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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. The authors will subsequently revise their articles for inclusion in a volume published by the British Museum Press.

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The Agenda Gap? Approaches to the Bronze Age in current research frameworks

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Introduction

It is now 60 years since the first formal consideration of future research directions for the British Bronze Age (and other periods) was published. Its purpose was to ensure archaeologists were 'taking the best advantage of all our opportunities, whether for deliberate field-work or excavation, or for turning chance discoveries to good account', and 'to avoid the wastage involved by any overlapping or misdirecting of our energies' (Hawkes and Piggott 1948, 11). However, it is only in the last fifteen years or so that such frameworks have become a routine part of the research landscape, most notably with the set of Regional Research Frameworks (RRFs) for England and Wales, some of which are now published while others remain under active development. These have similar aims to the 1948 document but sit within a 'research landscape' that has changed profoundly since then. In particular there are concerns with the lack of academic focus and content in work driven by PPG16, and a need to provide academic reference points for cultural resource management (Olivier 1996, 1-2). The RRFs and similar documents - such as the research frameworks for the World Heritage Sites (WHSs) of Stonehenge, Avebury and Orkney (see Darvill 2007) - mean that numerous research topics for the Bronze Age have already been set out in the literature, covering areas of greater or lesser geographical size. Here I attempt a brief review and synthesis of the contents of these frameworks, and an assessment of current priorities in Bronze Age research.

The basic structure of nearly all recent research frameworks conforms to the principles set out by Olivier (1996, 5). He describes the three elements which collectively make up a research framework: a *resource assessment*, which is a description of the current state of knowledge; a *research agenda*, which lists gaps in knowledge, work that could be done and the potential for the resource to answer questions; and a *research strategy*, a statement setting out priorities and methods for future research. Here, fitting the forward-looking theme of this volume, I am concerned primarily with the agendas and strategies (hereafter referred to as 'research agendas'). In practice research priorities are often set out within the agendas, while the strategies tend to be briefer and deal more with methods and organisation of research activities - although there is considerable variation in the way priorities and themes are set out and brigaded, the level of detail they contain and the period divisions employed. While this variability makes comparative studies of the type attempted here more difficult, it does provide further insight into the scope of current and proposed research on the Bronze Age nationally.

An important point to note, in line with their stated rationale and the key role of the curatorial sector in the RRF process, is that the research agendas considered here are not purely concerned with academic study; all are fundamentally pragmatic and practical documents with a broad scope. The Eastern Counties RRF, for example, sums up a position which seems to characterise all these documents, in noting that research/explanation and management/conservation are often considered to be in conflict but should instead be seen as mutually supporting (Brown and Wade 2000, 1-2). Similarly the WHS research agendas are always partnered by a management plan (English Heritage 2000; 2005; Historic Scotland 2001). For Roskams and Whyman (2007) this is part of a process of countering the divorce of curatorial and fieldwork practice within British archaeology.

Another key point is that, despite some variation in emphasis, these documents are not prescriptive (given the inevitably contingent and serendipitous element of much archaeological research, they could hardly be so) but aim to enable and maximise opportunities: 'a research framework ... is not intended to determine a programme of action, but rather to highlight issues and problems that could usefully be addressed' (Downes and Wickham-Jones 2005, 24), and again: 'It is not the aim of this ... document ... to provide a prescriptive list of research aims; but rather, as the title suggests, to set a framework for our research' (Murphy and Brown 2000, 10). Indeed the value of these documents, and of the whole RRF process (characterised in one place as 'mass therapy for the heritage sector': Gerrard and Mason 2006), may lie as much in engendering a research culture across the whole sector as setting a specific direction for that research. On the other hand, although little work has so far been carried out on the practical impact of research agendas, they still do seek to influence research activity and therefore warrant further scrutiny. Indeed, I believe that despite the strengths of an approach which seeks to widen research activities beyond the academic community, there are weaknesses in the way these documents are framed, with which a national overview like the present undertaking ought to engage. In addition, it is important to both take account of and hold to account the increasing number of policy and strategy documents within archaeology. While their rationale is self-evident and impact largely positive, there is a need to remain aware of the accountability or auditing practices from which such documents spring, lest 'in trying to justify their work organisations may fundamentally transform the essence of what they do' (Cooper, 2008).

In this paper, therefore, I attempt to distil the key points emerging from published research frameworks, in terms of both recurring themes for Bronze Age research that have relevance at a national level, and how the period is characterised as a cultural and chronological entity. Specific questions in the light of these agendas include whether the idea of a coherent, unified Bronze Age retains any relevance or utility, and how well such frameworks capture the full range of research topics necessary to take Bronze Age studies forward.

The research agendas considered in this review principally comprise those RRFs which have been published or for which draft documents are available on-line. They cover five English regions, the London area and Wales (*Table 1*). In addition the research agendas for three WHSs with significant Bronze Age components are considered.

Region	Reference	Relevant sections	
Greater Thames Estuary	Williams and Brown 1999	n/a	
Eastern Counties	Brown and Glazebrook 2000	Neolithic and Bronze Age	
Avebury	AAHRG 2001	Neolithic and Early Bronze Age	Late Bronze Age
London	Nixon <i>et al.</i> 2002	Neolithic and Early Bronze Age	Middle Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age
Stonehenge	Darvill 2005	<i>Early Bronze Age</i>	<i>Middle and Later Bronze Age</i>
Orkney	Downes <i>et al.</i> 2005	<i>Bronze Age</i>	
East Midlands	Cooper 2006	Neolithic and Early to Middle Bronze Age	Later Bronze Age and Iron Age
North-East	Petts and Gerrard 2006	Neolithic and Early Bronze Age	Late Bronze Age and Iron Age
North-West	Hodgson and Brennan 2007	Neolithic and Bronze Age	
South-West	Webster 2008	<i>Neolithic and Early Bronze Age</i>	<i>Later Bronze Age and Iron Age</i>
Wales	http://www.archaeoleg.org.uk	Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age	Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Table 1. Current published research agendas with relevance to the Bronze Age (sections in italics are titles of the resource assessments only)

Defining the Bronze Age

It is commonplace in prehistory to acknowledge the artificial nature of period boundaries and divisions while continuing to use them because of the need for some form of heuristic framework. The risk, of course, even when they are used in this way, is that the divisions can serve either to obscure or exaggerate the importance of continuities and transitions. Most of the published research frameworks listed in Table 1 adopt some kind of periodised (as opposed to thematic) approach to prehistory; the only exception is the Greater Thames, although the South-West, Stonehenge and Orkney have thematic agendas underpinned by period-based resource assessments (for an argument against basing these documents on existing period divisions within prehistory see Roskams and Whyman 2007). The most interesting feature of the table is to demonstrate that the Bronze Age is almost nowhere treated as a discrete period in its own right. This might not be a major concern, given the acknowledged artificiality of the Three-Age system, but it has some potentially significant implications.

In all the research frameworks except for Stonehenge and Orkney, part or all of the Bronze Age is combined with the Neolithic. The unified treatment of the Bronze Age in the Orkney

resource assessment is because it 'has been characterised as an impoverished period sandwiched between the apparent splendour of the Neolithic and Iron Ages'; the document emphasises how 'recent research is addressing this imbalance' (Card 2005, 56). For Stonehenge the Early Bronze Age is specifically separated out in the resource assessment in order to focus on the rich graves of the 'Wessex Culture' found in this region (Darvill 2005, 61). Outside the WHSs, with their relatively rich and detailed data-sets, however, the Early Bronze Age is seen as essentially continuous with the Late Neolithic (Webster 2008, 280). Although the rationale is not usually directly explained, the resource assessment for the North-West states 'how artificial it is to draw a boundary between the Later Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age' (Hodgson and Brennand 2006, 29). The Neolithic-Bronze Age transition has therefore largely disappeared as a research priority, except for the South-West, where the impact of metalworking upon later Neolithic societies is problematised (Webster 2008, 240).

In all but three cases the Bronze Age is split in two and its latter part combined with the Iron Age. The break comes after the Early Bronze Age in five of the frameworks, the 'earlier Bronze Age' (not further defined) in one, and the Middle Bronze Age in another. In all these cases, except for Avebury, the later part of the Bronze Age is treated together with the Iron Age. Such a division reflects the recognition of major changes in farming practice, land division and settlement in the course of the 2nd millennium BC, its precise chronological position reflecting the nature of the evidence in each region. In London, for example, it is the emergence of field systems in the Middle Bronze Age that seems to define the break (Nixon et al. 2002, 25), while in the North-East the reason for the division is implicit in the statement that:

'The study of later prehistoric period [sic] ... has often seemed overshadowed by work on the preceding Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods and the succeeding Roman era; both periods which left upstanding and often spectacular archaeological remains (Petts and Gerrard 2006, 33).'

In the East Midlands, extensive field systems do not appear until the Iron Age and the chapter division is therefore set rather later, at 1000 BC. But whereas the 1st millennium is characterised as 'an era of comparatively rapid social and cultural developments' (Willis 2006, 89) there is no explanation of the particular significance of developments at its turn; here it seems as if the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition is not considered a particularly significant event either.

In the North-West strategy, on the other hand, the decision to treat the Neolithic and Bronze Age together but keep the Iron Age separate is not directly explained, but Hodgson and Brennand (2007, 50) state that 'there is a visible change in the archaeological record at this time' (the all-but-complete disappearance of LBA artefacts and funerary practices). There may also be a clue in the statement that the Iron Age 'has often traditionally been studied as a precursor to the Roman period, rather than as a successor to the Bronze Age' (ibid.). The Eastern Counties, meanwhile, do see the appearance of field systems and enclosed settlements in the middle part of the Bronze Age, but the rationale for treating the whole of the Neolithic and Bronze Age together is their incorporation within a longer narrative that focusses on the development of farming across both periods (Brown and Murphy 2000).

In both these regions the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition is raised as an issue that goes beyond technological changes in metallurgy (Bryant 2000, 17; Hodgson and Brennand 2007, 50). But in other regions, not just the East Midlands, its significance is less clear: for instance, the project design for the South-East RRF goes so far as to state 'There are no signs of major cultural changes at the transition between the Bronze and Iron Ages, in many aspects of material culture it is a meaningless division' (Anon. 2007, 18).

This brief survey shows that while the Three-Age system is familiar and clearly still thought to be useful (none of the frameworks has replaced it with simple date ranges), the Bronze Age is its least satisfactory part: combined and divided in various combinations, it no longer appears to define a unitary phase in most areas of Britain. Does this matter? While the deconstruction of the Bronze Age in the research agendas mirrors recent academic approaches (e.g. Bradley 2007, 25-6) and emphasises the significance of the changes occurring in the mid-2nd millennium BC, there is a risk in organising the documents this way that the period may seem less significant than its neighbours - the earlier part appearing as a coda to the longer Neolithic period and the later part as a prelude to developments in the Iron Age. Such a perception would be unfortunate and indicates why the present volume is valuable: not because the period should be reinstated with an undue coherence but as a corrective to ensure its complexities are not downplayed or overlooked.

Approaches to research

Because the RRF process specifically focuses on addressing gaps in current knowledge, the need to collect new data in order to fill those gaps is highlighted in just about every region. However, the question of the balance between data collection and interpretation comes up in some form within most of the research agendas. Indeed the North-East agenda acknowledges that the mere accumulation of data, especially through developer-funded fieldwork projects and grey literature, may form a barrier 'to the continuation and growth of research' (Petts and Gerrard 2006, 1-2). The East Midlands agenda juxtaposes two basic approaches, with Clay (2006, 86) stressing the primary importance of data acquisition for the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age, arguing that:

'The aim of any research agenda must be to develop brick-building research and to accumulate direct indicators rather than rely too heavily on assumptions. While new arguments will undoubtedly be formulated, the way forward now does require new evidence ...'

On the other hand, Willis (2006, 89) suggests that the issues for the later Bronze Age and Iron Age in the same region are more about analysis of existing data: 'Only recently have approaches and models appeared which seem in any way sufficiently sophisticated to enable us to do justice to the quality of evidence from the region ...'. However, he does concede that 'our knowledge is very incomplete' (ibid., 128) and there is a risk that the disparity between 'hot-spots' and other areas may widen without more targeted interventions in the latter.

In the WHSs, meanwhile, which we can certainly consider as 'hot-spots', it seems to be the

(relative) quality of existing evidence that allows a greater focus on interpretation: the Stonehenge agenda, for instance, noting the 'danger of simply perpetuating existing knowledge through over-reliance on traditional classifications and ways of thinking' (Darvill 2005, 108), explicitly distinguishes period- and site-based issues from contextual and interpretative ones.

Despite the common acknowledgement that research comprises more than just data collection, the specific agendas for the Bronze Age do seem to concentrate primarily on gap-filling, with interpretative positions largely implicit. The problem is not that research per se is narrowly defined in these documents, but that at the level of specific research questions there are few explicit links between what is being asked of the data and the methods and approaches that could usefully be applied. For instance the prehistoric agenda for the North-West flags up 'ritual, religion and ceremony' as a theme but the specific research topics are about locating, characterising and managing sites, not approaches to understanding ritual (Hodgson and Brennan 2007, 41-3). Although there are exceptions, such as Willis's (2006) paper in the East Midlands framework which discusses the value of a phenomenological approach to landscape (cf Brück 2005), otherwise this and other key topics in academic prehistory are largely bypassed. The WHS agendas, on the other hand, place more emphasis on interpretative approaches, presumably in part because many of the key academic case studies relate to these particular monuments. One useful purpose of a national agenda, therefore, will be to emphasise the interpretative positions and narrative threads within which the data collection specified in the RRFs can usefully be synthesised. The way such documents are framed also plays a role. As Cooper (2008) has discussed, in a critique of English Heritage's own research strategy, the bullet-point approach found in many research agendas may hinder the creation of any sense of sequence or narrative.

Another point about how research is characterised concerns the scale or level of the research topics set out in these documents. While the WHS agendas, with their generally higher baseline of existing knowledge, can set out very specific topics related to individual sites, it is a notable feature of the RRFs that the Bronze Age research agendas are rather generic, i.e. few of the topics listed could not equally well be applied to other regions, albeit backed up by different local examples. Clearly some kind of selection is required to avoid the danger of long lists of very specific topics that lack a clear sense of priorities, but the risk in generalising is that what is distinctive about a particular region is no longer foregrounded, as it is in the resource assessments. On the other hand it does aid the present exercise in allowing us to compare the balance of research themes across the RRFs.

Only one document does not lay out a simple list of topics for the period: this is the Eastern Counties where Murphy and Brown (2000, 10) instead outline a possible umbrella project 'directed at the central problem of the Neolithic and Bronze Age: the development of farming and the attendant development and integration of monuments, fields and settlements'. Conceptually this may be more useful than the bullet point agendas (see below), but whether it is as influential in practice remains to be seen: no such umbrella project seems to have emerged since the document was published, though some elements highlighted in the document have been developed (Brown and Saunders in press). In other cases, flexibility is attempted not through eschewing lists but through stressing the need to revise and update

the framework in order to accommodate future discoveries and advances.

This brief review of approaches shows that research in current agendas is primarily conceived as fieldwork to fill gaps in knowledge, with similar - or at least commensurate - priorities in different regions. Detailed consideration of interpretative approaches is rare, but there is an acknowledgement in most cases of the importance of work on existing archives and collections, of continuing to build understanding in relatively well-researched areas, and of keeping the document valid by regular updating and avoiding being overly prescriptive.

Bronze Age research themes

In this section I attempt to distil the key themes from these documents, particularly looking at those that recur across a number of different regions and sites. While this paper focusses on research themes identified specifically for the Bronze Age, research in this period does not exist in a vacuum; there are a number of recurring general priorities for prehistory that have relevance to the Bronze Age. In particular these concern such aspects as publication backlogs, the environmental context, chronological frameworks and artefact studies. Within such general themes, however, emphasis can vary. For instance, in terms of artefacts, there is a strong scientific focus to the research themes listed in the North-East agenda but less emphasis on their social and symbolic role, while the cross-period theme of 'finds studies' in the Eastern Counties agenda discusses the 'changing attitudes and practices' which artefacts embody but lacks detail on the potential of new scientific techniques (Brown et al. 2000, 45). It remains unclear to what extent these differences might come to influence the character of research in different regions.

Because the documents differ in emphasis, as mentioned above, the following should be considered only as a sketch of current research priorities rather than a formal analysis - some agendas contribute more to the mix than others, simply by virtue of having a longer list, and some topics could fit in more than one category. Moreover, because the Bronze Age is variously combined with the Neolithic and Iron Age some of the topics may be primarily aimed at one of those periods (though I have excluded those clearly referring exclusively to the Neolithic or Iron Age). I attempted to assess the balance of current priorities by grouping research topics into five broad categories, dealing with: landscape-scale or synthetic issues; the investigation of individual sites; artefact production, use and exchange; interpretative issues, such as 'monumentality' or 'structured deposition'; and practical themes, such as management or methodologies. Table 2 provides a more detailed list of headings under which the specific topics encountered in the research agendas seem to fit.

Theme	No. documents	No. topics
Landscape/Synthesis		
Character and development of farming	5	15
Landscape approaches, inc. surveys	7	15
Characterising settlement	6	12
Improving knowledge of environment	6	8
Understanding subsistence economy	4	6
Trade and communication	3	4
Site-Specific		
Understanding specific types of site	6	16
Dating sites	6	7
Understanding funerary behaviour	5	7
Detailed investigation of known sites	3	3
Investigating unexplored monuments	2	2
Investigating use of natural features	1	1
Material Culture		
Metalwork	5	11
Dated ceramic sequences	5	10
Lithics	4	6
Finds (other or general)	4	5
Crafts and technology (general)	3	5
Stone	3	5
Work on archives/museum collections	3	3
Human remains	2	3
Scientific analysis of pottery (lipids, petrology, etc)	2	3
Interpretation		
Monumentality	3	8
Social change/structure/identity	3	5
Deposition	3	4
Transitions	2	2
Testing specific models	1	2
Regional traditions	1	1
Management/Methodology		
Site management/conservation	2	2
Excavation methods	1	1
Public archaeology/outreach	1	1
Publication	1	1

Table 2. Summary of Bronze Age research topics occurring in seven research agendas (Avebury, London, East Midlands, North-East, North-West, South-West, Wales)

Overall, the table shows that about 35% of Bronze Age research topics in these documents deal with landscape/synthesis, 30% with material culture, 20% with site-specific issues, 10% with interpretation and 5% with management/methodology. Other periods would need to be assessed in order to determine whether this balance of themes differs from that for other periods. But because of the split between the earlier and later Bronze Age in most documents, it can be seen that the earlier part of the period has proportionally more site-specific and interpretative research topics, while the later part has more material culture and management/methodology topics. This may reflect the predominance of monuments - especially barrows - and associated issues around mortuary rituals in the earlier part of the period. But we should also note variation between individual documents: in the North-West agenda, for instance, landscape/synthesis themes are proportionately few but site-specific and material culture themes are more common; conversely, both the latter are relatively sparse in the Welsh agenda, where interpretative topics are more common. There is also variation within individual documents between the earlier and later parts of the Bronze Age: for example, the South-West agenda (Webster, 2008, *passim*) also lays particular stress on innovative approaches to thinking about the data but this is restricted to Early Bronze Age (and Neolithic) topics. No doubt it reflects the academic predominance of Wessex in these periods (one effect of which is 'the huge disparity that exists in levels of archaeological investigation' within the region: *ibid.*, 276).

There is no space here to go through the detailed list of research topics set out for each region – in any case, those interested in Bronze Age research should consult the documents themselves. But it can be noted that certain themes seem to loom larger than others – understanding the broad patterns of settlement and farming crops up more than the details of economy, environment and exchange; research to characterise individual types of site also takes precedence over more detailed intra-site topics. In the landscape/synthesis and site-specific themes, therefore, it seems much basic research remains to be undertaken over much of the country. In terms of material culture, metalwork, pottery and flint/stone are discussed in roughly equal measure, though the need for better ceramic chronologies is a specific topic that routinely recurs. In the area of interpretative themes, the low representation of topics to do with understanding transitions at either end of the Bronze Age confirms some of the points made above (and stands in clear contrast to the common focus in these documents on the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition). Finally, it is notable that there is no pattern at all in terms of recurring methodological and management topics.

It is interesting to compare these themes with the five recommendations for Bronze Age research produced 60 years ago by Hawkes and Piggott (1948, 88-93). They include: absolute chronology; relative chronology (with the Neolithic and Iron Age transitions highlighted); the 'distribution and mode of life' (i.e. the survey and selective excavation of sites); burials and ceremonial structures (especially round barrows and cairns, emphasising 'the barrow as a ritual structure'); and industry and trade (especially the production and use of metalwork). While the focus on transitions and lack of a specific mention of farming are major differences, in many ways the agendas of today seem remarkably similar. Of course this does not mean Bronze Age research has not advanced greatly in 60 years. To take an obvious example, absolute dating now means Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates rather than assigning

sites to pollen zones. Rather, I think this resemblance shows two things: one is that archaeology is never likely to finally answer these core questions – finding one piece of the puzzle simply highlights the need to find the next one. The second may be more serious, and lies with the way research agendas are organised. It seems to me that the process of integrating the evidence into innovative and seamless narratives of the Bronze Age, and constructing different types of archaeological knowledge (cf Darvill 2007), has not advanced so much. Most academic syntheses still draw on a very restricted range of data, and much of what lies in the grey literature remains unsynthesised. As mentioned above, the bullet-point approach to research topics does not lay sufficient emphasis on the creation of interpretative narratives. That should be one purpose of a national research strategy for the Bronze Age.

Conclusions

I have suggested that existing research frameworks provide a useful source of information about research priorities for the Bronze Age nationally but they have to be treated with some caution. The Bronze Age is the hardest period to assess separately because of the way it is usually split and amalgamated with other periods; the transitions at either end of the Bronze Age are assigned less significance than they used to be, but while the labels continue to be used there is a risk of diluting the perceived importance of the period as a whole. Nevertheless this treatment tells us something interesting about how the Bronze Age is perceived and where current research interests lie.

Another weakness is the tendency for lists of specific research topics to be dominated by (or reduced to) data collection, even though at a higher level the research process is acknowledged to consist of more than just gap-filling. In this area the agendas for the World Heritage Sites provide a more interpretative approach, but there remains a risk that by not articulating the intellectual basis of the RRF exercise - how we get from the wished-for better data to a better understanding of Bronze Age societies, for instance - research at a regional level will remain under-theorised and fall short of its full potential. Moreover, this can lead to something of a disjuncture with national period agendas, which because of their broader perspective can lay more stress on interpretation and synthesis. The present volume, if sensitive to the underlying research agendas discussed here, will be a useful corrective in both areas.

A national perspective can also usefully synthesise and compare the research topics emerging from different regions, as I have attempted here, but ironically the RRF agendas often seem to iron out some of what makes the Bronze Age locally distinctive. In advancing research across Britain there is still a need to spell out the rich diversity of Bronze Age archaeology and the appeal of the integrated and engaging narratives of social life that can now be written

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