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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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Bronze Age pottery and settlements in southern England

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Abstract

Pottery is often treated as a poor relation in Bronze Age studies. However ceramics have much to offer. During the last forty years a fairly esoteric subject, dominated mainly by detailed analyses of decorative motifs and the construction of elaborate chronological schemes, has been transformed into a powerful source of knowledge which can inform topics as diverse as culinary habits and feasting, the symbolic power of rock inclusions contained in pottery fabrics, and ritual deposition. A summary of recent research directions will pinpoint areas ripe for future study, and the huge potential of settlement studies will also be highlighted.

I Pottery

How little do we know?

Following the remarkable gathering together of Bronze Age pottery in the photographic corpus compiled by Abercromby (1912), there was a significant lull in the concerted study of Bronze Age pottery. Then from the 1960s onwards a series of doctoral theses were undertaken. As a result, major corpora of Early Bronze Age Beakers (Clarke 1970) and Collared Urns (Longworth 1984) were published, and studies of Food Vessels (Simpson 1968), Biconical Urns and Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury pottery were undertaken. The back-dating of Early Iron Age ceramics into the Late Bronze Age, and the definition of plain and decorated styles was neatly summarised by Barrett (1980), and a useful overall summary of Bronze Age pottery in Britain is provided by Gibson (2002)

What we need to do. Doctoral research involving artefact corpora appears to be unfashionable. However the compilation of such works for Food Vessels, accessory vessels and the Late Bronze Age styles is desperately needed; and the studies of Biconical Urns and MBA pottery (see above) need to be published.

When was pottery made?

All pottery studies still need to be underpinned by secure chronological frameworks. Several advances in dating techniques are aiding the construction and restructuring of such schemes, while relative chronological approaches are still important. The main relative systems of dating are stratigraphic sequences and association with other dateable artefacts such as metalwork. The problems of correlating Beaker dates with existing typological schemes are being solved by Needham through a re-jigging of the definitions of some of the key type descriptions. Two extremely important advances have been the development of radiocarbon dating methods which can be applied firstly to cremated human remains, and secondly to the burnt residues of cooked food on the interior surfaces of potsherds. Early Bronze Age urns often contain, or cover, human cremations and recent programmes of dating for Scotland (Sheridan 2003) and Ireland (Brindley 2007) have demonstrated the high potential of this avenue of research.

What we need to do

Many more radiocarbon dates are needed, and the new techniques involving the dating of burnt residues and cremated bone, alongside the use of Bayesian methods, should be exploited to the full.

How was pottery made?

Ceramics are items made from clay which has been heated in order to drive off the water that forms part of the chemical composition of the clay molecules. A very useful discussion of how this occurs, and of prehistoric ceramic production technology in general, is provided by Gibson (2002: Ch.2). Until the Late Iron Age all pottery was hand built and fired on open bonfires or in pits. Technological knowledge would have been passed down through the generations, and the use of fire and kilns may have linked this technology symbolically to other high temperature processes such as metalworking and indeed the drying of crops. All such processes involved irreversible transformations of materials: in the case of ceramics from plastic, damp clay to hard and fragile vessels, and these transformations may have been imbued with powerful magical significance. We do not know to what extent potters were specialists, but it is possible that potters, whether women or men, may have held respected positions within society. Bonfire or pit firings leave little specific evidence in the soil, but the existence of on-site pottery production can be inferred by various means: the presence of stores of raw potting clay and material for inclusions, bases of bonfires with associated sherds from wasters or spalled vessels, or tools for forming or decorating vessels.

What we need to do.

Excavators need to look out for wasters, bonfire bases and oven furniture, and experimental

projects should build on current work.

Was pottery local or non-local?

From the 1960s onwards the use of petrological techniques, especially thin sectioning, became more common, but it was not until the 1970s that systematic description and coding of fabric types was developed. Thus a system for the objective description and record of fabrics became the basis for the Guidelines for Analysis and Publication published and disseminated by the Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group (1997). In 1994 the United Kingdom Thin Section (UKTS) database, an initiative funded by English Heritage, was produced: it listed c. 5500 thin sections of prehistoric pottery. The significance of this large body of data has been summarised and assessed by Morris and Woodward (2003). Prehistoric ceramics are highly suitable for investigation using thin-sectioning and ceramic petrology. There are two principal topics which have been addressed by the use of ceramic petrology in Britain: characterisation and provenancing. Characterisation defines the nature of the clay matrix and the inclusions within it, while provenancing uses that information to interpret the geological sources from which the naturally occurring or deliberately added inclusions were derived, and often can suggest a likely source that is closest to the archaeological site under consideration. A good example is the study of Early Bronze Age Trevisker ware in Cornwall which contains gabbroic inclusions from The Lizard (Parker Pearson 1995). Also a recent application of the technique of inductively-coupled plasma spectroscopy (ICPS) has contributed to the identification of locally produced and non-local vessels on the Bronze Age site at Bestwall, Dorset (Ladle and Woodward forthcoming).

How do fabrics change through time during British prehistory? An important analysis of such changes in Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age Wessex was undertaken by Cleal (1995), and consideration of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age ceramics was added by Woodward (2002a: 106-9). Typical fabrics were grog mixtures in Beakers, grog in Early Bronze Age urns, and burnt flint in Middle Bronze Age vessels. Late Bronze Age fabrics also tend to have flint inclusions, but associated with much more sand.

What we need to do.

All specialists should use the PCRG Guidelines and should use petrological analysis as a matter of course. Fabric series for site assemblages should involve lumping of categories rather than

splitting, and should be designed with research questions in mind.

What was pottery for?

Systematic study of vessel sizes did not form part of the traditional approaches to ceramic analysis in British prehistory. The reasons for this are difficult to assess, especially when it seems so obvious that pots were made to be used, and that vessel capacity, as well as shape, are likely to relate very closely to different potential functions for the various styles of pottery. Direct evidence of vessel use can survive as external sooting or as burnt food residues, and animal fats and plant waxes absorbed by the pottery can now be analysed.

One pioneering attempt to consider ceramic function was David Clarke's division of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age Beaker pottery into three functional categories: fine wares, everyday wares and heavy-duty wares, and I applied this simple scheme to urns from Deverel-Rimbury settlements and cemeteries (Ellison 1981). Another approach to the study of vessel size is to plot the rim diameter against vessel height, and this technique has provided interesting patterns for Early and Middle Bronze Age pottery (Woodward 1995: figs.17.1 and 17.2). One reason for the lack of similar studies of vessel capacity in relation to later Bronze Age pottery is that most assemblages are dominated by sherd material only. In order to tackle this problem I experimented with the idea of using rim diameter as a measure of vessel size. Collared Urns of the Early Bronze Age show a very wide size range and a peak of very small vessels is present. Towards the end of the Early Bronze Age, Biconical Urns and Trevisker pots were the first groups of pottery since the earlier Neolithic to show a tripartite pattern of vessel size. In the Middle Bronze Age, for the first time, fine wares can clearly be distinguished from coarse wares, and the far-reaching changes in ceramic associations that took place in the Late Bronze Age were related to developments in the serving and eating of food and drink (Barrett 1980). In terms of vessel size, this change is associated with the first occurrence of four-fold size groupings according to rim diameter, and a very large overall range of vessel sizes. This trend coincides with the development of settled farmsteads and field systems, and may relate to the definition of age sets and the division of labour within the new sedentary social environment, as well as to changes in food preparation and cooking techniques associated with a greater dependence on cereals.

What we need to do

The unpublished data recorded in site archives, such as rim diameter, and the occurrence of

sooting and residues, could be used to investigate the variations in vessel size and usage amongst contemporary sites, and across regional divides.

What does pottery express?

Modern research seems to be indicating that inclusions added to potting clay recipes were deliberately selected for their particular colour, texture and general appearance, and that such inclusions may have possessed symbolic values. In addition to observations on the symbolic significance of the shiny and luminous quartz found in many prehistoric pots, we can also draw attention to the carefully selected hard and dark-hued rock fragments found in vessels belonging to various periods in north Wales (Williams and Jenkins 2004), and in urns from the Lake District and in the Welsh Marches. All of these may have derived from locations of particular ritual significance, from isolated boulders of mythical importance, from erratics forming part of stone monuments, or from contemporary stone artefacts (Woodward 2002a). The incidence of bone and grog in vessels has also been interpreted in symbolic terms. The grog may have been ground up from parts of known vessels which were of importance to the owner of the new vessel. Thus the new pot might contain fragments of the vessel previously belonging to a parent or ancestor. Burnt flint becomes common as inclusions from the Middle Bronze Age onwards. It may be no coincidence that this is the time when sedentary occupation farming first developed. Burnt flint nodules would have been ubiquitous on settlement sites and may have symbolised the hearth, the home and the very essence of settled life.

Some periods and areas are characterised by plain wares alone and many assemblages contain both decorated and plain wares. Furthermore some vessel types carry all over decoration while other types have decorated zones limited to the upper parts of the pot, the shoulder or the rim only. The different techniques of decoration are well illustrated in Gibson (2002). It seems unlikely that the different techniques of decoration were selected at random, and it may be that they also transmitted symbolic meanings or linkages. Many of the tools used to produce impressions, such as bones, twigs, reeds, straws or quills, may have been gathered in the wild, and thus symbolised particular places or ecological zones known to the users and makers. The raw material for the cords used to make cord impressions may have derived from the lime tree or the hemp plant. Lime bast fibres were used particularly in the production of fish nets, and network was also used as slings for large containers. Thus some cord decoration may have been skeuomorphic, mimicking the slings, but it may be that the use of cord also provided a reference to other spheres of life such as the netting of fish, and boat-building.

Also the possible use of hemp fibres (*Cannabis sativa*) to execute the decoration on Beakers may have been a symbolic reference to the stimulating alcoholic or hallucinogenic contents of the vessels themselves (Woodward 2002a). In a similar way, consideration of bird-bone impressions invites allusion to the birds themselves. The bones of certain kinds of birds were preferred – blackbird and magpie, carrion crow, rook, sparrow and jay. These birds tended to be black in colour, or displayed plumage of striking contrasts: the black and white magpie and the jay with its unusual flashes of pink and blue. It may be that such species were regarded as possessing magical or spiritual powers, and that such power could be transferred to the pottery vessels. The use of combs may have been related symbolically to the use of similar tools in the process of weaving, or to the use of personal hair combs. Finally, the use of the human finger and thumb not only places the process within the domestic sphere but also emphasises an element of individual identification: the vessel is marked by a part of the body that made it.

Studies of the location of decoration on the body of pots has traditionally been associated mainly with Beakers. Apart from their potential for typological and relative dating, the variety of schemes of zonation may also have deeper meanings. Ian Hodder, in a study of Dutch Neolithic pottery showed that a change from complex to more stylised decoration may have been linked to changes in social structure (Hodder 1982: 169 and 175-6). Turning to Late Bronze Age jars, a different kind of relationship can be deduced. The decorative motifs fall into two groups, one associated with jars of rounded profile and the other with vessels displaying sharp shoulders. Smooth-profiled jars carry floating chevrons or lunate motifs, often filled with regular or random stab decoration (Fig.1, 1-3). The sharp-shouldered vessels however are characterised by much simpler bounded linear, chevron or lozenge patterns (Fig.1, 4-5). Do the rounded jars with curvy decoration represent female characteristics? Or was it the shouldered jars with simple geometric or fingertip decoration that were connected more with food preparation and women, while the fancy rounded jars were used for ritual or feasting activities?

What we need to do

It would be desirable to compile a manual of descriptive terms for decoration and codings for the location of decorative elements and motifs. This would aid systematic analysis of schemes between sites and regions. Also we need to think more carefully about what the decoration means.

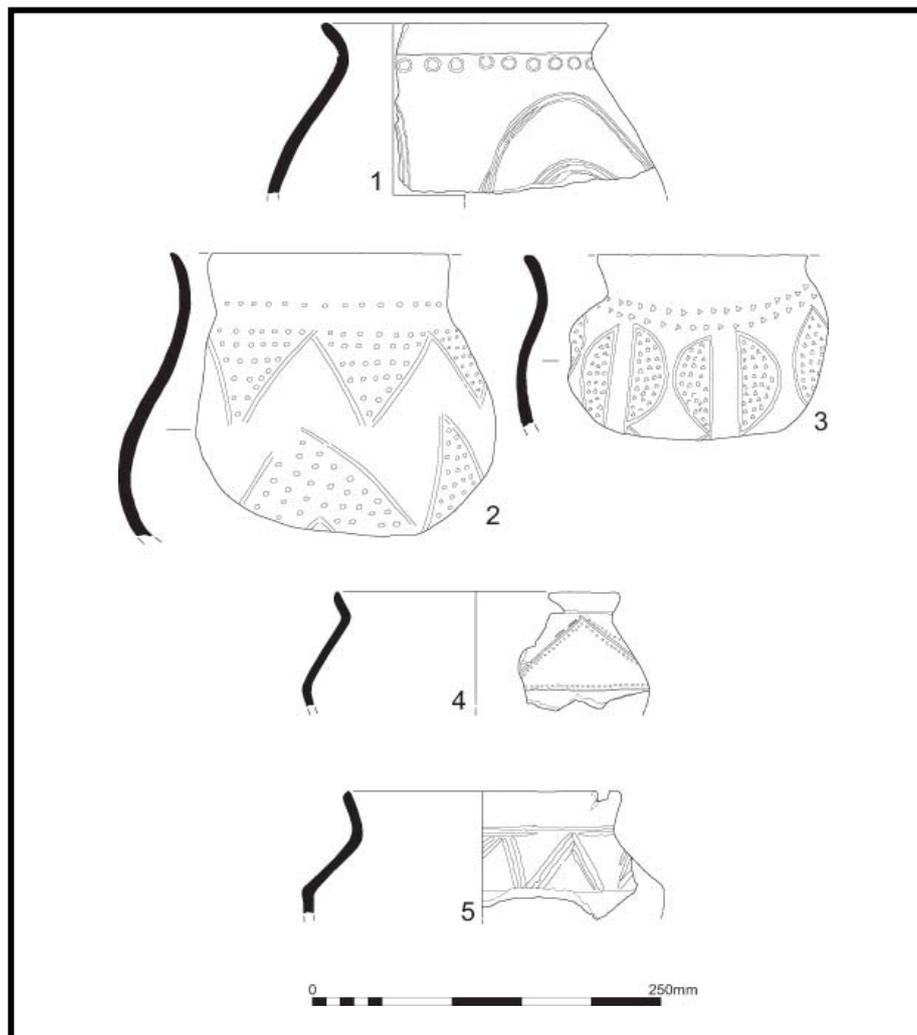


Figure 1. Late Bronze Age jars: 1, 4 and 5 from Potterne, Wiltshire (after Lawson 2000, fig.51, 43; fig.54, 62 and 63) and 2 and 3 from All Cannings Cross, Wiltshire (after Cunnington 1929, plate 31, 3 and 5).

How was pottery used?

It has been assumed that prehistoric pots were made primarily for domestic use, as storage, cooking or serving containers, or to receive or accompany the bones or bodies of the recent dead. However, in many periods of prehistory pottery comes from contexts which are decidedly non-domestic in nature. Many of these assemblages can be interpreted as the remains of feasting on a large scale. At Bestwall, Dorset, in the Middle Bronze Age, pottery from feasting episodes was associated with a burnt mound, following the closing down of a roundhouse (Ladle and Woodward 2003), and the first of a series of ceramic 'feasting sets' recognised from Late Bronze Age contexts was that found at Broom, Warwickshire (Fig. 2). This was found in a pit next to a pyre and a scatter of bronze cauldron fragments. In fact it could be argued that much, if not all, pottery produced before the Iron Age was produced for

special, non-domestic purposes: either for deposition in graves or as rare and exotic containers for special food and drink prepared for conspicuous consumption at feasts, festivals or other communal social events (Woodward 2000). One clue to the identification of such assemblages is the presence of rare, usually open-rimmed, vessels of exceptionally large capacity.

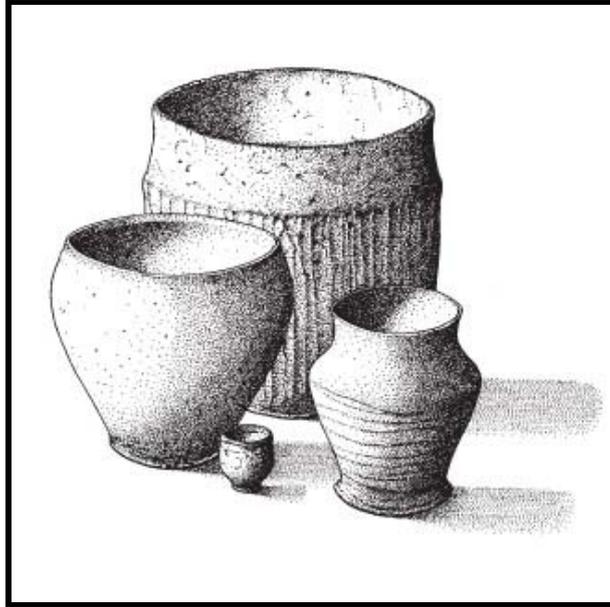


Figure 2. Late Bronze Age ceramic feasting set from Broom, Warwickshire (after Stuart Palmer). Drawing by Candida Stevens. © Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society.

Who owned and used the pots?

How can the analysis of pottery help us to identify the actual people who made and used ceramic vessels in prehistory? Occasionally vessel size can be linked to age. A child buried at Doune, Perth and Kinross was accompanied by a small Food Vessel and a miniature battle-axe (McLaren 2004), and within some Middle Bronze Age urn cemeteries in the east Midlands the size of urn increased in relation to the age of the individual cremated. But such patterns are rarely evident elsewhere. Another way in which pots related to individual people, or families, was through their employment as relics and heirlooms. We have already seen that the use of grog may have enabled the symbolic incorporation of ancestral pots, and the power or their owners, into the fabric of new vessels. Sherds used to make such special grog may have been obtained from funerary vessels, the existence of which can be investigated by looking for vessels in graves that were inserted in an incomplete state (Woodward 2002b).

Studies of the spatial distribution of pottery can provide clues to systems of social and economic organisation and past human behaviour at several geographical scales. Some of the important results of such studies have been summarised by Pollard (2002) and Woodward

(2002c). They include conclusions concerning the nature of social organisation in the Middle Bronze Age derived from study of the distribution of pottery and other artefacts within pairs of roundhouses, the relation of the distribution of pottery in roundhouses to cosmology and the daily round, and the deliberate and symbolic placing of pottery deposits within ditch terminals or other significant locations within settlement enclosures.

What we need to do

Pottery reports and research should not be divorced from its contexts, and fragmentation studies are highly significant. The location and nature of deposition have much to tell about the use, function and significance of Bronze Age pottery, and it is only through detailed contextual analysis that a full understanding of ceramics will be achieved.

II Settlements

Existing data and modules

The traces of Early Bronze Age settlements in southern England remain elusive, but the array of Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury settlements on the chalk, first investigated fully in Sussex by the Curwens, and then on Salisbury Plain (e.g. Stone 1941) and Dorset (ApSimon and Rahtz 1962) has provided a classic suite of excavated sites. These sites formed the basis of some pioneering analysis which involved the plotting of different finds categories in relation to ditches and structures, and the definition of recurring settlement modules consisting of a living house accompanied by one or more ancillary structures (Bradley and Ellison 1975; Ellison 1981). The corpus of late Early and Middle Bronze Age settlements has been augmented through important excavations in Cornwall, and also on river gravels, especially in the Thames valley and Essex. The standard units comprising roundhouses, four-posters, small pits, fence lines, enclosures and ponds or wells have been well recorded, and the short-lived (?single generation) nature of individual roundhouses has been emphasised (Bruck 1999). A selection of key modern excavations would include Trethellan Farm, Cornwall (Nowakowski 1993), Black Patch, Sussex (MBA: Drewett 1982; Russell 1996), sites on the Brighton ByPass (MBA: Rudling ed. 2002), Mucking North Ring, Essex (LBA: Bond 1988), South Hornchurch, Essex (Guttmann and Last 2000), Green Park (Brossler *et al.* 2004) and Hartshill Copse, Berkshire (Collard *et al.* 2006).

What we need to do

One of the main problems with many recent excavations (not those listed above) is that only small parts of settlements have been sampled, and there has been little funding for radiocarbon dating. This means that the sequence of structures, and overall chronology can seldom be worked out. If possible whole settlements or whole sectors of them should be excavated. Attempts should be made to work out horizontal relationships on the ground, during the excavation, and obtain absolute dating wherever possible (see below).

Dating

The most important dating evidence on excavated settlement sites is that of horizontal, or, if one is very lucky, vertical stratification. Otherwise dating in broad terms is provided by pottery assemblages, and, occasionally, by associated diagnostic metalwork. From most sites we have just a few radiocarbon dates: they are often determined on non-identified charcoal of unknown life age and are of little use. In direct contrast to this situation, at Bestwall Quarry, Dorset it proved possible to fund a series of 145 radiocarbon dates relating to a sequence of Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age settlements and field systems, and subsequently to date the individual roundhouses and settlement modules to successive periods of human generations over many centuries (Fig. 3; Ladle and Woodward forthcoming).

What we need to do

The most desirable development in Bronze Age settlement studies would be the systematic provision of funding for large suites of radiocarbon dates. The dates should be taken from short-lived, single entity samples which are directly associated with structural features and/or diagnostic pottery assemblages. Without this development it will seldom be possible to assign relative chronologies to successive structures or settlement modules within any individual site, and social interpretation will be severely compromised. Commercial and research projects need to estimate for suitable dating programmes: it may be more important to fund this than a very detailed non-focussed study of the pottery for instance.

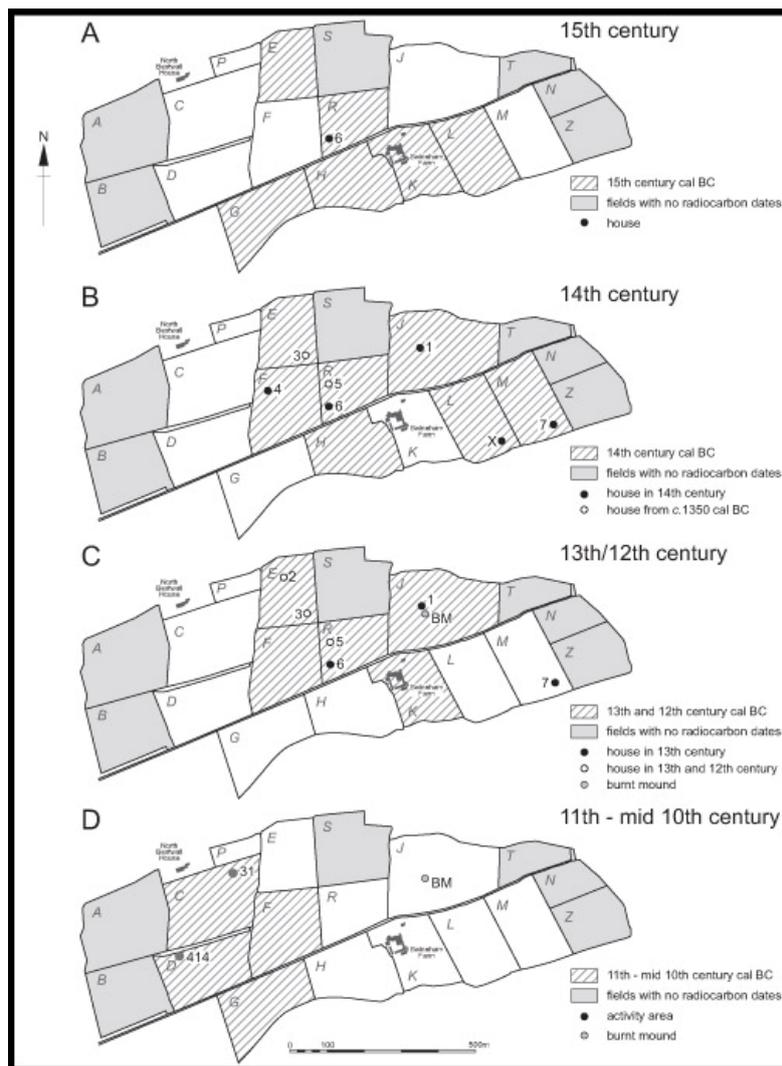


Figure 3. Middle Bronze Age occupation at Bestwall, Dorset: spatial development through time (Ladle and Woodward forthcoming).

Fields/drove ways/pens

The practical study of Bronze Age field systems in southern England got off to a very good start in Sussex, where the Curwens were able to record earthwork remains of settlements and their associated field lynchets (e.g. Curwen 1934). Such work was developed by the RCHM in Wessex, especially under the guidance of Bowen, whose seminal book remains essential reading (Bowen 1961). A particularly important contribution has been made by Fowler, across a large stretch of protected chalk downland above Avebury (Fowler 2000). The later Early Bronze Age origins of many axial field systems on the chalk has been demonstrated, along with their developments through to the Late Bronze Age period. And the origins of the large boundary ditches on Salisbury Plain have been investigated through a thoughtful interdisciplinary study (Bradley et al 1994). In more recent years commercial projects, based

mainly in the river valleys of southern and eastern England, have led to the discovery of extensive Bronze Age field systems, and associated structures, in more low-lying terrain. The early work of Pryor at Fengate is of particular note: with the elucidation of various scales of field system and associated features such as sheep runs, gates, pens and stock pens (see Pryor 1998 for summary). By systematically searching the available 'grey literature' relating to commercial interventions over many years Yates has been able to demonstrate the widespread existence of Middle and Late Bronze Age field systems on river gravels in the south, and to tie them in to the known later Bronze Age settlements and ring works, and also to concentrations of metalwork (Yates 2007). The advance in knowledge provided by this piece of work is astounding. At the same time it has been possible to investigate the interweaving of Bronze Age settlement structures, fields, drove ways, wells and structured artefact deposits over a large area at Heathrow Terminal 5 (Framework Archaeology 2006), thus filling out the lowland picture in a dramatic way

What we need to do

Commercial project directors should become more aware of the importance of individual Bronze Age ditches. Large-scale gravel excavations need to concentrate on the relative dating of fields, drove ways and settlement modules. We also need detailed fragmentation studies of pottery to inform the original date, and use life, of field and enclosure boundaries.

And now is the time to launch complementary field projects on the chalk, to date suspected early field systems by targeted lynchet sectioning, and to employ new air photographic and GIS techniques to the full.

Spatial patterning of finds

Definition of settlement modules was initially stimulated by the plotting of all finds categories against the structures and attempting to interpret the resulting patterns in functional and social terms (Ellison 1981; 1987). However this approach has seldom been taken up by later excavators of Bronze Age settlements. An important contribution was made by Barrett and Needham (1988) who argued that some of the artefacts found in roundhouses may have been deliberate depositions, associated with the building or abandonment of the house i.e. foundation or closing deposits. This idea was also developed by Nowakowski in her important re-working of the depositional history evidenced at Trethellan Farm (Nowakowski 2001). The definition of such deposits, and of other forms of structured artefact groups, does not detract

from the potential use of overall finds distributions to inform structural function and the use of social space. This research direction has been fully developed in Iron Age studies where the disposition of finds, especially pottery, within roundhouses and settlement enclosures as a whole has been employed to develop powerful models involving everyday routines, differential use of enclosed space and cosmological connotations (e.g. Parker Pearson 1999). Also the careful consideration of the distribution of finds, and pottery fragmentation, in relation to Iron Age house plans has led to discussions of the use of front and back space, the area around the hearth, and the deposition of finds according to right hand or left hand ruling (Pope 2007; Woodward and Hughes 2007). In this respect Bronze Age settlement studies are now seriously lagging behind. Few distributions of finds categories have been discussed, and plans showing quantified occurrence of pottery are very few: Fig. 11 in the Hartshill Copse report (Collard *et al.* 2006) is a good example, and the data relating to one of the houses from Bestwall, Dorset is illustrated here (Fig. 4).

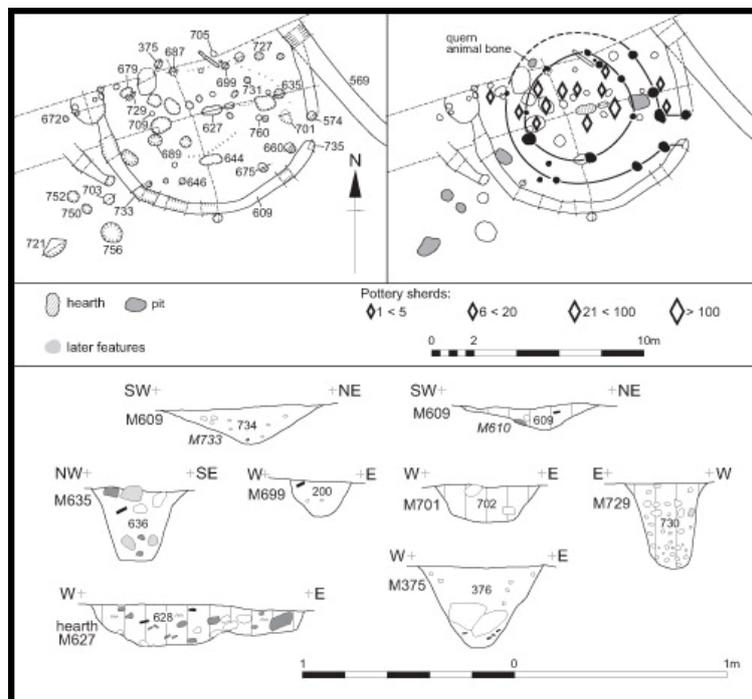


Figure 4. Bestwall, Dorset: Middle Bronze Age house 7 (Ladle and Woodward forthcoming).

What we need to do

There should be far more interaction between excavators, the authors of site narratives and the finds specialists concerned. Study of the distribution and context of all finds categories should be viewed as a very high priority, and relevant distribution patterns should be published as a matter of course. Integrated discussion and exciting interpretations would undoubtedly then follow. Particular attention should be paid to the three-dimensional record

of structured deposits in the ground, and pottery specialists should pay great attention to the matter of fragmentation and sherd size in assessing probable types of original deposition. There is much potential for the reworking of surviving pottery assemblages in relation to site archives: this could provide ideal museum-based and data-centred dissertation topics for research students.

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