nuanced appreciation of changes over time in the character and significance of Early Bronze Age mortuary rites (Garwood 2007). Bronze Age concepts of personhood have been reconsidered in critiques of

the link between the practice of single burial and the supposed emergence of an 'ideology of the individual' (Brück 2004; Fowler 2005), while sophisticated approaches to the relationship between materiality and society have contributed to our understanding of the symbolic significance of the artefacts and substances employed in Early Bronze Age mortuary rites (Jones 2002; Owoc 2002).

However, there is still considerable scope for ongoing research into many aspects of Bronze Age funerary practice. A thorough overview of evidence for Early Bronze Age funerary deposits that contain incomplete bodies, or that comprise the remains of more than one individual, would allow the overly simplified contrast often drawn between the multiple burials of the Neolithic and the single burials of the Early Bronze Age to be reconsidered (see Gibson 2004 and Brück 2006b for examples). For instance, in some cases, inhumations are missing particular skeletal elements, while elsewhere only parts of the body (such as an articulated limb or a skull) are present. Unburnt bones may be found in a disarticulated and disordered mass, while in other cases, one or more bones from a second individual may accompany the 'primary' burial. Doubtless, a range of practices including excarnation, defleshing and dismemberment, selective retention of ancestral bones, and the reopening and/or desecration of burial sites account for such variations. What is evident is that Early Bronze Age funerary rites were complex, multi-phase and highly variable; whether this variability can be accounted for by regional, chronological or social differences is less clear. Certainly, there is potential for new scientific techniques to be employed in understanding some of the questions that might arise from such a study. For example, analysis of ancient DNA may provide insights into the familial relationships that existed both within and between mortuary sites and might help to distinguish ancestral relics from raiding trophies.

Other aspects of the Early Bronze Age mortuary record deserve further attention. There are interesting patterns in the location of grave goods relative to the human body (Brück 2004, 322): for example, the deposition of Beaker pots in front of the face, behind the head and at the feet was noted many years ago by Clarke (1970, 454-455), and further work on this topic may identify similar relationships for other categories of material culture. It seems likely that such careful patterns of placement are a reflection of the symbolic significance ascribed both to certain artefacts and to the body itself. Similar observations may be made in relation to the animal remains recovered from Bronze Age burials. Little research has been carried out on this topic, yet the selection of particular species and body parts and their location in the grave surely has much to tell us regarding not only mortuary practice and symbolism, but also the character of human-animal relationships (Brück 2004, 322-325). An initial study of animal remains in Wiltshire, Dorset and Oxfordshire has identified some significant and interesting trends (Wilkin 2006), while ongoing work by Mark Maltby on worked bone from mortuary contexts is examining patterns in the selection of species, skeletal element and side of the body (Woodward *et al.* 2005; A. Woodward pers. comm.). Doubtless, further work in related areas would be valuable: for example, a study of human-animal relationships employing the mortuary data would undoubtedly cast light on important elements of Bronze Age conceptual frameworks - the distinctions between subject and object, culture and nature, and mind and matter that underpin modern Western attitudes to animals are surely very different to those that informed Bronze Age understandings of the world and people's place within it (Oma 2007; cf. Thomas 2004). Indeed, our understanding of many other such conceptual distinctions remains poor. A thorough reassessment of evidence for the differential treatment of men and women in Early Bronze Age burial rites is sorely needed, specifically one that employs modern bioarchaeological data to re-examine traditional assumptions regarding gender roles and identities (for a sophisticated recent discussion of aspects of this issue, see Sofaer Derevenski 2002).

Although the funerary rites of the Early Bronze Age are perhaps the most archaeologically visible, further work on those of the Middle and Late Bronze Age may also prove enlightening.

Recent discoveries of Late Bronze Age cremation burials in south-central and south-eastern England add to our body of knowledge of funerary rites in this period (see also Champion 2007) and it would be useful to synthesise these finds. Examples include cremation deposits at Stotfold in Bedfordshire and Springhead in Kent (C. Gibson and A. Barclay, pers. comm.). These sites provide evidence for significant variability in the character of Late Bronze Age mortuary treatment. For example, the cremation burial of an adult male found at Site 48, West of Ongar Road, Essex, comprised 1085g of burnt bone, while five of the group of nine cremation deposits from Stone Hall, Essex, weighed less than 100g (Powell 2007). For the Middle Bronze Age, the burial practices of northern Britain have been the focus of less attention than those of the south and east, and studies that identify regional traditions and trajectories in these areas would be useful. Indeed, it seems likely that even the unaccompanied cremations that typify mortuary practice of this period may have more to tell us than is often assumed. Studies of the representation of different skeletal elements may indicate deliberate selection, while the 'structured' nature of many cremation deposits (containing different layers of charcoal, cremated bone and other materials) deserves further attention, suggesting that cremation rites were complex and multi-phase activities.

## Landscape

Although seminal work on the character of Bronze Age landscapes has been undertaken (e.g. Fleming 1988; Garwood 1999; Barnatt *et al.* 2002), research on prehistoric landscapes has – in recent years at least – focused largely on other periods, in particular the Neolithic. Yet, large-scale commercially-funded projects such as those that take place in advance of gravel extraction have the potential to provide us with extraordinary insights into the organisation of the Bronze Age landscape. For example, recent work by Yates (2007) has demonstrated that Later Bronze Age landscapes in south-east England were carefully laid out; for other regions too, there is surely now potential to identify consistent patterning in the spatial relationships between such elements as settlements, burials, field boundaries, burnt mounds, waterholes, metalwork (and other) deposits, bridges and trackways. We should now also be in a position to reassess inter-regional differences in both the prevalence and distribution of different site types. Much of this information remains spread across individual project reports and in grey literature, and further synthetic and interpretative work on this material would be invaluable. Such research would enhance understanding not only of the practicalities of social and economic activities, but evidence for the structuring of the landscape may provide interesting insights into Bronze Age cosmographies: for example, the location of burial monuments at the junctions of field boundaries or the deposition of metalwork and other items in waterholes or along trackways might help us to identify elements of the landscape that may have been considered contentious, liminal or otherworldly.

Moreover, such studies of Bronze Age landscapes could help to integrate a range of compartmentalised specialisms. For example, there are still serious gaps in our knowledge of the landscape context of metalwork deposition: work on bronze artefacts has traditionally focused on typology because many such finds were either unprovenanced or their depositional contexts were poorly recorded. Hence, although there is a broad understanding of the sorts of landscape features from which bronze objects have been recovered (rivers and bogs, for example), the spatial relationship between metalwork findspots, other categories of site (for example settlements, burials or field boundaries) and aspects of the topography remains unclear (but see Barber 2001; Yates 2007). The detailed contextual investigations that have been carried out by Cowie on a number of Scottish hoards (e.g. 2004) provide excellent examples of this sort of work and we may hope that the Portable Antiquities Scheme (<http://www.finds.org.uk/index.php>) will facilitate similar research in England and Wales. Already, some interesting patterns can be discerned, such as the deposition of Late

Bronze Age metalwork at the foot of dramatic hills or crags on which defended settlements of similar date were constructed (examples include the shield from South Cadbury, Somerset: Coles *et al.* 1999).

Hopefully, such work might facilitate an integrated approach to Bronze Age landscapes in which strict lines of demarcation are not drawn between ritual and secular practice or between social and economic activities. As I have remarked elsewhere (Brück 2000), the distinction that has been drawn between the landscapes of the Earlier and Later Bronze Age (dominated by funerary monuments on the one hand and settlements and field systems on the other) has meant that human-environment interaction during the latter part of the period has often been envisaged in functionalist and sometimes determinist terms. Yet, a different approach to features such as field boundaries might facilitate an agrarian sociology for the Bronze Age: for example, the creation of boundaries and their relationship to houses, funerary monuments and significant topographical features speak of inter-personal and inter-community dynamics and have much to tell us regarding the social and cultural significance of Bronze Age landscapes (e.g. Johnston 2005). The types of activities that people were involved with on a daily basis – watering cattle, laying hedges, cleaning out ditches – cast light not only on the practicalities of subsistence but formed a significant element of social identity and social differentiation (Edmonds 2001; Giles 2007). The practical choices that people made when faced with soil deterioration or climatic change therefore drew on constellations of knowledge that were rooted in particular social conditions. As research currently stands, palaeoenvironmental analyses commissioned for archaeological projects tend to be confined to specialist reports that are rarely fully integrated with discussion of the archaeology itself. This is, of course, a symptom of the disjunction between culture and nature that characterises modern Western thinking (cf. Thomas 2004); certainly, this is a matter that deserves further attention relative to both Earlier and Later Bronze Age landscapes.

## Artefacts

Artefact studies have traditionally been a particular focus in research on the British Bronze Age. In recent years, however, these have fallen out of favour – perhaps because of the perceived ‘traditionalism’ of the sorts of typological studies that have dominated this body of literature. However, there is an extraordinary wealth of information that may be obtained from detailed studies of particular classes of artefacts, especially where consideration of contextual details including aspects of depositional practice are taken into account. Work by Woodward *et al.* (2005) on the life histories of artefacts recovered from Early Bronze Age burials and studies of use wear on bronze objects by Bridgford (1997) and York (2002) provide good examples of how this type of research can provide remarkable insights into the social role and significance of particular categories of artefact.

Many categories of find deserve further research. For example, worked bone is found in much larger quantities on Late Bronze Age settlements than on sites of earlier centuries, but there is no detailed synthetic study of this material. Early Bronze Age pottery has been the focus of much research, yet the symbolic significance of the complex decorative schemes applied to pots such as Food Vessels requires further consideration. ‘Foreign’ objects such as quernstones are frequently recovered from Late Bronze Age settlements, and a new synthesis of such material (examining exchange relations within particular regional contexts) might throw light on the networks of relationships within which social identities were constituted during this period (see Moore 2007 for such a study of quernstones in an Iron Age context). An examination of the deposition of this class of artefacts (as parts or wholes, used or unused) might provide interesting insights into how inter-regional relationships (including exchange

and inter-marriage) were organised, perceived and valued. Natural objects such as shells, stones and fossils accompany many Early Bronze Age burials, but there is no catalogue of these finds and their significance remains poorly understood. Despite significant recent advances in our understanding of the extraction, processing and exchange of copper (e.g. Rohl and Needham 1998; Timberlake 2003), our knowledge of both the landscape context and the social context of metalworking is still limited. Again, a synthesis and critical evaluation of the evidence for metalworking from different categories of site would be highly valuable.

## Conclusion

Together, these constitute just a few examples of the many categories of artefact that deserve further research; certainly, recent developments in material culture studies in other areas of archaeology (e.g. Knappett 2005) demonstrate the very great potential of such research to illuminate aspects of British Bronze Age society. Extending beyond the study of particular artefact types, further research on the extraordinary diversity of sites and landscapes that have been uncovered in recent developer-funded work would be immensely valuable. There is a need to maximise the benefit of such large-scale archaeological interventions. Initiatives to improve the accessibility of so-called 'grey' literature, for example by the Archaeological Data Service (<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/>), are therefore of very great value, both to the archaeological community and to the public. Indeed, easier access to information on other forms of unpublished research would also be useful: for example, a database of ongoing and completed postgraduate research, perhaps including brief abstracts, could help to disseminate information on those working in the field, although it is not currently clear who might be willing to hold and maintain such a database.

Finally, it is perhaps fair to say that to date there has been little critical consideration of the way in which contemporary socio-political concerns and conditions have influenced interpretations of the Bronze Age (exceptions include Morris 1988 and Brittain 2007). The reflexivity that pervades other areas of archaeological research is barely in evidence in our own field of interest. In respect of my own research, the significance of this became clear to me entirely by accident: at a conference on British Bronze Age landscapes, I was one of just five women out of twenty-nine speakers. Three of those women (including myself) were examining Bronze Age houses and domestic practice, while the other papers presented landscape studies of a very different scale. It was only then that I began to wonder if my own gender identity had anything to do with my choice of research topic! It is surely to be hoped that the relationship between the interests, agendas and interpretative frameworks that shape the study of the Bronze Age and the broader social contexts in which we work will soon form a focus of investigation in its own right.

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