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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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A canon for the Bronze Age?

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Abstract

Catalogues and databases which are easily accessible to all interested parties regardless of their geographical location, occupation, background or purpose, provide a level playing field for research, publication and debate in the archaeology of the bronze age. The establishment of a canon of reliable, illustrated documentation of as many facets of the Bronze Age as are required, is a prerequisite to the future of our understanding of the Bronze Age.

Text

An invitation to contribute to an agenda to inspire innovative research projects, targeted excavations and new collaborations which is aimed at academics, students, archaeological units and foreign scholars is a very pleasant invitation indeed to receive! It is also nice to be able to nominate a favourite research project that remains unpublished.

This particular contribution is made from an outside perspective, that of the foreign academic, student and scholar. I am an Irish archaeologist who has lived for many years in the Netherlands. My interests in the British Bronze Age are based on the geographical position of Ireland relevant to Britain and my wish list is predicated on this. My work is data-based and artefactual. My main interests are in pottery and in the application of radiocarbon dating to specific problems. As an archaeologist I have viewed British material from east and west and in various contexts while working on both Irish and Dutch material. In this instance my comments are made on the basis of recent work that I have carried out in Ireland (Brindley 2007). Because of the geographical position of Ireland, most discussions of Irish material must take some cognisance of British material, even if only because continental ideas and chronology are sometimes received through the filter of that landmass.

My interests are two-pronged: I am interested in British material for its own sake, and because of its filtering effect. My concerns therefore are to do with access to information and confidence in its reliability: foundations, by which I mean the availability of clear and unambiguous documentation of data. As the basic building blocks of all subsequent planned research into the Bronze Age, it is essential that this data is as stable and as definitive as can be.

- Foundations need to be secure to ensure that valid interpretations can be made. This has become especially relevant in recent decades with the acceptance that multiple interpretations are both possible and desirable.

- Foundations need to be accessible to allow for further and future critical review of such interpretations at any time.
- And they need to be accessible to allow for ensuing debate by other participants to take place on a level playing field. Stimulating contributions can be expected from participants with different backgrounds and different arguments but the material or evidence being discussed must be common. Otherwise debate is not possible.

These foundations, in my view, are the catalogues of basic data required to make useful observations regarding the Bronze Age of the whole island mass of Britain. A canon for the British Bronze Age? Although there are exceptions (and regional studies do exist in some quantity) it is remarkably difficult to get an island-wide overview of material in many cases. It is equally difficult to assess or even critically review the many interpretative accounts that have appeared and are such a strong characteristic of British accounts of British prehistory (eg Bradley 2007). I believe that this is not something restricted to those of us trying to understand the Bronze Age of Britain from outside. The difficulty in arriving at a good understanding of even fairly basic data and therefore being able to participate in any debate of the Bronze Age lies in the absence of a critical mass of accessible basic information. It is a difficulty not only for the outsider but also for the younger insider as a glance at Figure 1, a map of proposed museum research, shows. Information in Britain is widely dispersed.

This is due to several factors including the distributions of museums and private collections, the large number of local journals, the variety of activities that local societies are engaged in, the variations in the purposes for which the information has been collected and the variable standards that result from all of these. As a result of the growth in the number and extent of development instigated excavations large quantities of data have become available but are dispersed over regional and local authorities and vary in accessibility and quality of documentation. Even the best academic libraries outside Britain are not able to keep track of the huge numbers of outlets for archaeological discoveries. Another problem arises with trying to assess the reliability of information. Under these circumstances amassing sufficient data to make useful comment on even a fairly simple topic is expensive, time consuming, sometimes difficult and frankly an unattractive proposition in many cases. It stifles debate.

Figure 1 is a map of proposed fieldwork necessary for a study of one aspect of the middle Bronze Age. It includes 80 museums and collections to be visited in 2008 where in total approximately 500 artefacts will be examined. This map does not include objects reported under the Portable Antiquities Scheme set up in 1997 because while records are made under this scheme, the actual artefact is often retained by the finder. It is the preparatory step for a study of rapiers (Techniques & Society: a usewear analysis of weapons from the middle Bronze Age of northwestern Europe. Information: Steven Matthews, PhD student, Groningen Institute of Archaeology). It is a useful reminder of the scale of research necessary at present to join in many debates.

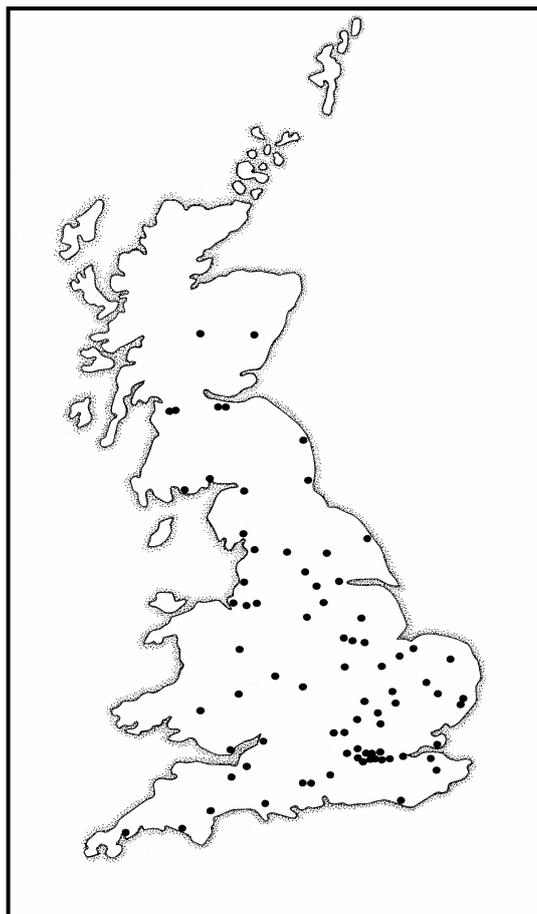


Figure 1. The highly dispersed nature of museums and collections of archaeological material, illustrated in this map of proposed fieldwork for a study of Bronze Age rapiers (information S. Matthews)

At present basic data for many categories of information is widely scattered. The few examples of existing nationwide catalogues include beaker pottery and collared urns from graves, early Bronze Age daggers, swords, and basal-looped spearheads (Clarke 1970, Gerloff 1975, Taylor 1980, Longworth 1984, Burgess & Gerloff 1981, Burgess & Colquhoun 1988, Davis 2006). This list is interesting: the catalogues prepared by Clarke, Taylor and Longworth have all appeared in the Gulbenkian Archaeological Series published by Cambridge University Press, the catalogues prepared by Gerloff, Burgess and Colquhoun have all appeared in the *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* series published by Beck in Munich. The Gulbenkian Archaeological Series had the advantage of being large format volumes but lacked a consistent approach (eg, to the necessity of illustrating material). The series has been discontinued. The *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* series is an international series funded by German money. These volumes are far more standardised, and importantly, they can be used in conjunction with other volumes in the same series dealing with comparable material from other countries. Davis' very good catalogue is published in a stand-alone volume and is based on his doctoral research.

It is probably far too late to establish a more centrally organised curatorial system for both

artefacts and archives based on a number of regional or provincial museums. The way forward, I suggest, lies in the setting up of a dedicated series of interlocked nationwide catalogues or databases.

These should not be confused with regional studies or lists of artefacts or radiocarbon dates appended to articles on other subjects, or material included in stand-alone publications such as conference proceedings, festschriften and unpublished PhDs, no matter how good in themselves. This information should be available in a dedicated series produced with the help of full-time professional editors and artists, where information can be sought and found with sufficient ease that researchers in the future will not expend practically all their available energy and finance on this basic aspect before settling down to stimulating analysis.

Their purpose should not be to document individual items to the extent that all fieldwork is considered redundant; therein lies madness. Rather, it is to facilitate fieldwork and research, stimulate the imagination, and encourage critical debate. It will be necessary to establish clear criteria regarding the information to be included, the assessment of its reliability and the conventions used for drawings, images, diagrams etc. An essential element must be the assessment of the quality of documentation - contamination of context, reliability of association, security of context, level of preservation (in the case of ground traces).

I perceive these databases as not being restricted to artefacts but to include a wide variety of data, structures, scientific analyses etc. They should provide fully measured drawings of each item, and as a minimum, findspot and circumstances of recovery (context and associations), present location, assessment of data and cross reference to other relevant catalogues/databases. For example, in a catalogue of pit burials an entry associated with a collared urn would provide links to catalogues of collared urns, analyses of charcoal and bone, and radiocarbon dates.

These databases could be arranged in a two-tier system with liberal cross-referencing. The first tier should consist of phenomena such as structures (graves, houses etc), human remains, artefacts, environmental data (wood, pollen, seeds etc), animal bone etc. A second tier could consist of generated data: analyses - houses (size, construction, orientation etc), composition (eg metallurgy, ceramics), usewear (eg tools and weapons), residues, skeletal material (gender, illness patterns), pollen diagrams, dendro and radiocarbon dates, etc. This second tier will have an essential role to play in the development of new analytical techniques in that it will generate at an early stage a standard in the form of a reference collection of, for instance, patterns of wear on flint. One enormous advantage of the present digital age is that if, in a particular field it becomes apparent that the initially accepted standard is inappropriate, changes can be instigated.

The obvious way to publish this information is in digital form.

To summarise the benefits that I see pertaining in this archaeological utopia are:

- the formation of a resource equally accessible to those working in either the sphere of developer archaeology or that of academic archaeology and which is not dependent on chance, financial considerations or personal interest.

- the promotion of empirical discussion as a counterbalance to the current heavy investment in theory-led discussion
- a stimulus to the development of new theoretical frameworks
- the facilitation of adequate testing of theory
- the promotion of new techniques by providing access to basic data on the existence and location of potential samples and material
- the provision of a format in which results can be added to developing experience thus providing a foundation for good common practice and a yardstick to judge results by.

And finally, my nomination of an unpublished or unfinished project which I would like to see completed and published: the food vessel catalogue started by the late, ever generous-hearted, Derek Simpson.

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