SOLENT THAMES RESEARCH FRAMEWORK RESEARCH AGENDA
THE LATER BRONZE AGE AND IRON AGE PERIOD

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Nature of the Evidence

A considerable amount of archaeological investigation has been carried out across the sub-region, which has given rise to the current level of understanding of the later prehistoric period. This work has been linked in many instances, particularly since the introduction of PPG16, to development including extensive areas of gravel extraction, urban growth and transport schemes. In addition, there have also been a number of large scale research projects, such as *Danebury Environs Project* and *Hillforts of the Ridgeway*. As a result the archaeological evidence from this period is somewhat biased towards particular places and themes and its interpretation may not in fact represent a full and accurate picture of activity.

- A diverse range of 'hotspots' of later prehistoric investigation exists across the Solent Thames area, for which comparison of results is required.
- Consideration should be given to using GIS methods to explore and define the possible impact of biases in fieldwork and/or development, and how and where imbalances may need to be corrected.
- More attention needs to be paid to areas which have seen especially little coverage or have conditions that are inherently difficult to overcome (for example carrying out Lidar surveys of woodland areas and doing more to establish the extent of late prehistoric activity in clayland areas).

Chronology

In the past chronology was established on the basis of pottery and other type series. Increasingly the use of stratigraphic sequences and scientific dating techniques has enabled more refined chronologies to be developed, but typological approaches remain essential and much needs to be done to resolve uncertain and confused patterns, including regional variations.

- An audit of the existing scientific and typological chronological frameworks established on a sub-regional or thematic basis is required.
- Resolution of chronological issues identified in the audit will need:
  - Standards or criteria to enhance chronological resolution in terms of sampling strategies for artefacts and scientific dating.
  - Scientific as well as stratigraphic enhancement of the chronological framework using Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL), dendrochronology and C14 linked to residue analysis for example.
  - A programme of retrospective C14 dating with agreed priorities.

- Excavations of well-stratified artefact-rich sites should adopt sampling strategies targeted at the specific objective of refining chronologies using multiple methods – including realistic assessment of redeposited material.

Landscape and Land Use

From the later prehistoric period there is evidence for land clearance, changes in farming and organisation of the landscape, both in the form of extensive field systems and large scale land division, often marked by substantial boundaries.

- The origin and purpose of field systems in the Solent Thames area, including the reasons for establishing co-axial fields, and other field patterns, and the physical form and management of field boundaries would merit further study.
- Changes in the relationship between fields and settlements across the region also need to be investigated.
- Research may show whether fields were mainly to control grazing or to grow crops. The importance of grassland management in the Iron Age economy and the degree of specialisation of grazing farmsteads, for example whether horse raising a major economic activity in the Thames valley should be further explored.
- The relative effects of climate change and socio/economic factors on changes in farming need to be explored.

The pattern of landuse and its development across the region can be investigated through a number of research themes. One of the key sources of evidence to characterise these developments will come from the biological record, including pollen sequences. The full range of palaeo-environmental and geoarchaeological data should be collected, particularly from sites away from the chalk. Retrieval of sufficient environmental samples to generate such sequences and facilitate collection of other biological indicators should be routine. Any sites with large assemblages of fish, bird and shellfish remains would be of national importance.

- The extent of clearance in different parts of the Solent Thames area at different periods should be explored. A cycle of clearance and regeneration may have persisted in some areas.
- Farming and clearance should be explored through further studies of alluvial and colluvial deposits.
- The relationship of land use and clearance to the basis of the economy and how it varied through time should be considered across the region.
- The use of newly cleared areas and any influence of climate on land use need to be investigated, possibly through proxy data for temperature and rainfall.
- The location and exploitation of woodland should be explored through palaeoenvironmental data.
- The survival of large mammals such as bear and aurochs etc. in the Bronze Age and Iron Age countryside is worth consideration in terms of landuse and habitat loss.

Technical changes in agriculture and their economic and social significance need further investigation, but rely heavily on obtaining large enough samples to go well beyond mere species identification. These issues include

- Changes in animal rearing strategies and the balance of primary and secondary products from pastoral agriculture
- The introduction of new domestic animal species, perhaps including fowl
- Changes in the scale, methods and social context of arable production
- The change to spelt and free-threshing varieties of wheat can be explored through biological remains.
- Weed floras can shed light on time of sowing, soil fertility and soil drainage and the by-products of crop-processing.
- The remains of cultivation equipment and of plough marks are rare but important in contributing to understanding the development of ploughing technologies
- Evidence of the intensity and/or mobility of agriculture and settlement should be further investigated through a variety of means including retrieval of synanthropic species, pests and disease.

Settlement

The later prehistoric period saw the development of permanent settlements, although transhumanance did not entirely disappear. Types of settlement range from scattered farmsteads and open and enclosed settlements to defensive enclosures and finally to the *oppida*. The relationship between the different kinds of settlement and social organisation, particularly social hierarchy, and changes in economy presents a number of issues. These are not specific to the region, but the number of hillforts and surrounding settlements, later period *oppida*, extensive relict field systems and evidence for seasonal occupation suggest that the Solent Thames area would provide suitable opportunities to explore them.

- Indications of the decline of earlier prehistoric patterns of mobile domestic activity, including whether highly dispersed later Bronze Age settlements were only seasonal places of occupation need to be tested.
- Indications of increased intensity of settlement could be explored, for example whether this reflects a switch from family to more communal management of animals and crops and the role of land-use divisions.
- The factors that led to a common shift of settlement location in the late Iron Age need to be identified.
- There is potential for more investigation of whether differences in settlement form and patterns of change can be explained in relation to possible pre-existing landuse rights, and how this may have affected the development of settled farming communities

- The difference in enclosed and unenclosed settlements may still be a useful distinction, but needs to be re-examined in relation to differences in scale, social and economic basis of settlement and other factors.
- The extent to which forts have Bronze Age origins and their role at that period form part of the larger issue of the purpose of hillforts, including roles in reunion, ritual and refuge.
- Levels of occupation of forts and the presence of external settlements need further clarification.
- If many forts were not prestige settlements, the possible existence of other places fulfilling this or other complementary roles needs to be explored, including whether material culture may prove a better indicator of social hierarchy than settlement form.
- Extent to which the socio-economic basis of settlement differs across the area needs to be explored.
- More work is required on whether the form of settlements is related to their socio-economic role or to other non-morphological factors and the existence of geographical and chronological variations.
- Palaeoenvironmental evidence should be used to help develop spatial chronologies for settlement change and to identify functions of specific sites.
- Changes in settlement function should be compared to changes in other areas e.g. pottery typologies to look for relationships between them.
- Palaeoenvironmental evidence, including lipids residues, should be used to try to elucidate the use of middens and burnt mounds.

Social organisation

In the past it had been thought that the different forms of settlement reflected some form of hierarchy in society. However, this idea has been undermined by a lack of certainty over the role of defensive enclosures and the fact that the status of material culture found does not correlate with settlement type. The likely development of cultural, tribal, economic and political regions is indicated by large scale linear earthworks and distribution of coinage. While by no means exclusive to the Solent Thames area, there are several important issues to be explored to which the levels of late prehistoric activity and archaeological research across the region can make a significant contribution.

- The extent to which single family pastoral farmsteads existed needs to be determined.
- More remains to be learnt about storage pits, such as establishment of a minimum size and their reuse as latrines with the implications of this for burials in pits.
- Late prehistoric health care could be better understood through a review of the results of analyses of human skeletal remains and seeds of medicinal plants.

- Large scale land divisions are not well understood and there is a need to determine their frequency, to discover whether these defined land rights and ownership or land use areas and to discover who organised them.
- The form taken by the boundaries above ground and how long they lasted merits further study.
- The size of communities in the Iron Age, their social and economic relationships and the degree of economic specialisation need more investigation.

The built environment

The remains of many buildings dating to the late prehistoric period have now been identified across the sub-region, demonstrating a variety of construction techniques, showing increasing complexity over time. Both round houses and rectangular buildings have been found. There are also large numbers of four post structures, traditionally thought to be granaries, but as they occur at pastoral sites also, their function is not as clear cut. Although the use of pits to store grain has been well demonstrated, there remain numerous questions about these ubiquitous features, Given the enormous number now available for study certain questions about structures in the region may be addressed.

- Sampling strategies need to be refined, giving priority to well-preserved examples and to contexts that are most likely to yield meaningful associations with the life history of the structures they represent
- The development of the architecture of late prehistoric houses over a long time scale from the middle Bronze Age to late Iron Age may be clarified, including the mixture of cosmological and practical influences on design
- How far can the distribution of hearth deposits and objects in and around houses explain the social and practical structure of day-to-day living both indoors and out of doors?
- The role of four posters needs better understanding, including a possible association with pastoral farms, and the existence of some unusually substantial structures with massive posts.
- Further work on the use of pits is still needed, including the effectiveness of grain storage on different soils; how small a storage pit can be; and whether pits dug or reused as latrines or other uses?

Material culture

Everyday objects from settlements display a wide variety of quality of manufacture and design which may relate to a greater social role than is associated with such objects in the present day. Although deliberate deposits of such objects are uncommon large numbers of deposits of higher status pottery, metalwork, querns, animal remains and other objects have been found, including those in watery contexts. The significance of both the objects and their deposition remains unclear, posing questions such as:

- The functions of common objects like loom weights/ oven bricks; antler combs; and grooved and polished metapodials.
- Whether there was a personal and social significance in common highly finished and decorated craft tools and domestic objects.

One direction for study with the Solent Thames area would be its pottery.

- Assemblages from large numbers of excavated sites would allow exploration of pottery fabrics and changing fashions, sub-regional styles of pottery and their links to social groups.

Crafts, trade and industry

Archaeological evidence suggests that during the late prehistoric period manufacture, particularly of metalwork, involved the use of specialist craftsmen in addition to more domestic production. The extent to which the specialist remained in a particular location or travelled between sites is less easy to determine. Within the Solent Thames region questions about craft production remain.

- The organisation of crafts, use of itinerant craftsmen and the extent to which all families carried out basic domestic crafts needs to be investigated using a combination of settlement archaeology and appropriate specialist analyses.
- Given the early date of the iron-working at Hartshill Copse, the origins of iron-working require further investigation.
- The impact of industrial processes on the environment needs to be explored. Any large scale iron-working will have placed demands on the local woodland as a source of charcoal.
- The organisation of metal working needs to be clarified, especially how arrangements for different stages from procurement of raw materials to production and recycling of finished objects
- The geological origins and distribution of pottery fabrics needs greater precision to understand the social and economic context of pottery manufacture and distribution

Transport and communication

Evidence from bones suggests that oxen were the principal draft animals although possible horse breeding areas suggest that high status horse drawn vehicles may have been used. Evidence for a road network is limited. Communication by water was also probably common and a number of possible waterfront sites have been identified, although environmental evidence may help to extend understanding of how the water was used. However, material culture provides the best indication of long distance communication including cross channel trade.

- More evidence is needed for the development of the use of horses for transport and communication from the later Bronze Age onwards
- There is a need to explore patterns and axes of exchange, including the nature of the main exports from the region, possibly corn or horses.
- The role of the Thames as a key boundary in distribution of salt from Droitwich, Hampshire and Dorset should be investigated.
- European connections from the south coast and down the Thames and their influence on patterns of exchange at different periods should be studied.
- More evidence for structures and waterside activities needs to be identified.

Ceremony and ritual

In comparison with other periods, the evidence for the treatment of the dead in the later prehistoric period is limited, although deposition in pits was taking place. Creation of large scale funerary monuments also decreased during this period. There remain many issues to explore, to which the comparative wealth of evidence from the region can make a significant contribution.

- When and why people stopped building and using funerary monuments during the period.
- The extent that biases in fieldwork might prevent the discovery of more urnfields and other cemeteries.
- The frequency of cremations and burials in boundaries, fields and settlements before and after monuments stopped being used.
- Selection criteria for pit burials, possibly the socially disadvantaged, and the frequency for this occurring on different sites and its reasons.
- The significance of so-called 'special deposits' of different kinds in relation to how frequently deposits occur relative to settlement duration and other indicators of possible social significance.
- Further consideration of what constitutes an Iron Age cemetery, including whether small groups outside settlements count.
- Examples of other forms of formal burial (e.g. in buildings at Frilford and Spring Road, Abingdon).
- Practices indicated by mutilated bodies and double burials and the possible prevalence of human sacrifice.
- The significance of differences in sex, age, health and stature of burials within cemeteries and around settlements.

In particular the region has the capacity explore the relationship between water and ritual, with some significant evidence already recovered from the Thames and Langstone Harbour.

- It remains to be established whether excarnation and scattering of remains on land or river was the norm.

- The nature, purpose and frequency of 'special deposits' of human remains and metalwork,

The number of ceremonial and ritual sites identified is small, though there are some of the Roman period where earlier features have been identified.

- Further work is needed to identify possible places of ceremony and ritual, both of a formal nature such as the long-standing issue of the possible prehistoric origins of some Roman temple sites, and more natural (e.g. woodland or riverside) places of ceremonial or ritual significance.

Warfare, defence and military installations

Hillforts are the most imposing late prehistoric monuments, but their function is uncertain. Few show definite signs of conflict and they might have played a role in political and social organisation rather than serving a defensive role. Similarly deposits of weapons in rivers may not have been related to conflict. The extent of warfare and the politics of the period need addressing through several avenues:

- The relationship between the major late Bronze Age and Iron Age linear ditches and territorial entities needs to be explored.
- More investigation is needed into the impact that the massive deployment of labour involved in constructing, maintaining and remodelling of communal enclosures and forts had on local society and economy and the exertion and symbolising of social and political authority.
- Evidence from settlements suggests that society was peaceful, although this conflicts somewhat with the picture from hillforts. The incidence of attack needs to be clarified and a clearer understanding of the reasons for the burning of some hillforts is needed.
- The many major late Iron Age earthworks in the central part of the Upper Thames may represent an area where several major political entities were juxtaposed raising questions about who built them and why.
- The relationship between the earthworks associated with different major centres in late Iron Age and tribal political attitudes to Rome needs further exploration, including how this differed across the region (e.g. the wider political implications of the idea that the North Oxfordshire Grims Ditch and Cassington Big Ring were unfinished),
- There is need for review of metalwork found in rivers, considering the preponderance of weapons, their possible use in conflict, association with deposition of bodies and their relationship to politics and the role of rivers as tribal boundaries.

What were the Drivers and Inhibitors of change?

A possible approach to the study of the later prehistoric period is to consider the evidence in relation to how changes were influenced by a variety of factors, listed below.

- Environment
- Population dynamics
- Family relations
- Communication
- Economics
- Technology
- Rights and traditions
- Religion
- Politics