

## Chapter 10

# The Later Bronze Age and Iron Age: Research Agenda

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### 10.1 Character of the regions, geological and topographical diversity

The Solent-Thames sub-region provides a different segment of the country from the more usual way of dividing it, using areas such as Wessex and the hillfort zone. This provides a fresh opportunity to consider the late prehistoric period.

The Solent-Thames is a meaningful cross section of the varied pattern of later prehistoric development in Southern England and ways to exploit this should be developed. These should include:

- 10.1.1 Investigation of the distribution of natural deposits that could provide natural pollen and insect sequences to map environmental change through the period.
- 10.1.2 The use of GIS and other geographical techniques to explore the interaction of major natural geological and topographical differences with social, economic or cultural factors.
- 10.1.3 The potential to compare the Solent-Thames with other sub-regions to investigate regionalism in late prehistory.

### 10.2 Nature of the evidence

There has been a considerable amount of archaeological investigation carried out across the sub-region, which has made possible the current level of understanding of the later prehistoric period. In many instances this work has been linked to development, including extensive areas of gravel extraction, particularly since the introduction of PPG16. However, there have also been a number of large-scale research projects, such as the *Danebury Environs Project* and *Hillforts of the Ridgeway*, mainly focussed on hillforts and enclosed settlements. As a result the archaeological evidence from this period may not be providing a full and accurate picture of activity. Consideration should be given to the ways and extent to which the overall picture has been distorted by biases in fieldwork and or development, including how to redress imbalances and focus on poorly surveyed areas which warrant particular attention. These might include:

- 10.2.1 The use of modern GIS methods to explore and counter such biases.
- 10.2.2 Areas which have been prone to especially little coverage or have conditions that are inherently difficult to overcome deserve most attention, for example priorities for carrying out Lidar surveys of woodland areas and the most appropriate method for addressing claylands.
- 10.2.3 In addition, a diverse range of 'hotspots' of later prehistoric investigation across the Solent-Thames area exists, for which comparison of results is required.

### 10.3 Chronology

In the past chronology was established on the basis of type series. Increasingly the use of stratigraphic sequences and scientific dating techniques has enabled more exact and refined chronologies to be prepared. Typology has produced some confusing patterns which have yet to be resolved through other methods. Much remains to be done.

- 10.3.1 An audit of the existing scientific and typological chronological frameworks established on a sub-regional or thematic basis is required.
- 10.3.2 Resolution of chronological issues identified in the audit will need:
  - A – Standards or criteria to enhance chronological resolution in terms of sampling strategies for artefacts and scientific dating.
  - B – Enhancement of the chronological framework, using techniques such as Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL), dendrochronology and residue analysis.
  - C – A programme of retrospective C14 dating with agreed priorities.
- 10.3.3 Excavations should be undertaken with the specific objective of refining chronologies using well-stratified artefact-rich sites.

## 10.4 Landscape and land use

From the later prehistoric period there is evidence for land clearance, changes in farming and organisation of the landscape, both in the form of extensive field systems and large scale land-division, often marked by substantial boundaries. Some of these changes may be related to climatic change. One of the key sources of evidence to explain these developments will come from the biological record, including pollen sequences. The full range of palaeo-environmental and geo-archaeological data should be collected, particularly from sites away from the chalk. Retrieval of sufficient environmental samples to generate such sequences and facilitate collection of other biological indicators should be routine. Any sites with large assemblages of fish, bird and shellfish remains would be of national importance. The survival of large mammals such as bear, wolf and aurochs in the Bronze Age and Iron Age countryside, and the implications this has in terms of habitat loss, is also worth consideration.

The pattern of landuse and its development across the region can be investigated through a number of research themes.

- 10.4.1 The extent of clearance in different parts of the Solent-Thames area, and at what periods this took place, should be explored. A cycle of clearance and regeneration may have persisted in some areas.
- 10.4.2 The use of newly-cleared areas, and any influence of climate on land use, need to be investigated, possibly through proxy data for temperature and rainfall. The relationship with economy across the region and with time should be considered.
- 10.4.3 The location and exploitation of woodland should be explored through palaeo-environmental data.
- 10.4.4 Farming and clearance should be explored through studies of alluvial and colluvial deposits.

Changes in agriculture, such as the introduction of new domestic animal species, perhaps including fowl, or the change to spelt and free-threshing varieties of wheat, can be explored through biological remains. Weed floras can shed light on time of sowing, soil fertility and soil drainage and the by-products of crop-processing. Evidence can also be retrieved for synanthropic species, pests and disease.

- 10.4.5 For field systems in the Solent-Thames area, their origin and purpose, including the reason for co-axial fields and the form taken by field boundaries, would merit further study.

- 10.4.6 Changes in the relationship of fields to settlements across the region should also be investigated.
- 10.4.7 Research may show whether fields were mainly created to control grazing. The importance of grassland management in the Iron Age economy, and the degree of specialisation of grazing farmsteads, for example whether horse raising was a major economic activity in the Thames valley, should be explored.
- 10.4.8 The relative effects of climate change and socio/economic factors on changes in farming need to be clarified.

## 10.5 Settlement

The later prehistoric period saw the development of permanent settlements, although transhumance did not entirely disappear. Types of settlement range from scattered farmsteads, open and enclosed settlements to defensive enclosures and finally to the *oppida*. The relationship between the different kinds of settlement and social organisation, particularly social hierarchy, and changes in economy presents a number of issues. These are not specific to the region, but the number of hillforts and surrounding settlements, and later of *oppida*, the extensive relict field systems and the evidence for seasonal occupation, suggest that the Solent-Thames area would provide suitable opportunities to explore them.

- 10.5.1 The decline of earlier prehistoric patterns of mobile domestic activity, including whether highly dispersed later Bronze Age settlements were only seasonal places of occupation, might be tested.
- 10.5.2 Reasons for increases in the intensity of settlement should be explored, for example whether this reflects a switch from family to more communal management of animals and crops, and the role of land-use divisions in this process.
- 10.5.3 The factors that led to the common shift of settlement location in the late Iron Age need to be identified.
- 10.5.4 Pre-existing landuse rights may have affected the development of settled farming communities, possibly explaining differences in settlement form and patterns of change. Evidence for the emergence of such rights should be sought.
- 10.5.5 Classifying settlements as enclosed and unenclosed may still be useful, but differences

- in scale, social and economic basis of settlement may be considered in other ways.
- 10.5.6 The extent to which forts have Bronze Age origins and their role at that period form part of the larger issue of the purpose of hillforts, which might have been for reunions, ritual and for refuge.
- 10.5.7 Levels of occupation of forts still need further investigation, and the presence of external settlements immediately outside forts, and the relationships between them, requires further research.
- 10.5.8 If forts were not the prestige settlements then these need to be identified. Material culture may prove a better indicator of social hierarchy than size.
- 10.5.9 The extent to which the socio-economic basis of settlement differs across the region needs to be explored.
- 10.5.10 More work is required on whether the form of settlements bear a relation to their socio-economic role or to other non-morphological factors, and upon the existence of geographical and chronological variations within the region.
- 10.5.11 Palaeo-environmental evidence should be used to develop spatial chronologies for settlement change and to identify functions of specific sites.
- 10.5.12 Changes in settlement function should be compared to changes in other areas eg pottery typologies, to look for relationships between them.
- 10.5.13 Palaeo-environmental evidence, including lipid residues, should be used to try to elucidate the use of middens and burnt mounds.
- 10.6.1 The extent to which single family pastoral farmsteads existed needs to be determined.
- 10.6.2 More remains to be learnt about storage pits, such as the establishment of a minimum size, their reuse as latrines and the implications of this for burials in pits.
- 10.6.3 Late prehistoric health care may be better understood through bones and seeds of medicinal plants.
- 10.6.4 Survivors of trepanning operations may have worn their skull discs as talismans of good fortune, or these could be trophies. This might possibly be investigated through DNA or isotope studies
- 10.6.5 Large-scale land divisions are not well understood and there is a need to clarify their frequency, to discover whether these might have defined land rights and ownership or land use areas, and to discover who organised them.
- 10.6.6 The form taken by the boundaries above ground and how long they lasted merits further study.
- 10.6.7 The size of communities in the Iron Age, their social and economic relationships and the degree of economic specialisation need more investigation.

## 10.6 Social organisation

In the past it had been thought that the different forms of settlement reflected some form of hierarchy in society. However, this idea has been undermined by a lack of certainty over the role of defensive enclosures and the fact that the status of material culture found does not correlate with settlement type. The likely development of cultural, tribal, economic and political regions is indicated by large-scale linear earthworks and distribution of coinage. While by no means exclusive to the Solent-Thames area, there are several important issues to be explored to which the levels of late prehistoric activity and archaeological research across the region can make a significant contribution.

## 10.7 The built environment

The remains of many buildings dating to the late prehistoric period have now been identified across the sub-region, demonstrating a wide variety of construction techniques over time, and showing increasing complexity from the Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age. Both round houses and rectangular buildings have been found. There are also large numbers of four-post structures, traditionally thought to be granaries, but as they occur at pastoral sites also, their function is not as clear cut. Given the enormous number now available for study certain questions about structures in the region may be addressed.

- 10.7.1 The development of the architecture of late prehistoric houses over a long time scale from the middle Bronze Age to late Iron Age may be clarified.
- 10.7.2 The mix of cosmological and practical influences on architecture could be investigated.
- 10.7.3 The role of four-posters needs better understanding. An association with pastoral farms might suggest that some were for fodder, and the 'megaposters' found at Mingies Ditch

and other sites might support this theory. Further detailed study of the implications of the differing size of postholes for these structures would be valuable.

- 10.7.4 Sampling strategies need to be refined, giving priority to contexts associated with Bronze Age hut platforms/ roundhouses, including any postholes associated with these features, as these appear more productive than ditches. More balanced sampling of Iron Age sites, concentrating less on pits, and targeting four-post structures and ditches etc. would be beneficial.

### 10.8 Material culture

Everyday objects from settlements display a wide variety of quality of manufacture and design which may relate to a greater social role than is associated with such objects in the present day. Although deliberate deposits of such objects are uncommon, large numbers of deposits of higher status pottery, metalwork, querns, animal remains and other objects have been found, including those in watery contexts. The significance of both the objects and their deposition remains unclear, posing questions such as:

- 10.8.1 The functions of common objects like loom weights/ oven bricks; antler combs and grooved and polished metapodials.
- 10.8.2 Whether there was a personal and social significance in common highly finished and decorated craft tools and domestic objects.

One direction for study in the Solent-Thames area would be its pottery.

- 10.8.3 Detailed study of assemblages from large numbers of excavated sites would allow exploration of the distributions of pottery fabrics, changing fashions in fabrics, forms and decoration, the definition of sub-regional styles of pottery and their links to social groups.

### 10.9 Crafts, trade and industry

Archaeological evidence suggests that during the late prehistoric period manufacture, particularly of metalwork, involved the use of specialist craftsmen in addition to more domestic production. The extent to which the specialist remained in a particular location or travelled between sites is less easy to determine. The organisation of crafts, use of itinerant craftsmen and the extent to which all families carried out basic domestic crafts needs to be explored. Any large scale iron-working will have placed demands on the local woodland as a source of charcoal. The impact of industrial processes on the

environment merits exploration. Within the Solent-Thames region questions about craft production remain. In particular,

- 10.9.1 Where did smithing fit into the organisation of metal working?
- 10.9.2 Where were the sites where pottery was manufactured, and what evidence can be used to identify and distinguish such sites?

### 10.10 Transport and communication

Evidence from bones suggests that oxen were the principal draft animals although possible horse breeding areas suggest that high status horse-drawn vehicles may have been used. Evidence for a road network is limited. Communication by water was probably common and a number of waterfront sites have been identified. Environmental evidence may help to extend understanding of how the water was used. However, material culture provides the best indication of long distance communication including cross-channel trade.

- 10.10.1 There is a need to explore patterns and axes of exchange, including the nature of the main exports from the region, possibly corn or horses.
- 10.10.2 The role of the Thames as a key boundary in distribution of salt from Droitwich, Hampshire and Dorset should be investigated.
- 10.10.3 European connections from the south coast and down the Thames and their influence on patterns of exchange at different periods should be studied.
- 10.10.4 More evidence for structures and waterside activities needs to be identified.

### 10.11 Ceremony and ritual

In comparison with other periods, the evidence for the treatment of the dead in the later prehistoric period is limited, although deposition in pits was taking place. Creation of large scale funerary monuments also decreased during this period and the number of ritual sites identified is small, although there are some sites where an earlier feature has been identified in association with one dating from the Roman period. There remain many issues to explore, to which the comparative wealth of evidence from the region can make a significant contribution. Questions include:

- 10.11.1 When and why people stopped building and using funerary monuments during the period?
- 10.11.2 The extent to which biases in fieldwork might

- prevent the discovery of more urnfields and other cemeteries?
- 10.11.3 How frequent were cremations and inhumation burials in boundaries, fields and settlements before monuments stopped being used?
- 10.11.4 What were the selection criteria for pit burials? Were these the socially disadvantaged, and why does this occur with varying frequency on different sites? If (as currently appears) it was seldom more than once in a couple of generations on most sites, what is the significance of pit burial?
- 10.11.5 How do we define an Iron Age cemetery, and do small groups outside settlements count?
- 10.11.6 What other forms of formal burial like those in buildings at Frilford and Spring Road, Abingdon are there, are there chronological patterns in their occurrence, and how should we interpret them?
- 10.11.7 How should we interpret practices indicated by mutilated bodies and double burials, and how prevalent was human sacrifice?
- 10.11.8 What is the significance of differences in sex, age, health and stature of burials within cemeteries and around settlements.
- In particular the region has the capacity explore the relationship between water and ritual, with some significant evidence already recovered from the Thames and from Langstone Harbour.
- 10.11.9 It remains to be established whether excarnation and scattering of remains on land or river was the norm?
- 10.11.10 What was the nature, purpose and frequency of 'special deposits' of human remains and metalwork?
- the concept of territorial entities needs to be explored. The many major late Iron Age earthworks in the central part of the Upper Thames may represent major political boundaries and possible ownership differences, rather than defence.
- 10.12.2 The relationship between the earthworks associated with different major centres in late Iron Age and tribal political attitudes to Rome should be explored.
- 10.12.3 The question needs to be answered as to whether the North Oxfordshire Grims Ditch and Cassington Big Ring are unfinished.
- 10.12.4 More investigation is needed into the extent to which construction, maintenance and remodelling of communal enclosures and forts, with the massive deployment of labour involved, was a major means of exerting and symbolising social and political authority.
- 10.12.5 Evidence from settlements suggests that society was peaceful, although this conflicts somewhat with the picture from hillforts. The idea needs to be tested.
- 10.12.6 The level of attack on and burning of hillforts should be established, and the context of burning requires more careful consideration. Was burning always evidence of attack, or might it have been due to ritual cleansing or even to deliberate modification of the defences by the occupants?
- 10.12.7 There is need for review of metalwork found in rivers, considering the preponderance of weapons, their possible use in conflict, association with deposition of bodies and their relationship to politics and the role of rivers as tribal boundaries

### 10.12 Warfare, defence and military installations

Hillforts are the most imposing late prehistoric monuments, but their function is uncertain. Few show definite signs of conflict and they might have played a role in political and social organisation rather than serving a defensive role. Similarly deposits of weapons in rivers may not have been related to conflict. The extent of warfare and the politics of the period need addressing through several avenues:

- 10.12.1 The relationship between the major late Bronze Age and Iron Age linear ditches and

### 10.13 What were the drivers and inhibitors of change?

A possible approach to the study of the later prehistoric period is to consider the evidence in relation to how changes were influenced by a variety of factors.

- A - Environment
- B - Population dynamics
- C - Family relations
- D - Communications
- E - Economics
- F - Technology
- G - Rights and Traditions
- H - Religion
- J - Politics