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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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Information, Interaction and Society

Ben Roberts

(British Museum)

The Data Revolution

In reviewing the future of Bronze Age research in the final chapter of his immense pan-European survey, Anthony Harding (2000, 435) commented that the sheer scale and density of available data did little to encourage younger scholars. In Britain, the rapid growth of developer funded excavations with *PPG 16* since 1990 together with the recording of objects found by metal detectors under the *Portable Antiquities Scheme*¹ since 1997 has produced vast quantities of new information that were simply unimaginable to earlier generations. Where the new data has been integrated into research projects, it has frequently provided insights into previously unexplored areas as well as changing existing frameworks and interpretations (e.g. Bradley 2007; Champion 2007; Roberts 2007; Yates 2007). It is evident that the potential for gaining further ideas into the period 2500-800 BC in Britain is only just starting to be realised. The challenge is therefore, not only to incorporate these new discoveries, but also to explore new questions and approaches that can exploit the increased information and provide fresh insights into our understanding of prehistoric communities. The prevailing intellectual trends within British archaeology are concentrated towards finer, more detailed understandings of sites, landscapes and regions. Whilst the theoretical and methodological advances have been invaluable to the development of the discipline, there is a sense that the many possibilities of re-defining the broader perspectives provided by the new data are being missed.

The use of data to analyse broader perspectives is not a straightforward process. Unpublished excavation reports, specialist reports, archaeological databases and theses comprise the 'grey literature' which remains beyond the reach of many researchers (Bradley 2007). Similarly, the vast majority of published literature such as books, monographs and journal papers are not accessible outside of a handful of major libraries. Whilst initiatives such as the *Archaeological Data Service*², the British Museum collection online³) as well as the placing of county *Sites and Monument Records (SMRs)* online are currently seeking to address this problem, it is worth examining whether an existing national database containing new Bronze Age discoveries such as the *Portable Antiquities Scheme* has been used to its full potential. It would seem that whilst there are now ongoing research projects exploring issues surrounding the circulation and deposition of bronze metalwork, the exploitation of this new resource has been gradual. A partial explanation can be sought in the relatively unfashionable status of Bronze Age metalwork studies, many researchers may also require a period of adjustment to the sudden presentation of vast quantities of new data which, rather than being analysed,

presented and interpreted by a single scholar as is usual, is there waiting to be mined on a digital database. The traditional research techniques employed by many individuals are simply not prepared for such a possibility and are therefore unable to explore the many opportunities it provides. If compared to the sciences or other social sciences, the process of digitising archaeological data is still in its infancy. It is therefore argued that the failure to adapt research questions and methodologies to this data revolution would ensure that many new understandings into Bronze Age communities would be missed.

Communication, insular archaeology and mobility

The inability of many Bronze Age researchers in Britain to read languages other than English frequently creates a slightly warped perspective. When the majority of surveys seek to transcend national borders to explore connections and comparisons elsewhere, there is a definite bias towards areas with English language publications such as Ireland, Holland and Scandinavia. There are few scholars who regularly consult French, Spanish, Italian or Portuguese texts and fewer still who are comfortable in German or Slavonic languages. This not only severely restricts the data and interpretations that are drawn upon, it also means that the British attendance of those Bronze Age conferences where the official language is not English is practically non-existent. Whilst it is possible to observe the growing dominance of English as the major language of archaeology, it can be argued that this process is far slower in Bronze Age research where German retains pre-eminence and publications are still created in the language(s) of the country concerned.

The reason that these linguistic barriers matter is the international nature of the European Bronze Age (e.g. Hänsel 1998; Harding 2000; Larsson and Kristiansen 2006) which sees comparable phenomena occurring from the Black Sea to the Atlantic Ocean as well as from northern Scotland to southern Portugal (e.g. Jorge et al. 1998; Ruiz-Gálvez 1998; Cunliffe 2001). It is no coincidence that a substantial part of the research traditions in continental Europe for the Bronze Age has involved exploring the movement of ideas, practices, objects and people. However, the justified rejection of invasionist explanations in British prehistory (Clark 1966), has meant that debates on the role of cross-channel interaction in shaping Bronze Age communities in Britain occurs only when stimulated by shipwrecks (e.g. Muckelroy 1981; Clark 2004) and exotic objects (e.g. Needham et al. 2006) or materials (e.g. Beck and Shennan 1991). This reluctance has meant that there has been insufficient discussion on the implications of results produced by strontium and oxygen isotopes on prehistoric teeth that apparently identify patterns of movement. The probable central European origin of the exceptional Bell Beaker burial at Amesbury (Fitzpatrick 2002, Evans et al. 2006), has led to the substantial increase in the scale of such projects (e.g. Jay and Richards 2007; see Budd et al. 2004, Bentley 2006 and Vander Linden 2007 for a review of current and future research). Similarly, analyses of the changing presence or absence of genetic traits through time have been used to reconstruct the movement of biologically defined groups into Britain and has led to the proposal of potentially major migration event in Britain during the Bronze Age (e.g. Oppenheimer 2006). This is an issue which cannot be ignored.

Proposals of mobility through landscapes as inherent to communities within Britain during the later 3rd – early 2nd millennium BC are now readily accepted (e.g. Lawson 2007) together with ideas concerning rivers providing the main transport and communication arteries (e.g. Sherratt 1996). However, when the possibility of maritime travel is raised then there is an immediate change in perception towards ideas inspired by the anthropologist Mary Helms (1988; 1993) concerning the ideological implications of such distant journeys. Whilst not to deny the many stimulating perspectives that have arisen as a consequence, a simple glance at the metalwork or ceramic evidence indicates that cross-channel movement was widespread. For instance, the virtual cessation of copper mining in Britain beyond the Great Orme, north Wales by 1500 BC is paralleled by the vast increase in the visible consumption of bronze objects – especially by communities in southern and eastern England. Whilst it is currently not possible to provenance the bronze, the typological parallels and distributions (e.g. Rowlands 1976; O'Connor 1980) and south coast shipwreck evidence (e.g. Van der Noort 2006) implies that bronze is being imported on a substantial scale from the continent across the sea as well as being recycled from older objects. During this period, the concept of cross-channel communities sharing more with each other than with communities further inland is relatively common in the French literature yet remains elusive in virtually all British texts. Whilst there are many possibilities of approaching mobility in the Bronze Age that need to be addressed, it is argued that by continuing to ignore the continental literature, the British perspective will remain insular in apparent defiance of past realities.

Exploring trends

The idea of identifying economic trends in prehistoric communities has been unfashionable amongst recent generations of Bronze Age scholars in Britain. The intellectual climate has been dedicated to challenging traditional assumptions of “ritual” and “rational” (e.g. Brück 2001; Bradley 2005). To this end, contrasts are frequently drawn between the social and symbolic characteristics of subsistence, structures and craftworking evident in ethnographic and anthropological research and the absence of these perspectives in technological or cost-benefit economic interpretations of prehistoric activity (e.g. Budd and Taylor 1995; Brück and Goodman 1999; Parker Pearson 2003). Whilst this trend of applying of ethnographic and anthropological analogies has unquestionably enriched debate, replacing a past that feels primitive yet familiar with one that feels unfamiliar, is not always a verifiable reflection of past realities (e.g. Stig-Sørensen 1996; Shennan 1999 for critique). It has also led to scholarship that favours dwelling on the meanings of specific phenomena over investigating their broader underlying dynamics. Ideas of political economy, where the flow of goods and labour towards elites are analysed, have been enthusiastically discussed across the Atlantic (e.g. Earle 1991; 1997; 2002; Feinman & Nicholas 2004) though have found little favour on these shores despite early parallels (e.g. Rowlands 1980; Thorpe & Richards 1984). The reason lies in the stated desire to move beyond elite-orientated perspectives and a marked scepticism towards ideas that seek general processes rather than localised contexts (e.g. Barrett 1994). However, there are identifiable trends in practices that continue throughout the Bronze Age such as subsistence practices, the creation of physical structures and the

production, circulation and consumption of organic and inorganic goods which have implications on the underlying dynamics of Bronze Age communities.

The presence of definable trends in space and time during the Bronze Age in Britain, whether in the form of assemblages, horizons or cultures has survived the onslaughts of several generations of theoretically inclined archaeologists. Whilst these are definable entities to varying degrees and therefore serve a purpose in constructing an interpretation, none provides an intellectual framework with which to address why objects, buildings or burials occurred in the form that it did and how they relate to the prehistoric communities involved. These Bronze Age groupings have been deconstructed, re-formulated, re-named and simply ignored but significantly not been consigned to the dustbin of archaeological research. Whether they are employed as a background to regional or local investigations or provide the central focus for research, they show no signs of going away. What this indicates is that these entities have a validity. However, how distinct similarities in burials, settlements, technology or material culture, beyond the human experience but visible to archaeologists, are analysed and interpreted has yet to be resolved. Perhaps the starting point should be the broad diversity of chronological and geographical scales through which archaeological regularities and variations exist. This reduces the expectations of straightforward correlations as it does not insist on bounded entities. What might be important is the nature of the connections where cultural transmission occurs and cultural variation is created. The creation and reproduction of the constructed Bronze Age world involved the transmission of information such as ideas, techniques and practices through social learning from person to person. It is through understanding the trends in the nature of this information, the mechanisms of the processes involved and the observable consequences that the underlying dynamics of Bronze Age communities can be glimpsed.

The analysis of broader trends would also facilitate the analysis of how changing environmental conditions influence the communities during the Bronze Age. During the seventeen centuries under consideration, the climate sees comparatively warm and dry conditions giving way to a cooler and wetter environment with the deterioration beginning just before 1300 BC, accelerating after 900 BC and being wettest about 700 BC. The debates surrounding more rapid climatic downturns have been driven largely by tree ring data which indicates the years of 2345 BC, 1628 BC and 1159 BC represent catastrophes (e.g. Burgess 1985; Baillie 1995) though debate continues regarding the causes and effects (e.g. Buckland et al. 1997). The desire to avoid environmental determinism has meant that many researchers are either dismissive or hesitant to approach such an issue. However, the modern disconnection with the agricultural economy makes it hard to appreciate the extent to which the rhythm of people's lives would have been dictated by the variations in the changing seasons. The consistent acquisition of adequate food would always have been a high priority for prehistoric communities, especially given the potentially devastating effects of bad years. The consequence would be a pattern of living at least partially structured by activities dictated by the available food resources.

Bronze Age society and scholars

Despite substantial gains in the data relating to the Bronze Age in Britain, the anthropological dream of a sophisticated understanding of the many forms of social organisation that existed in communities will never be realised. Whilst demographic insights are naturally challenging with the available data, there is still no real sense of how many people were present or how populations were concentrated. Furthermore, the majority of researchers have shunned the idea of chiefdoms, the replacement of deliberately vague terms such as 'elite' and 'group' has enabled a more studied neutrality rather than served an explanatory purpose. Any proposed model of social organisation of Bronze Age society can be criticised as crude by sociological standards yet this is to miss the point. If the model can be evaluated against the available data, then more refined models can be proposed.

It is argued that a major reason for this situation lies in the virtual absence of syntheses for the Bronze Age in Britain since Colin Burgess published *The Age of Stonehenge* in 1980 (Burgess 1980). Whilst Iron Age research has benefited immensely from drawing on and reacting towards Barry Cunliffe's four editions of *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (Cunliffe 2005), there has been nothing comparable for the Bronze Age. One of the consequences is that whilst there are now some regional syntheses and regional research assessments, there is relatively little detailed appreciation of the regionality throughout Britain during the Bronze Age – something that is now standard for Iron Age debate (e.g. Gwilt and Haselgrove 1997; Haselgrove et al. 2001). This is partially exacerbated by the infrequent publication of conference proceedings on Bronze Age Britain with the last being Brück (2001) and, before that, Barrett and Bradley (1980) as well as the absence of a dedicated journal or monograph series. This means that unless the proposed article is able to be accepted into highly competitive journals such as *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* or *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, the only real options are county or specialist journals or edited volumes. Underlying these worrying publication trends is the relatively small presence of academics teaching in British universities who actively specialise in the Bronze Age in Britain when compared to those active in the Iron Age, Neolithic, Roman or Anglo-Saxon periods. Instead, the vast majority of the Bronze Age scholars are concentrated in archaeological units, county councils and museums and unfortunately have only limited contact with the students who will form the next generation of professional archaeologists. This not to argue for the artificial and absurd boundaries created by the Three Age system, rather it is instead a plea for more communication and coherency in the scholarship covering the centuries between 2500 BC and 800 BC in Britain.

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1 <http://www.finds.org.uk>

2 <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk>

3 http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx