

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Lincolnshire

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Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

The Neolithic (c. 4,000-2,800)

Introduction

Traditionally the early phase of this period is characterised by clearance of forested areas and domestication of both animals and crops. The date for this clearance phase in Britain is generally set at about 5000BP and it is possible that date applies to sites on the chalk and limestone ridges within Lincolnshire. In lower lying areas, such as the Marshes, evidence points to a gradual deforestation taking place (Greig 1982) with some areas such as Bourne and Thurlby continuing a tree coverage until Bronze Age peat formation (French 1994). Further tree coverage no doubt continued in certain areas throughout both prehistoric and historic periods. Radio Carbon dates are published for the county in Fenland Survey and the report on the Eton Landscape (Cambs) is forthcoming.

Evidence

Finds of artefacts indicative of this period (such as early Grimston pottery and lozenge shaped arrowheads) are numerous across the county. Ceramic assemblages containing Grimston bowl pottery have been recovered from Giants Hill longbarrow (Skendleby), Dragnby, Walesby, Great Ponton (possible settlement), Tattershall Thorpe (settlement) and Risby Warren (settlement). As well as the Grimston wares other culturally distinctive ceramics have been recorded. Mortlake style pottery has been found at Dovesby and Kirkby on Bain long barrow and a Mildenhall style bowl was excavated at Tattershall Thorpe. The latter is a rare northerly occurrence of this ceramic not usually distributed north of the Welland and interestingly this style is also known from Wigber Low, Derbyshire (see conclusions). Imported flint and stone axes are also attested to from many areas often associated with flint scatters. May's summary described the distribution of axes from this period and noted that the patterning suggested Neolithic activity in the form of tree clearance was not restricted to upland areas (May 1976). The spatial evidence has changed little in the last twenty years although interpretation has (see discussion on settlement below). The high occurrence of group VI Great Langdale axeheads is indicative of a cultural or economic link across a wide region as enough outcrops appear to have been transported from source to a production center in Lincolnshire.

A number of settlements within this period have been recognised within the county such as South Rauceby, Tattershall Thorpe, Tallington and Deeping St Nicholas. Radiocarbon dates from Tattershall Thorpe indicate the site was occupied in the fourth millennium BC (4800 ± 70 BP). Other sites also exist where evidence intimates similar status such as Tetford, Salmonby and Stainfield. Causwayed Camps are located at Barholm and Uffington, and it is possible South Rauceby and Dowsby also represent this type of monument. This settlement pattern reflects a wider pattern than the *ëupland* focus assumed by May (1976) and appears to show a wide distribution of settlements utilising many different environments from Fen edge to harder geological ridges. Lithic scatters recorded within the county also probably represent other settlements not yet fully identified. A possible early field system has been identified at Donington on Bain but further investigation is required to confirm this interpretation and these features may very well belong to a later period.

The Long Barrow monuments, the greatest concentration of which is located on the Wolds, represent the best evidence for ritual in the county at present. Comprising of a series of earthworks running along the chalk ridge, this group was the focus of excavations early in the century. Outside of the Wold group only five other Long Barrows have been recorded in the county. Six of the Wold monuments are associated with mortuary enclosures, while outside of this group only one other mortuary enclosure is known at Harlaxton. The Wold group obviously represents a focused utilisation of the area but strangely settlement evidence does not appear to mirror this activity pattern. However, this apparent dichotomy has to be offset against the lack of recognised settlement and the correlation of surface finds with these monuments (see above).

Apart from the Long Barrows and mortuary enclosures other ritual sites are not common, although a hengiform have been identified in the Bain Valley and a henge (as the first part of a complex barrow)

has been excavated at West Ashby (Field 1985) and further possible examples exist in South Kesteven (J. Stevens pers. comm). The county lacks any form of cursus monuments although it is possible that pit or post alignments may serve a similar function (Jones forthcoming). This form of ritual sites are known as postholes on the fen edge gravels of the Welland Valley excavated at Stow Farm (A. Hatton pers. comm.) and pit alignments at Harlaxton (Jones forthcoming).

Conclusions

Excavations at Welland Bank Pit of a Bronze Age buried and the exceptional preservation of the Flag Fen (Cambs) site attests to the potential for the survival of early sites in the region especially in the low lying The spatial distribution of evidence from this period is perhaps indicative of fieldwork preference rather than actual land utilisation within the Neolithic. However the spatial correspondence between Mesolithic and Neolithic sites offers opportunities for analysis of long standing cultural links as well as transitional phases. It is only with the excavation of settlement sites that any interpretations can be tested concerning the transition phases of the Mesolithic/Neolithic or the Neolithic/Bronze Age. The occurrence of Mildenhall pottery in Derbyshire and Lincolnshire may also be indicative of cultural linkage based in the late Mesolithic, which continued into the early agricultural period.

The Beaker Period (Late Neolithic/Bronze Age Transition 2700 - 1700)

Introduction

The transition from the Late Neolithic to the Bronze Age is associated with a number of pottery types which appear to be representative of social distinction (Bradley Social Found). The most prominent of these being the Beakers which are widespread throughout the county although a lack of excavated sites belonging to this date means little interpretation as to their status can be found. Many barrows are evident throughout Lincolnshire and recent agricultural practices mean that many may have been lost (May 1976). The longevity of pottery styles in this period makes associated dating difficult. An archive of positively identified sites compiled by C. Allen (City and County Museum) conservatively lists 24 geographically widespread, although notably none occur near coastal regions.

Evidence

Differing forms of Beaker pottery have been located within the county including Handled Beakers from South Willingham and Denton, a Northern British/Rhine vessel from Tattershall Thorpe, food vessels from South Kelsey and Southern British type at Claxby.

Evidence from funerary contexts (characterised by single inhumations in flat graves/round barrows) occurs at Tallington, Thoresway, and Claxby and Beaker pottery is associated with a ring ditch at Donington on Bain. Cremations are reported from Somersby and Salmonby and inhumations from Denton. Beakers associated with settlement occurs at Barholm and Stow Tallington and possibly at Newton on Trent, The SMR contains 58 records relating to Beaker pottery many of which represent fragments not recovered from true in-situ contexts. The data from barrows is also incomplete due to the lack of excavated examples that can be clearly dated. Further problems exist in ascribing round barrows to this period as this form of monument is known from the Neolithic through to the Saxon period. A number of excavated barrows dating to this period are known such as Tallington, Thoresway, Broughton Common and Stroxton with the most full account being the Deeping St Nicholas excavation (French 1994). The latter site is important as it shows that burial mounds may well be the later stages of ritual monuments with their roots within the Late Neolithic period. The initial phases of the Deeping barrow included a Late Neolithic flat grave child inhumation (dated BC 2030-1775) with associated wooden monument. The mound itself exhibited five separate building phases, the first two of which, belong to this period. Remodelling and further burials continued into the Bronze Age.

Possible settlement evidence for this period occurs at Risby Warren, Dragonby, and Tattershall Thorpe. The latter site, as well as producing Beaker pottery, also produced Grooved ware, which has also been recovered from a number of Lincolnshire sites including Salmonby, West Ashby and Barholm. Beaker pottery associated with a single inhumation has also been recovered from Ruskington which appears to have been a focus of activity and possibly represents either an early interest in free-draining soils or perhaps that rout ways grew in importance at this time (Palmer-Brown 1995).

Conclusions

The lack of environmental evidence or open area excavations on domestic sites of this period means the evidence has a restricted potential. However it is likely that based on the concentration of other

monuments possibly of this period, continued quarrying and thus archaeological investigation of areas such as the Welland Valley would produce settlement evidence.

The Bronze Age

As with many parts of the country, Lincolnshire's Bronze Age has for many years, been dominated by the study of barrows, and metalwork. But very slowly this image of Lincolnshire in the Bronze Age has been changing, due to research and rescue led surveys and excavations, and since the early nineties, development led projects have further enriched our knowledge of the later Prehistoric period.

As we shall no doubt hear in the other papers, any study of Lincolnshire's archaeology is complicated by its unique geography and geology, which, not surprisingly, appears to have had a major effect on where people chose to build their homes, their means of subsistence and even where they buried their dead.

Burial.

As already mentioned, there is a significant body of information about burial methods in the Bronze Age. Although many of Lincolnshire's round barrows have long since been ploughed away or destroyed by other means, enough have been and still are visible in the landscape or on aerial photographs, to have drawn the attention of both professional and amateur archaeologists. This visible presence, combined with many threats of destruction, has meant that many examples of this class of monument have been recorded.

Their distribution in the landscape shows some significant bias'. As pointed out by May in 1976 and still upheld by current distribution maps, there are concentrations of barrows in specific geographical areas. These are: Along the Wolds, in the same way as the Neolithic Long Barrows had dominated the area and on the dip slope of the wolds down to the coast. Also along the eastern flank of the Limestone ridge and the Ancholme and Witham river valleys, then down the southern fen edge and eastward along the Welland Valley. Why are they concentrated in these areas? Were they positioned to create the biggest visual impact on the surrounding landscape or were they situated in transitional or marginal zones or to define boundaries?

Certainly a position on the high ground of the wolds or the limestone ridge would make these monuments visible for many miles and on the lower ground of the fens and river valleys even the smallest of barrows would have had some visual impact. The barrow cemetery at Salmonby near Horncastle was situated so that it could be viewed from a nearby ancient trackway, and the barrow complex at Little Duke's farm, Deeping St. Nicholas forms part of: Quote: a much larger barrow cemetery running across the current course of the River Welland and is situated on the landward margin of the perceived earlier Bronze Age at the river/fen interface.(French 1994).

Aside from their distribution the main pattern to emerge from those excavations which have taken place, is that there appears to be little continuity of burial practise either within specific cemeteries or between the separate complexes.

At Salmonby at least one large or possibly two smaller barrow cemeteries were represented, with some of the barrows clustered together and others in dispersed linear formation. There was little or no continuity of contents, each one revealing major differences in the method of burial and in the types of grave good accompanying the dead.

A similar story occurred in the south of the county at Stroxtun, south of Grantham. Here a cemetery of five barrows was excavated prior to destruction by gravel extraction. Each barrow was different. Some contained inhumations, others cremations. One barrow contained just one burial, whilst another had 18, and as at other cemeteries a mixture of adults and juveniles were buried within these barrows, so age was obviously not a barrier.

A similar pattern of use can be seen at Deeping St. Nicholas, The main excavated barrow revealed a number of periods of use and rebuilding, the earliest burial was that of a child, later burials consisted of male and female inhumations and after extensive remodelling, cremations were added. Though with each new addition the position of the earlier burials was respected.

It seems that Bronze Age barrows were intermittently used over large periods of time through the first half of the second millennium BC, but this ceased before the end of the millennium.

As for who was buried in these barrows, we do not know how individuals were chosen for this privilege (if that is what it was) and what was the significance of cremation as opposed to inhumation and the differences in accompanying grave goods?

Cremation cemeteries.

The other form of burial known from the Bronze Age was that of the flat cremation cemetery. Excavations have taken place at cemeteries near Long Bennington, a site which lay on the river terrace projecting into the alluvium and peat of Bennington Fen (Allen 1987) and on two sites less than 300 metres apart in Old Somerby and Ropsley parishes. (Lane 1995). At the Long Bennington cemetery cremations were discovered in pottery which is described as broadly similar to Deverel-Rimbury ware, which could have been made locally. In the Ropsley and the Old Somerby cemeteries the cremations were contained in pottery which was found to be very similar to that being used on domestic sites. Interestingly, in Ropsley parish, it was noted that those artefacts which may have been associated with funerary contexts were found in the west of the parish on the heavier soils of the boulder clay. Whilst the one known urn cemetery in the parish came from the junction of the clay and the limestone, therefore on marginal territory just like many of the barrows previously mentioned (Lane 1995). Dating proved to be difficult, despite the discovery of a bronze bangle at Old Somerby which was dated typologically to around the 14th-13th centuries BC, but no more secure date other than sometime in the 2nd Millennium BC has so far been proved for all three cemeteries.

Settlement.

The number of known barrows is staggering in comparison to the paucity of strong evidence for settlement in the Bronze Age. The SMR distribution map, although maybe a little bleaker than the real picture due to the need to separate actual settlement from pottery scatters, (some of which may have been associated with burials) shows just three concentrations of settlement. A cluster in Ropsley parish, a line of sites down the southern fen edge and along the Welland Valley, and another at the southern foot of the Wolds on the northern fen edge. This last concentration of probable Bronze Age settlements were recognised from flint and pottery scatters found during the fenland survey. They were mainly situated along the fen margin, often on low, sandy ridges within the clays and may have been seasonally occupied (Lane 1993)

Of the southern fen edge and Welland valley sites, until recently the most extensive excavation of a Bronze Age settlement site was that at Billingborough under the direction of Peter Chowne in the mid 1970s. The excavation of a sub-rectangular enclosure discovered that there had been four phases of occupation on the site, beginning in the early to mid Bronze Age and abandoned in the Late Iron Age/Early Roman periods. During the Iron Age an extensive field system was laid out, believed to be in response to the marine transgression, after which the site was used for salt production. In its earlier phases, Billingborough was predominantly a dryland site involved in cereal production, four post structures were found, and the keeping of sheep and or goat for meat.

More recently the work carried out on one of the Welland Valley sites by APS at the Ennemix gravel extraction quarry east of Deeping St. James, has provided extensive evidence of Later Bronze Age settlement. Preliminary analysis of the pottery assemblage from this site having placed it within the earlier part of the 1st Millennium BC. The site had been covered by a layer of alluvium, c.50 cm deep, which had resulted in excellent preservation. Within a massive boundary ditch, the remains of structures including; post built roundhouses, four posts and rectangular buildings were discovered. Floor layers and hearths had also survived along with large amounts of pottery. The settlement area was characterised by a layer of dark earth which was full of pottery and bone. The discovery of an enclosure, which formed an integral part of a much larger field system, implies that some form of stock management was also taking place. (Dymond and Mouraille pers comm.) The Post-excavation analysis of this site is ongoing, but it offers a rare and exciting chance to look at a large Later Bronze Age settlement site, which may be just one small section of a massive field system..

Away from the fen edge and the Welland valley, evidence for settlement is even patchier. The Ropsley Humby survey found over 250 find sites with pottery dating to the Bronze Age, but only one site was marked by a cropmark, despite the recent intensive work of the R.C.H.M.National Mapping Project. Most of the pottery came from the Middle Bronze Age period (1700-1200BC), Lane 1995, with only limited amounts dating to the EBA and none from the LBA (The absence of recognisable LBA activity other than metalwork finds is typical throughout the county, making the recent discoveries at Deeping St. James even more important.) The largest concentration of find sites came from the limestone heath in the northern part of the parish where Neolithic and EBA flints had also been concentrated.

In the north of the county, investigations of Bronze Age settlements is even rarer. Evidence for a crude wooden trackway, dated to the LBA by a number of Bronze artefacts, was found in a number of places

within Brigg in the Ancholme Valley. These finds were mainly made in the last century or the earlier part of this one. But a wooden trackway does not make a settlement. Evidence for a possible LBA site was found at Kirmond Le Mire in the Wolds, during the construction of a pipeline. Excavations through the High Street cut through the remains of a rectangular enclosure, the pottery recovered being similar to Deverel-Rimbury ware, indicating that the site may have been Later Bronze Age. (Field 1992)

By far the greatest evidence for human activity in Later Bronze Age Lincolnshire is metalwork. As discussed at great length by May in 1976, we do have high concentrations of Bronze Age metalwork finds from many parts of the county. The distribution map showing all Bronze Age metal finds recorded on the SMR indicates activity in many of the areas currently considered to be all but devoid of settlement, such as the river valleys of the Trent, Witham and Ancholme. Inevitably, some of the metalwork comes from in and around the areas where cemeteries were situated, but amongst the other explanations for the presence of this metalwork is the possibility that it represents votive deposits in special watery places away from domestic sites. This may be the case for some of the finds, but the possibility that some of this metalwork also represents some form of settlement in the vicinity should not be discounted.

Very little metalwork has come from either the chalk or limestone hills or the southern fens. Soil exhaustion leading to an abandonment of the higher ground, and marine flooding leading to a movement away from coastal sites, being the most common explanations for this. Along the southern fens very little evidence has been found for LBA/EIA settlement, not surprising considering the scale of the marine inundation here at that time. But human resourcefulness often weathered these problems and there is evidence for settlement away from the worst affected areas. In Bourne fen, Later Bronze Age / Early Iron Age pottery was found alongside other evidence of occupation including a hearth, fired clay fragments and daub, on a site close to the waterlogged zone. Chowne (1980), has also commented on the distribution of LBA metalwork, noting the high number of finds in the peat fen between Lincoln and the River Slea, particularly along the edge of this fen where the peat layer was thinner. He raised the possibility that much of this metalwork may have come from settlements, which were subsequently buried by peat growth.

Yet occasionally evidence for associated occupation is found. For example, the Later Bronze Age pottery and antler cheekpiece found at Washingborough during dredging of the Witham. Excavations carried out in 1973 by Orme and Cole in the vicinity of these discoveries, found that the material probably came from layers of silt in a pool which may once have lain close to an occupation site. Bone, pottery and worked wood were found, with cattle making up one half of the bone, the rest being a mixture of domestic and wild animal, bird and fish. Both fine and coarse pottery was found, although both indicated a high level of skill in pottery making. The dates given for this site were c.8th/7th/6th century BC so at the very end of the Bronze Age, into the Early Iron Age.

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