Late Bronze Age to Middle Iron 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.

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- Publication of major unpublished fieldwork projects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- Synthesis of published/unpublished material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

Application of Bayesian modelling to radiocarbon dates to help refine chronologies.

Dating has tended to focus on the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, leaving many outstanding questions about the date of Middle Iron Age sequences and material chronologies.

Transitions

Further work is required to understand changes that occurred across the Early-Middle Iron Age transition, at a point conventionally placed during the C4th BC. Details of shifts in settlement morphology, material traditions and the wider social geography of the region's landscapes requires further definition, with aspects of these changes deserving of much closer dating.

Social organisation and tribal polities

Future questions about social organisation and tribal politics should be pitched to better understand small, rural homesteads as the basis for familial and communal organisation, as opposed to addressing more abstract concepts of social hierarchy or identity in this period

Regional difference and continental connections

There is a need for comparative work to understand regional differences. There may be widespread acknowledgement that things are different between areas, but the details have not been formally articulated.

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Settlement

Examination of the inter-relationships between settlements, together with the variation and changes in settlement types, offers potential to explore the social changes taking place, as well as the inter-relationship between settlement and monuments (2011).

Further work is needed to explore connections between sites that are thought to be contemporary. How did they relate physically, economically and socially? Use the artefactual record to explore differences in terms of status and adoption of different (and potentially linked) economic strategies.

Excavated Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age settlement sites are now much more widely recorded across the region. Basic gaps in the settlement record have been filled, with each county having examples of unenclosed settlements. The relationship between these open settlements and settlement types such as ringworks, enclosures and large agglomerated pit-dominated sites requires further study and may reveal intra-regional differences in the character of settlement geography.

Explore the range of settlement forms in the Late Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age and establish their patterning and distribution.

Define more closely different types of settlement and enclosure, and explore how these vary over space and time.

Attempt to correlate patterns with quantity and range of finds to try to benchmark different types of sites. Is there a correlation between enclosure forms and economic signature from animal bone or pottery retrieved? Are all types of finds found across all types of site, or is there patterning in the content and composition?

Hillforts, ringworks and other ‘aggrandised’ enclosures

Hillforts in the region have seen little investigation in recent years. How the region's hillforts fit with the different interpretations advanced for hillforts in other parts of Britain needs more work.

Synthesis of evidence from hillforts, ringworks and other 'aggrandised' enclosures to further investigate their origins, history and status.

There is a need to revisit archives as opportunities for further site-based investigation are likely to be rare.

An outline chronology based on scientific dates is needed for each of these sites if we are to properly understand their function and relationship to surrounding sites and one another.

Late Bronze Age ringworks would benefit from further review and study. Programmes of absolute dating are needed to establish the origins and duration of activity at these sites. Were these sites still in use in the Earliest Iron Age and, if so, did their role and function change over the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition?

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Clayland settlement and exploitation

Further work is needed to understand the processes of permanently settling the claylands and how they unfolded over the course of the period. To what extent can we recognise 'pioneering' phases of occupation, and when did these give way to widespread permanent settlements?

The character of clayland occupation in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age needs closer definition. Does this occupation differ to that on the gravels or other geologies?

Is there any evidence that specific activities were being conducted on the clay?

How did agrarian regimes on clayland sites complement or contrast to those on other geologies, and what was the relationship between such sites?

Are there any signs that a distinct clayland community emerged in any part of the region during this period?

Fields and farming

How long did Middle Bronze Age boundary systems continue to structure the organisation of the early- to mid-first millennium BC landscapes?

Further work is needed to define if, where and when earlier field systems were actively maintained, and/or establish whether new systems were constructed.

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Burial and the treatment of human remains

Further work is needed to understand the nature and extent of unurned cremations. These can no longer be assumed to date from the Middle Bronze Age in Eastern England. These cremations are being found in varying contexts and locations, as isolated burials, small groups, as or as part of larger cemeteries. Further work is needed to understand the nature and extent of this funerary tradition, and the degree of continuity with practices from the Middle Bronze Age. A present, dates achieved for Late Bronze Age cremations appear to cluster between c. 1200-1000 BC but the chronology requires further resolution. Can changes in Late Bronze Age cremation practice be recognised over time? Some Early Iron Age examples have also been recorded suggesting continuity into the earlier first millennium BC.

Routine radiocarbon dating of cremations is crucial. Isolated cremations should be dated and the extent of dating programmes for cemeteries will need careful consideration on a site-by-site basis. The same is true for isolated, often flexed, inhumations, which have yielded dates covering the whole of the late second and first millennia BC.

Further work is needed to establish patterns in burial practice and the treatment of human remains. To what extent can different burial traditions be identified, and do they vary over space and time? Are there patterns in the age and sex profile of human remains and do these differ in relation to treatment in burial? Is there patterning in the selection and deposition of disarticulated body parts?

Further work is needed to examine the modification of human bone. Worked and sometimes polished human remains are increasingly being identified. What was the status of these bones and how were they used?

Work is needed to examine grave-goods in more detail. Formal burial of complete bodies often contain grave-goods, particularly items of personal adornment, or, more rarely, pots. Is there any patterning in which objects were selected for burial and where we find them? How common is this practice and what might it tell us about the construction of identity and personhood?

Monuments

The relationship between monuments and settlements requires further consideration.

The nature of Iron Age funerary practices within the region, and specifically the use of funerary monuments such as barrows or mortuary enclosures, needs further study.

Late Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age Research topics and priorities

The characterisation, production and distribution of artefacts

The distribution and patterning of most basic artefact categories requires further study and synthesis. Are there differences in geographical patterning of particular artefacts or artefact attributes (form, material, decoration)? If so, do these distributions correlate with particular site types? At what scale do these patterns resolve themselves, and what might they mean in social terms?

The existing typologies for most artefact types require critical review and renewal – many have not been updated for decades.

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

Scientific analysis of artefacts is required to properly characterise (and potentially provenance) raw materials and examine production techniques. Were artefacts that are visually similar always made in the same way, or are there underlying differences in technological tradition?

Analysis of artefactual assemblages must be pitched at appropriate geographic and contextual scales. Further resources and support are required to characterise and investigate the broader patterning of artefacts in space and time.

Manufacturing and industry

The nature and extent of manufacturing needs further study - how much was on a commercial basis and how much small scale and localised cottage industry/production? This should include the study of kiln sites, evidence of secondary working of copper alloys, salt production etc.

Metalworking in the Early Iron Age is still poorly understood. Evidence for iron smelting is also scarce.

The extent of flint working in the Middle Iron Age requires further study and may vary across the region.

The importance of both cereal and salt production should be assessed, since both are tentatively suggested as the basis for Trinovantian wealth and power

Salt working sites need large-scale excavation with the aim of understanding a whole salt production complex (its component parts, dating and development) and locate any associated structures. So far, evidence of this nature is only available from Essex and from Ormesby St Margaret (Norfolk).

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Depositional practices

Further work is needed to explore the wider nature of depositional practices on sites.

Discussions have tended to focus on overtly formal acts of 'structured' or 'ritual' deposition but interpretation needs to move beyond definition and identification if it is to continue to further the understanding of these practices. Crucial is the recognition that material entered the ground in a variety of different ways and for a variety of different reasons, grading from the largely unconsidered disposal of refuse at one end of the spectrum to overtly and explicitly symbolic acts of deposition at the other. All require analysis to understand routine practice and changes over time.

In particular work on this topic should address the issue of refuse maintenance and the formation of middens or surface refuse heaps. Is it possible to track how middening within settlements changed in this period? Are there differences in the configuration, location and scale of middens?