

Early to Middle Bronze Age Research topics and priorities

Methodological approaches and cross-cutting themes

These issues are relevant to several of the topics and priorities to be considered and discussed during the workshops. They will not form the focus of a discussion session, but are likely to be relevant to many of the topics and priorities discussed.

Excavation of 'entire' archaeological entities is necessary. A significant number of Early to Middle Bronze Age monuments, burial groups, settlement enclosures and so on have been exposed and excavated only partially. This leads to a truncated understanding of key aspects of Bronze Age landscapes. Current wording of planning legislation should be used actively to ensure that regionally important sites are, where possible, at least exposed in their entirety so that it is possible to address questions such as the size of MBA cremation cemeteries; the overall plan form of funerary monuments and so on.

It is sometimes necessary and/or desirable to excavate beyond development footprints – this includes at least exposing the extent of (if not also investigating in detail) important archaeological entities (major Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age pit concentrations, round houses, round barrows, cremation cemeteries and so on). In some cases it might even be interpretatively worthwhile to sample landscape evidence beyond major concentrations of Bronze Age archaeology (e.g. field systems, see also Evans forthcoming). It is certainly possible that recent shifts in planning policy have contributed to an increase in the partial exposure and excavation of archaeological entities. In the long-term this trend will almost certainly have a negative impact both on developing detailed understandings of the Early to Middle Bronze Age and on our capacity to communicate about this archaeology to wider audiences

Other key priorities include:

- Targeted palaeoecological investigation/a more integrated approach to landscape development
- Greater collaboration between academics and other researchers across the region
- Greater investment in producing both popular and academic outputs
- Publication of major unpublished fieldwork projects
- Improved communication between fieldwork organisations and availability of grey literature
- Better integration of academic research findings into HER records to inform future research
- Multi-stranded investigations combining evidence from different aspects of past landscapes and from excavated sites and scientific analysis (e.g. palaeoenvironmental evidence)
- Synthesis of evidence from areas threatened by agriculture (rather than immediately by development threats)
- Synthesis of published/unpublished material
- Synthesis of evidence for coastal/maritime archaeology

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Dating and chronology

Strategic radiocarbon dating is necessary, both where it is helpful to generate absolute dates to support typological schema and where material culture is lacking (e.g. Early Bronze Age settlement structures, Middle Bronze Age land boundaries and settlement enclosures)

Bayesian modelling should be applied to radiocarbon dates particularly from monuments and ceramic assemblages, to help refine chronologies.

The outcomes of radiocarbon and other modes of dating should be collated periodically at a regional level, either in an online forum or otherwise in annual summaries in local journals. As well as making this information more accessible, this would also help practitioners make better informed and more strategic decisions about what needs to be dated and how standard site-based dating programmes could productively be enhanced.

More specific priorities for dating include:

- Early Bronze Age structures (e.g. roundhouses) and settlement enclosures – several have been identified, none are securely dated
- Cemetery chronologies – there is scope to build on the work undertaken by Garrow et al (2014), particularly in terms of our understanding of Middle Bronze Age cremation cemetery chronologies
- Field system chronologies – accepting the complexities involved in dating BA land boundaries, teasing out a more refined understanding of specific construction sequences remains important
- BA post alignments and their relationship to field systems – none of the recently excavated BA post alignments from the region are well dated; their temporal relationship with field systems is still not entirely clear
- Early Bronze Age ceramic sequences – especially the chronological relationship between Beaker, Food Vessel, Collared Urn and Biconical urn deposits
- M/LBA ceramic sequences – especially the chronological relationship between Deverel Rimbury and Post Deverel Rimbury ceramic traditions where materially rich settlements spanning the M/LBA coincide spatially. Ladle and Woodward's (2009) close dating for the M/LBA ceramics from Bestwall Quarry, Dorset provides a useful model in this respect
- Bayesian modelling of site-specific sequences – opportunities for this are rare. However where there is regionally or nationally important evidence together with good stratigraphic information, it is interpretatively essential that more detailed dating programmes of this kind are pursued
- Dating programmes that address interpretative themes extending beyond the site level (e.g. human remains from non-funerary contexts)

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Regional difference and continental connections

The character/reality of the divide in the evidence between northern and southern parts of the region needs to be established.

While this might seem obvious, it is also vital researchers remain open to examining patterning *beyond* the regional boundary. For instance consideration of the emergence of Bronze Age landscapes around the Fen basin (including into Lincolnshire) is analytically important.

Examination of links between East Anglia and Western Europe is necessary, particularly in a maritime context. There is growing evidence for close similarities in the character and make-up of Bronze Age landscapes on both sides of the North Sea during the second millennium BC. This relationship needs to be investigated more systematically and to establish whether broad resemblances in the evidence base were accompanied by more direct evidence for contact and exchange.

The development of integrated understandings of coastal and inland archaeology is necessary – the failure to integrate ‘wetland’ and ‘dryland’ narratives has been raised as an issue at a national level.

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Settlement

Dating evidence should be obtained for Early Bronze Age structures (e.g. roundhouses) and settlement enclosures – several have been identified, none is securely dated.

Further attention needs to be paid to the emergence of upland (pioneer) landscapes versus lowland landscapes (with prior histories of occupation) in the Middle Bronze Age. While it is clear that earlier earthworks (Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments) played a major role in the development of some key lowland Middle Bronze Age landscapes, this was not necessarily the case more widely. In landscapes where such monuments were much less concentrated, the makeup and articulation of Middle to Late Bronze Age landscapes is potentially quite different and deserves further consideration.

Settlement mobility requires further study. There is a general assumption that the appearance of substantial evidence for settlements and fields in the Middle Bronze Age was accompanied by a settling down of contemporary populations. However, this is not necessarily the case and this needs to be investigated actively. An integrated approach that considers the character and intensity of settlement and farming practices is key to addressing this question.

The accumulative importance of isolated Early Bronze Age settlement evidence needs to be recognised.

Synthesis/analysis of Middle Bronze Age settlement evidence from across the region is required in order to enable major interpretative progress. In addition to providing an overview of settlement morphology, a consideration of depositional practices, of major contrasts in the makeup of settlement and of the character of settlement-associated practices would be interesting.

Examination of the inter-relationships between settlements, together with the variation and changes in settlement types, and the makeup of finds assemblages associated with different settlement forms offers potential to explore the social changes taking place.

The character of clayland occupation needs closer definition. Does this occupation differ to that on the gravels or other geologies?

Verification of evidence from aerial photographs is needed, especially beyond gravel landscapes.

Further methods need to be developed for identifying Bronze Age archaeology in non-gravel landscapes.

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Fields and farming

Synthesis of plant/animal remains are vital to understanding Early and Middle Bronze Age ecologies in a period that has been described, at a broad level, as witnessing an agricultural revolution.

Further work is required to better understand field system chronologies. Accepting the complexities involved in dating Bronze Age land boundaries, teasing out a more refined understanding of specific construction sequences remains important.

Bronze Age post alignments and their relationship to field systems and other landscape features need to be explored. None of the recently excavated post alignments has been well dated and their temporal relationship with field systems and other landscape features is still not entirely clear.

Although detailed palaeoenvironmental and other scientific work has accompanied the excavation of some of the more extensive field systems and is essential, for instance, in terms of understanding the role played by fields, such work continues to be a feature of the work of only a few key fieldwork organisations. It is vital that (a) a broader awareness is built of the potential applications of scientific methods and (b) relevant samples are taken systematically (rather than patchily as is currently the case) where the evidence is well preserved (e.g. from waterlogged features) and where regionally/nationally significant Early to Middle Bronze Age remains are uncovered

Machine excavation of Bronze Age field systems and waterholes following traditional hand excavation is advocated (see for instance the methods employed by Luke 2016 and Pickstone and Mortimer 2011). Understandings of Early to Middle Bronze Age landscapes could be enhanced significantly if, in addition to hand-excavating slots across ditched boundaries, substantial sections of these systems were regularly machine excavated and archaeological monitoring was conducted on wider areas while development takes place. This would improve the potential for artefact retrieval (and thus enhance understandings of the chronology of these features) and would increase significantly the possibility of identifying the isolated deposits (e.g. burials, metalwork deposits etc.) which we now know are a key feature of Bronze Age boundaries.

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Burial and the treatment of human remains

Synthesis of highly diverse burial evidence across the region is necessary, particularly beyond Middle Bronze Age cremations, which were addressed substantially by Robinson (2007). For instance, it would be very interesting to consider the incidence and character of grave goods over the duration of the E/MBA. This topic is still poorly understood in the East of England in comparison to other major research areas such as Wessex, the Thames Valley and East Yorkshire.

Cemetery chronologies – there is scope to build on the work undertaken by Garrow et al (2014), particularly in terms of our understanding of Middle Bronze Age cremation cemetery chronologies.

More broadly, routine radiocarbon dating of burials (both cremations and inhumations) without grave goods is crucial. Cremation cemeteries can no longer be assumed to be Middle Bronze Age in date. Equally, it is now clear that isolated inhumation burials were made throughout the course of later prehistory. It is important that the character and chronology of later prehistoric burials that lack clear dating evidence is understood as a component of burial practices more broadly.

Early and Middle Bronze Age health requires further research. Although it is recognised that farming practices and living conditions are key to human health, evidence from human remains (e.g. for malnutrition and disease) is rarely considered alongside that from palaeoenvironmental remains (e.g. for dietary make-up, insects indicative of squalid living conditions etc.). The growing number of Middle Bronze Age inhumations offers new interpretative scope in this respect.

The strategic application of aDNA analysis is currently revolutionising understandings of the makeup of Early Bronze Age societies and of the character of Bronze Age burial practices. For instance, it is now possible to identify the genetic relationships of people buried within cemeteries or where there are multiple burials in one grave. Evidence from the Eastern Region (in particular from Over, Cambridgeshire and from Trumpington Meadows, Cambridge) has played a key role in recent international research in this area. It is vital that researchers in the region seek actively to contribute to major scientific research programmes of this kind, and are open to the interpretative opportunities of new scientific methods more broadly.

Monuments

The shifting contexts of monumentality, from an Early Bronze Age emphasis on circular monuments to the creation of landscape-scale structures in the Middle and Later Bronze Age, require further study and interpretation.

Last's (2007) arguments regarding the diversity of Bronze Age funerary monuments and Garwood (2007) and Garrow et al's (2014) considerations of the chronology of monument building require further consideration within the region.

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The characterisation, production and distribution of artefacts

Integration of excavated and stray find evidence is necessary in order to maximise the potential of this material.

Ceramic evidence is in urgent need of synthesis. This is necessary for the Early Bronze Age (particularly beyond Collared Urns, addressed in detail by Law (2009)) and Middle Bronze Age ceramics in general, both in terms of the makeup of this dataset and their depositional contexts.

Dating evidence should be collected to improve our understanding of Early Bronze Age ceramic sequences, especially the chronological relationship between Beaker, Food Vessel, Collared Urn and Biconical Urn deposits.

Dating evidence is needed to improve our understanding of Middle to Late Bronze Age ceramic sequences – especially the chronological relationship between Deverel Rimbury and Post Deverel Rimbury ceramic traditions where materially rich settlements spanning the Middle to Late Bronze Age coincide spatially.

Technological studies and scientific analyses are needed to establish how artefacts were manufactured and the different processes and raw materials involved in their production.

The now significant corpus of metal artefacts requires further use and analysis. Despite the substantial number of metal artefacts now recorded for this period in the PAS database there have been no significant attempts to draw this evidence together, or to undertake more detailed or scientific analysis of these objects.

Synthesis of evidence for flint working throughout the Bronze Age is necessary.

Depositional practices

The relationship between different modes of deposition (e.g. hoards, burials and odd deposits) needs to be considered. It is now clear that odd deposits of human fragments, whole pots, metalwork deposits etc., in waterholes, field boundaries and settlement features, were a common occurrence throughout the Early to Middle Bronze Age. This evidence needs to be considered alongside that for hoards, burials and watery deposits in order to produce a composite account of depositional practice in the Early to Middle Bronze Age.