

Later Prehistoric Period

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Bronze Age

About 2300-700 BC

This period was the first in which large-scale physical structures were built, in the form of ritual monuments such as burial mounds, stone circles and rows; field systems, which can include lanes and droveways; and settlement enclosures, in which are found the circular huts which are such a hallmark of the last 2500 years of the prehistoric period. Important parts of the shaping of the present-day landscape date from the Bronze Age, including many roads and land boundaries.

Many of the first settlement enclosures known in Britain date from the Bronze Age, and survive well on upland areas such as Dartmoor and the coastline of the South Devon AONB. Outside these areas, they commonly appear as cropmarks on land now farmed.

Cropmarks show in arable fields when the crop ripens. Buried features such as ditches and pits retain water for longer than the surrounding ground, so the crop takes longer to ripen, growing tall and green. Features such as walls or banks dry out quickly, and the crop is stunted and yellow. These colour changes show up from the air, so any features which are deep or solid enough to resist erosion by ploughing show up on aerial photographs.

Tools and weapons

Metal first started to be used in Britain during the Bronze Age, and although its first uses were ornamental, using copper and gold, smiths quickly found how to alloy tin with copper to make bronze, a durable material which could be cast and beaten to make tools and weapons, of which axes, daggers and swords are most common.

As Britain's richest sources of tin and copper are found naturally in Devon and Cornwall, it seems likely that the South-West was among the first to exploit these resources. Recent research suggests that tinworking was already taking place on South Dartmoor by the 9th century BC.

Bronze tools are often found in the form of founders' hoards, which were often buried for safe-keeping by itinerant bronze-smiths, who would travel around the countryside making bronze objects. As their raw materials were heavy, they would often bury bronze scrap and ingots for later retrieval. In many cases, hoards were never collected again, perhaps because the smith had forgotten the location, or had died in the meantime. Several bronze swords found in the sea at Moor Sand near East Portlemouth may have fallen from the cliff where they had been buried by a smith, while a bronze axe found wedged in a rock at Lannacombe Beach may have got there by similar means.

In the first half of the Bronze Age, flint and other types of stone continued to be used for tool making, and some of the finest flint objects known come from this period. Barbed and tanged arrowheads are good examples of this, as are polished stone axe-hammers and maceheads, probably having ceremonial functions and made from polished volcanic greenstone, possibly from Callington in Cornwall. A broken macehead was found near Galampton, while two, were found near Chivelstone.

The likely locations of Bronze Age settlements can be inferred from the large number of burial mounds whose sites have been located by aerial photography. Bronze Age burial mounds were made by digging a circular ditch and piling up the earth inside it in a rounded heap over an inhumation or cremation of a dead person. When excavated, these mounds are commonly found to contain a pottery vessel containing the ashes of a cremated human body, sometimes placed inside a small stone chest. Other contents can include cuts of meat for the dead person's journey into the afterlife, tools of flint or bronze which he or she might need and items of personal status, eg: polished stone maceheads. White or red quartz was often piled onto the mound to make it stand out in the landscape. Many of these once existed, but few are well-preserved. Good examples can be seen at Stanborough, and others are visible as grassed mounds close to the coast path just east of Bolt Tail, and near Bantham.



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Ritual stone settings, comprising circles, rows and solitary stones, were common in the Bronze Age, though their details changed from place to place. The main phases of Stonehenge date to the Bronze Age, and show structures which are thought to have existed in timber in many other parts of Britain. Several sites of stone settings are known or suspected in the South Devon AONB at Slapton, Bolberry Down and Sevenstones Cross near Bigbury, but all have been cleared of their stones. The only intact ones in Devon are on Dartmoor, such as Merrivale, or Drizzlecombe in the Plym valley.

Agriculture

Organised farming, within the framework of often complex field systems, is thought to have flourished in Southern Britain during the middle Bronze Age, between c.1900 BC and c.1300 BC. Many of these field systems have been identified on Dartmoor and other highland areas, where they are associated with long boundaries, known as 'reaves' which split the landscape up into large territories.

These field systems have long parallel (coaxial) banks springing from a terminal reave, usually a longer boundary, dividing up territories. Short banks between the parallel ones divided these into irregularly sized sub-rectangular fields. Such field patterns are called coaxial field systems.

Settlements are commonly found with these field systems, earlier ones having circular huts scattered among the fields, while later Bronze Age settlements are often within sequential ovoid enclosures on the fringes of the fields.

Pastoral agricultural economies in mixed highland and lowland areas such as Devon and Cornwall, commonly practiced transhumance, that is, grazing animals on highland areas during the summer and bringing them down to the lowlands during the winter. Small-scale land divisions such as modern parishes did not exist in a system such as this - instead much larger land units were used, with less settled populations, due to their shifting lifestyle.

Bronze Age coaxial field systems have been identified on Dartmoor and on the South Devon coast, with long ridge roads, used as droveways between them. Recent research suggests that this arrangement, for which there is ample medieval evidence, was in fact Bronze Age in origin, making South Devon nationally important - evidence for Bronze Age transhumance is rare in Britain.

Environment

Several parts of Britain are fortunate to have extensive resources of organic and alluvial remains preserved in valley and lake silts, and moorland peat deposits, from which evidence for past climates and land use can be identified and interpreted.

Silts in Slapton Ley and peat deposits at Thurlestone have been sampled in this way, and show a marked decrease in tree pollen and a sharp increase in grass pollen around the beginning of the Bronze Age. This is thought to be related to large-scale deforestation, at least partly caused by human activity. Certainly, this change seems to coincide with the appearance of large-scale field systems and ritual landscapes, neither of which could operate in a woodland environment.

At the end of the Bronze Age, climatic deterioration after about 1000 BC began to cause abandonment of high land in Britain. This resulted in population pressure on land which was still suitable for farming. In the archaeological record, this is reflected in the construction of the first defended hilltop enclosures, or 'hillforts', and the proliferation of bronze weaponry - swords and spears.

Iron Age About 700 BC to 50 AD

Settlement and Agriculture



Bronze age/Iron age village

During the early Iron Age, the inhabitants of southern Britain became more territorial, with increasing incidence of warfare and other forms of tribal conflict. Large defended enclosures were built on hilltops, some containing settlements, while others were empty and may have been intended to protect cattle and sheep from theft. These enclosures, known as hillforts, are often found outside the areas of planned field systems, in the common grazing lands. They were defended by heavy earthwork banks and massive ditches, some having more than one line of defences and complex entrances. Several examples can be seen in the South Devon AONB, those at Bolt Tail and Blackdown Rings being well-preserved and easy to understand.

Many more smaller enclosures were also found, most of which were probably for stock control. As some of these also had substantial ramparts, the distinction between

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the two is often difficult to define, although hillforts are generally bigger, in better-defended positions. The majority of these smaller enclosures probably contained farmsteads and can date from about 600-100 BC.

Farmsteads of the later Iron Age tended to be square or rectangular with one or two enclosing ditches, a form which continued into the Romano-British period. An excellent example survives near Stoke Gabriel, which was occupied from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD.

Many of the more important forts had large territories associated with them, enclosed by banks, probably for ranching livestock. Their boundaries can still be seen in parts of the landscape today, such as the parish of South Huish, which probably developed from two Iron Age estates, dependent on the hillfort of Burleigh Dolts.

Ritual Activity

Burial traditions changed in the Iron Age, with the increasing veneration of water, a trend which continued into the Roman period. Several sites in Britain have evidence for human burial in rivers or lakes, often accompanied by broken weapons or other artefacts.

Recent discoveries beside the River Thames suggest that in the late Iron Age, bodies were laid out with their gravegoods on sandbanks, where wild animals might eat them and the river would eventually carry them away. Their skulls were often kept, as it would appear that in the late Iron Age, there was a cult surrounding the human head. Human skulls found in the Thames at Battersea, with large quantities of late Iron Age weapons and decorative metalwork were probably deposited there for ritual reasons.

Romano-British About 50 AD - 350 AD

Settlement and Agriculture

Roman civilisation as practised elsewhere in southern Britain was not generally known south-west of Exeter: there is no evidence for military activity, no planned roads or towns. The only known Romanised buildings for which there is evidence in the South Devon AONB may have been connected with Continental trade. Near the beach at Bantham, painted wall plaster was found mingled with debris from a late Roman to post-Roman trading settlement, while Roman tiles were found during excavations on the later site of Totnes Castle.

Thus, apart from occasional evidence for Roman organisation, native settlement and land-use in Cornwall and much of Devon continued unchanged from the Iron Age. In this respect, the region had strong similarities to Scotland and Wales, for which there is evidence of occasional military and commercial contact with the Roman world. Being on the fringes of the Empire, their way of life was largely unchanged.

This argument is supported by the nature of rural settlement, as shown by known archaeological sites. Excavation of native settlements at Stoke Gabriel and Butland near Modbury, have shown that Roman material culture in the form of pottery and jewellery was in circulation, but the form of the settlements remained the same as in the Iron Age, with small sub-rectangular farmstead enclosures containing circular timber huts. Many of these sites are known from cropmarks in the South Hams, notably around Kingsbridge.

Existing prehistoric field systems probably continued in use and pollen analysis shows that cereal production rose during the Romano-British period as a whole. Pastoral agriculture also continued to be practised, existing coaxial field systems such as those on Decklers Cliff near Gara Rock and on Bolt Head probably continuing in use.

A picture of a simple life of mixed arable and stock farming is gained, with occasional small farm sites scattered throughout the countryside, each with a couple of circular huts within a ditched enclosure. These were probably less for defence than for keeping animals from damaging the houses, with their vulnerable wattle and daub or clay bonded stone rubble walls and thatched roofs.

Trade

Roman coins are occasionally found on the fringes of the Empire and seem to have been in general circulation in the first to third centuries AD, although a full cash economy is unlikely to have operated, a mixture of coin transactions and barter being more likely.

Coastal trade with the Continent seems to have been important during the late Iron Age and Romano-British period along the whole coast of South-West England, with several trading sites on level beaches at river mouths. Here, evidence for temporary settlements, imported pottery and occasional evidence for Romanised buildings and associated enclosures have been found.

Several Greek writers between the 5th and 2nd centuries BC refer to the Cassiterides, or Tin Islands, which lay beyond the edge of the known world, and which historians have interpreted as being South-West Britain.

In the 1st century BC, a Roman commentator called Diodorus Siculus mentions an important port called Ictis, apparently an island off the coast, which was used as a port to which merchants from other lands (some sources say Spain) came to trade, exchanging Continental goods for tin. It is not known whether this was an actual place, or a reference to several places, all of which were producing similar goods. This is discussed in more detail in the Romano-British & Dark Age websheet.



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Ritual activity

At present, we know little of religious or burial customs on the fringes of the Empire during the Romano-British period, although it seems likely that the Iron Age veneration of water was continued, as coins and jewellery of this period are occasionally found in valley bottoms.

Place-name evidence for the Crediton area of mid-Devon suggests that a sacred wood or forested area was here, the place-name Nemeton, a Celtic word meaning 'sacred place' and similar to the latin word Nemus, meaning wood or grove. Burials are unknown from this period, but again may have followed Iron Age practice.

Summary

Evidence for certain parts of our remote past is sketchy, and always will be.

It is very difficult for a landscape archaeologist to work on a period where there are few surviving placenames and only a sketchy picture of land boundaries and settlement distribution. Intuition and an understanding of natural landscape formation processes is therefore of considerable importance in understanding how a locality may have appeared more than 1700 years ago.

The results cannot have the accuracy of later periods then, where placename and documentary evidence provides sufficient evidence for precision in the decipherment of the landscape.

Author

This factsheet was written by archaeologist Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA in 2005. It is one of a series of information sheets published by the South Devon AONB Unit. The material may be copied for private and non-commercial use provided the source is acknowledged.

Archaeological dig at Mount Folly Farm, Bigbury.



Decklers Cliff



Ancient field boundary, Soar.

