

Chapter 8

The Neolithic and Early Bronze Age: Research Agenda

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8.1 Nature of the evidence

A strength of the Solent-Thames region is that it enables us to look at very diverse areas and study the differences and similarities between them. Its physical diversity provides many opportunities for landscape reconstruction, from riverine environments with their alluvial silts, uplands with associated colluvial deposits to coastal and marine environments. There is also considerable variety in the evidence for human activity, in the realms of settlement, economy and beliefs. This evidence has considerable potential to shed light on the character of regional diversity at the time. Questions and issues to explore include:

- 8.1.1 why do some areas have major monuments and others do not, and why do some monuments have different distributions to others?
- 8.1.2 why is deposition in rivers favoured in some areas (for example the Middle Thames), whereas deposition in graves is more common elsewhere (such as the Upper Thames and Hampshire). Was there deliberate deposition in the sea?
- 8.1.3 comparing the character of ceremonial activity in areas where ‘typical’ monuments (eg henges) are rare with those from conventionally-accepted monument complexes
- 8.1.4 comparing the character of settlement in those areas that were comparatively populous from an early period with those where settlement was sparse.

8.2 Chronology

Much more precise chronologies are now available for some parts of the region (particularly the Upper Thames and the Cotswolds) and for some periods (mainly the earlier Neolithic) and these have demonstrated, not only that some of our widely-accepted sequences were erroneous, but also how much can be gained in terms of understanding the social dynamics of early communities. Priorities for research can be stated as follows:

- 8.2.1 Better dating of key sites and deposits, especially beyond the Cotswolds and the Upper Thames, in order to improve an understanding of chronological sequences across the region. This should include, in particular:
 - 8.2.2 identifying and investigating sites with both late Mesolithic and early Neolithic material present, especially where these can be linked to environmental and datable sequences
 - 8.2.3 better dating of the wide range of earlier Neolithic funerary monuments
 - 8.2.4 better refinement of early Bronze Age chronologies, for example the dating of early Bronze Age ‘Wessex’ burials – linking burials and settlement evidence, where this exists
 - 8.2.5 investigating sites with good environmental sequences with potential for environmental reconstruction
 - 8.2.6 full analysis of well-dated lithic assemblages to aid with the dating of surface finds from field survey
 - 8.2.7 dating residues on ceramics, particularly Peterborough Ware and ‘urn’ traditions of early Bronze Age date.

8.3 Landscape and land use

Over the course of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age, a dramatic change occurred in the landscape of the region which, for the first time, was achieved by human rather than natural means. Tree clearance occurred on an unprecedented scale, creating pasture for domesticated animals and small cultivation plots, both the animals reared and cereals grown being new introductions from the Continent at the beginning of the Neolithic. The speed of change, the relative and changing importance of animals and cereals and the impact of their introduction on human populations remains hotly contested. Key areas for study comprise:

- 8.3.1 Investigating the process of tree clearance, especially in relation to expanding settlement and new monument complexes and prehistoric monuments such as ring ditches. This should include the use of the widest possible range of relevant environmental techniques.
- 8.3.2 Examining direct evidence for cultivation, for example ard marks below barrows, in addition to appropriate environmental samples
- 8.3.3 Investigating the reasons (social and environmental) behind the episodic use of some apparently more fragile landscapes in the region. For example, the reduction in the use of clay-with-flint after the Neolithic, and the more intensive, but relatively short-lived use of the Hampshire Greensand and New Forest in the Bronze Age, following an apparent period of disuse since Mesolithic
- 8.3.4 Obtaining more and larger animal bone assemblages in order to gain a better understanding of herd composition and the primary uses of domesticated animals.
- 8.4.6 Further examination of the extent and character of midden sites, some of our most important and least investigated early Neolithic sites. To what extent are middens actually a feature of 'settlement' and to what extent a result of special events and gatherings? Were middens cultivated in the Neolithic, and how did the material in them come to be deposited or redeposited?. Advancing the recognition of middens in flint scatters (see also 8.4.4 above).
- 8.4.7 Does the character of settlement change between the early and later Neolithic, with greater mobility and emphasis on pastoralism?

8.4 Settlement

Identifying and characterising Neolithic and early Bronze Age settlement sites continues to be highly problematic. Issues and questions to address include:

- 8.4.1 Establishing the extent and character of settlement away from monument complexes, especially in areas where early settlement has traditionally been thought to be thin (eg Hampshire Basin, the Vale of Aylesbury, Vale of the White Horse. Extending areas of fieldwalking.
- 8.4.2 Is the impression that there is more extensive and denser settlement in the later Neolithic in many parts of the region real and, if so, does increasing population have an impact on other aspects of human activity, such as ceremony and ritual activity and burial practices?
- 8.4.3 Why is there comparatively little evidence of early Bronze Age settlement, and to what extent can the distribution of round barrows and ring ditches be used to elucidate the picture?
- 8.4.4 The better characterisation of settlement sites – what they are and what they should look like? For example, buried ground surfaces and their assemblages should be compared with material acquired in fieldwalking?
- 8.4.5 Identifying and examining buried sites, especially beneath colluvium off the chalk and preserved ground surfaces below both alluvium

8.5 Burial

The investigation of Neolithic and early Bronze Age burial monuments goes back to the beginnings of our discipline. Nevertheless, the sheer range of burial types emerging, initially from aerial photography, but more recently from large-scale developer-funded archaeology, has been unexpected. Recently-dated examples confound our preconceptions. Key areas for study, questions to address and recommendations for future approaches are as follows:

- 8.5.1 A much better understanding is needed of date range of the very varied burial monuments of the 4th millennium – portal dolmens, mortuary enclosures, oval barrows, small long barrows in river valleys, U-shaped enclosures, round and segmented ring ditches. These should be compared with the better-known sequences of cairns and long barrows on the chalk and limestone. Do these, apparently more simple structures also have extended sequences, as the Radley oval barrow suggests?
- 8.5.2 What is the relationship of these small burial monuments to the settlement evidence? Are smaller monuments found in areas of settlement?
- 8.5.3 What is the significance of small burial monuments in relation to monuments and the development of monument complexes?
- 8.5.4 Even though the number and range of burial monuments are more numerous than we had imagined, it is clear that most people would not have been buried at these sites. How were most dead bodies treated? What happened in the 3rd millennium when burial monuments

were few? Was cremation burial more common throughout than we have imagined?

- 8.5.5 Recent work has also highlighted the extent and importance of unmarked inhumation and cremation burials, throughout the period. The extent and relative significance of these merits further attention.
- 8.5.6 The human bones found in the excavation of cursuses should be dated as a matter of course.
- 8.5.7 Were some bodies deposited in rivers, along with distinctive Neolithic and early Bronze Age artefacts?
- 8.5.8 It has become apparent that early Bronze Age barrows are very complex, in terms of their contents and forms and the burial practices and other ritual activities associated with them, such as processions. Some of this evidence is found in the upper deposits of the barrows or beyond their physical extents and can be easily damaged if not recognised. Further analysis of their chronology and function is needed and recognition of the ritual use of these sites.
- 8.5.9 Piecemeal sampling of prehistoric burial mounds is likely to provide misleading results and should be avoided.
- 8.5.10 The areas around, and in between, barrows should be excavated as well as the mounds and ditches.
- 8.5.11 Flat graves and flat cemeteries are not likely to be discovered by piecemeal sampling. A better approach is strip, map and sample.

8.6 Ceremony and monuments

It may be thought that our major monuments and monument complexes are well understood, but this is far from the case. Most of our best-known monuments were examined rapidly in advance of development (mainly gravel extraction) many years ago, without the benefit of modern analytical techniques. Priorities for the future include:

- 8.6.1 The Thames Valley has one of the densest concentrations of causewayed enclosures in the country and yet only Abingdon has seen excavation on any scale in this region, and this was a long time ago (in the 1920s, 1954 and 1963) and in advance of development. A better understanding of causewayed enclosures is needed – their date, longevity of use and character of deposits. Are they all alike or are closely-spaced monuments complementary?

Are the more nearly-circular monuments of later date?

- 8.6.2 What is the relationship between causewayed enclosures and cursuses and why were cursuses constructed away from the earlier monuments? How were cursuses used and what is their link with small funerary monuments? Why do circular monuments that were the scene of feasting and other communal ritual activities go out of fashion?
- 8.6.3 What was the role of the large henges and why are they only found in the north of the region? What is their relation to small henge monuments?
- 8.6.4 Why and how did some monuments attract further monument building – pit and post circles and small ditched enclosures – and become more important complexes? Could these be described as pilgrimage sites?

8.7 Specialised activities (crafts, industries and exchange)

- 8.7.1 Easton Down and Martin's Clump are the only certainly known flint mines in our region. Over what period of time were they in use? Where did the majority of the flint used in the region come from, and how did people acquire it?
- 8.7.2 Burnt mounds are usually thought of as a later Bronze Age phenomenon, but a few are now dated to the early Bronze Age (or even late Neolithic). Are these more common than we had imagined? What is their link to settlement?
- 8.7.3 What is the extent, function and date of timber structures that are increasingly coming to light in coastal areas (for example in Langstone Harbour and at Wootton Quarr)?
- 8.7.4 Environments such as coastal zones and waterholes have revealed a range of wooden artefacts. What can we deduce about Neolithic and early Bronze Age woodworking? What do we know of other crafts?
- 8.7.5 What is the evidence of early metalworking in the region?

8.8 Links with the outside world

The character of the region means that links with the outside world were potentially diverse. Techniques for studying these, and key questions to address, include:

- 8.8.1 Investigate the potential long distance links with the region via the movement of artefacts and similarities in the morphology of monuments. For example, links between the Upper Thames Valley and the north of Britain can be approached through stone axes, Grooved Ware pottery, small late Neolithic circular enclosures and henges, and through the similarities between the Rollright Stones and Cumbrian stone circles. Links between the Hampshire Basin and the Continent might include the evidence of jadeite axes. Another area of high potential is links with the South West of England along the coast.
- 8.8.2 Isotope analysis on both human and animal bones (eg C, N, Pb, Sr) and creation of a wider database of isotope results in order to address the issue of the origin and mobility of individuals, communities and their animals
- 8.8.3 What can we say about the beginnings of the 'Channel Bronze Age'?
- 8.8.4 What impact did the introduction of metal have on society in the Solent-Thames region? Can this be seen in the high-status burials of the area and in aspects of everyday life?