
The Identification of a Later Bronze Age Hoard at Barway, and Consideration of the Association between Metalwork and Causeways

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A metalwork hoard dated to the Wilburton phase of the later Bronze Age, found at Barway close to the Isle of Ely in the Cambridgeshire Fens, is reported. Consideration of the hoard, in the context of later prehistoric hoarding in the local landscape, reveals that particular sorts of artefact were associated with particular places in the landscape. In particular a strong association between later Bronze Age hoards and causeways connecting the Isle of Ely to the outside world is identified, and an interpretation suggested. This study demonstrates the potential of a detailed contextual approach for providing a more nuanced understanding of later Bronze Age metalwork deposition that moves away from a simplistic wet-dry dichotomy.

Introduction

In recent years archaeologists have increasingly come to accept that prehistoric peoples deliberately deposited items in the ground, often in a structured way. This practice, known as hoarding, was particularly prevalent in the later Bronze Age of Britain and Ireland when metal artefacts ranging from a pair of objects to dozens or even hundred of items were placed in the ground. The traditional division of hoards between those placed in watery places, rivers, bogs and meres, and those buried on dry land, interprets the former as ritual offerings and the latter as either the metal-smith's raw material or as an individual's cache hidden for security, is over simplistic. Over the last 15 years a body of literature has developed the idea that different types of water played host to particular types of deposits. Perhaps the most intriguing of these is the suggestion that causeways were the focus of repeated deposits of metalwork. A new opportunity to develop this idea arose following the discovery of a hoard of later Bronze Age (c. 1400–700 BC) metalwork alongside the prehistoric causeway that connected the island of Ely to the mainland of Cambridgeshire. The aims of this paper are twofold: to present supporting evidence for this suggestion in the form of new evidence for metalwork deposition along the causeway between Little Thetford and Barway (Fordy), and then to offer an interpretation which helps us to understand this behaviour.

Background

In the summer of 2011 the writer was introduced to Phillip Randall by his colleague Kate Morrison-Ayres. She, having already met him, identified that his collection of artefacts and supporting documentation together comprised an important archaeological resource. The Randalls had for several generations been farmers and landowners of arable land to the east of the River Great Ouse at Barway, until recently when the family farm was sold. Over a period of almost a hundred years the family had amassed a large collection of later Bronze Age metalwork, the majority of which had come from a single field. It is impossible to say with certainty precisely how many artefacts and of what type came from their farm. Difficulty stems from the fact that the objects have never been in one place at any one time. Instead the finds have been divided between Mr Randall senior and his three sons, various farm workers who ploughed the land, and an unknown number of 'nighthawks' who illegally metal detected on the land. Matters are complicated further by the fact that the oldest brother whose collection was the largest and contained the 'choicest' pieces, emigrated to Australia some years ago taking his collection with him.

Thanks to Phillip Randall it has nonetheless been possible to make progress in reconstructing the contents of the hoard. Over a period of approximately thirty years he meticulously marked on a detailed Ordnance Survey map the precise location of each of the artefacts that he found (Fig 1 & Plate 1), many of which he donated to the museum in Ely. It is thanks to his foresight that it has been possible to begin to understand something of the depositional practices of the later Bronze Age.

The Finds

Although we will never know the precise number and types of finds we do have detailed records for the artefacts found by Phillip Randall, which serves as a sample of the range of objects in the original hoard.

The items collected by him were: nine socketed



Figure 2. The Barway hoard showing some of the objects found by Phillip Randall. From left to right, top row, chisel, remains of a spear socket, socketed axe. Bottom row, left to right, rapier, two fragments of blade, two dagger fragments, socketed axe. Photo: Steven Stanley Jugg.

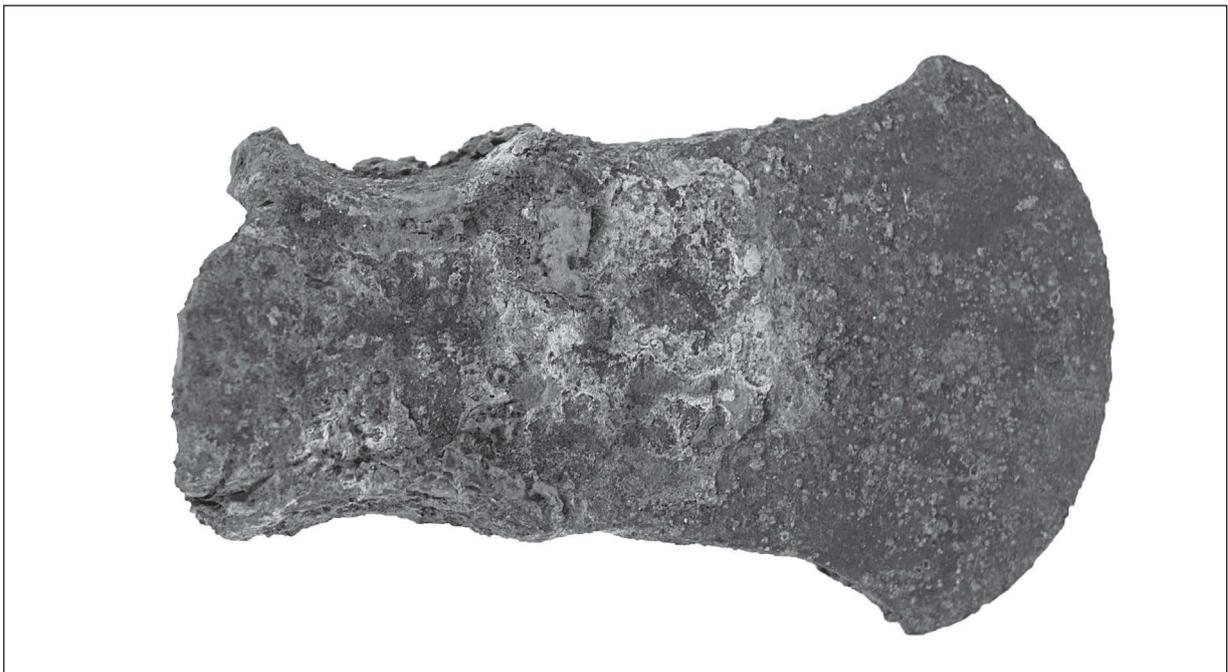


Figure 3. Socketed axe of Ulleskelf type, length 101mm, width across the blade 46mm, note the distinctive waisted shape. Photo: Steven Stanley Jugg.

ing climate are supported by the local environmental evidence. Before drainage, the Isle of Ely, was a true island emerging from the surrounding marsh land (Fig 5). Like other small islands and islets in the archipelago, such as Littleport to the north, Coveney to the west and Stuntney to the east, these were higher than the prevailing marshes and remained relatively safe from flooding, thus providing safe environments in which to settle, with a close proximity to the fens

where many resources could be exploited for food and building materials (French 2000).

Using all the available evidence it has been possible to discern a distinct island flavour to metalwork deposits in Ely. Moving beyond simplistic observations about the presence of large hoards, and the presence or absence of certain weapon types, such as swords, it has been possible to identify particular local associations between certain types of deposits

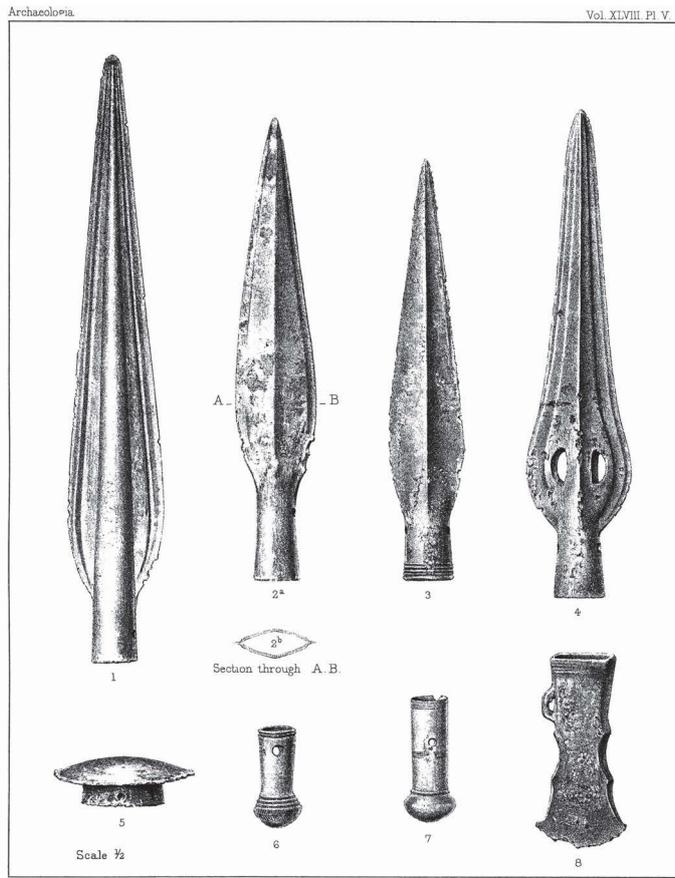


Figure 4. Illustration of the Wilburton hoard showing the Ulleskelf type of socketed axe, bottom right hand corner.

and particular locations, such as prehistoric causeways, that point to the inhabited insular identity.

During the early Bronze Age there would have been many active watercourses, tributaries of the River Great Ouse, creating a dendritic pattern of twisting streams and rivers across the Fens, but as the climate deteriorated later in the Bronze Age the whole area became peat covered (Hall 1996, 58), burying the roddons and spreading up the landward edges of the Isle. Only the major drainage channels of the River Great Ouse survived. It is against this background that we need to understand the construction and maintenance of the causeways that connected the Isle of Ely to 'mainland' Cambridgeshire.

The Causeway

The causeway, which ran in a direct line for at least 800m between Barway (Fordy) and Little Thetford, was discovered in 1932, by Phillip Randall's father when ploughing one of his fields. He unearthed a series of timber piles, which had been sharpened to a point at one end to assist when they had been driven into the soft clay that underlies the peat fen. Randall uprooted the posts, inverted them, and then replaced them in their original holes so as to leave them standing upright, thus the original line of the causeway can clearly be seen (Fig 6)

The causeway is located at one of the narrowest crossing points of the River Great Ouse, indicated by the place names Fordy and Thetford, and was visited by Lethbridge and Fowler who undertook a small test excavation (Lethbridge 1935, 86–89). The causeway was found to have been constructed of oak posts supporting brushwood, and was 9m wide and 800m in length. Along with a bronze armlet were sherds of later Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury type pottery, much of which had been disturbed by plough action. Phillip Randall also reported finding small pieces of coarse Deverel-Rimbury type pottery in the same area. It is in the same field, to either side of the causeway, that Phillip Randall has found his metalwork. Another find from the area was a two-pronged flesh-hook found at Little Thetford, which would have been used to hook large joints of meat out of the cauldrons in which it was cooked. This object was also dated to the Wilburton Phase of the Late Bronze Age c. 1100–800 BC (Bowman and Needham, 2007, 81).

Hoards

The Barway hoard is one of several later Bronze Age hoards recovered from the fen edge (Fig 5). A Late Bronze Age hoard found in the fen near Stuntney, along the causeway that joins it to the Isle of Ely, in c. 1939 was first discovered by ploughing and then

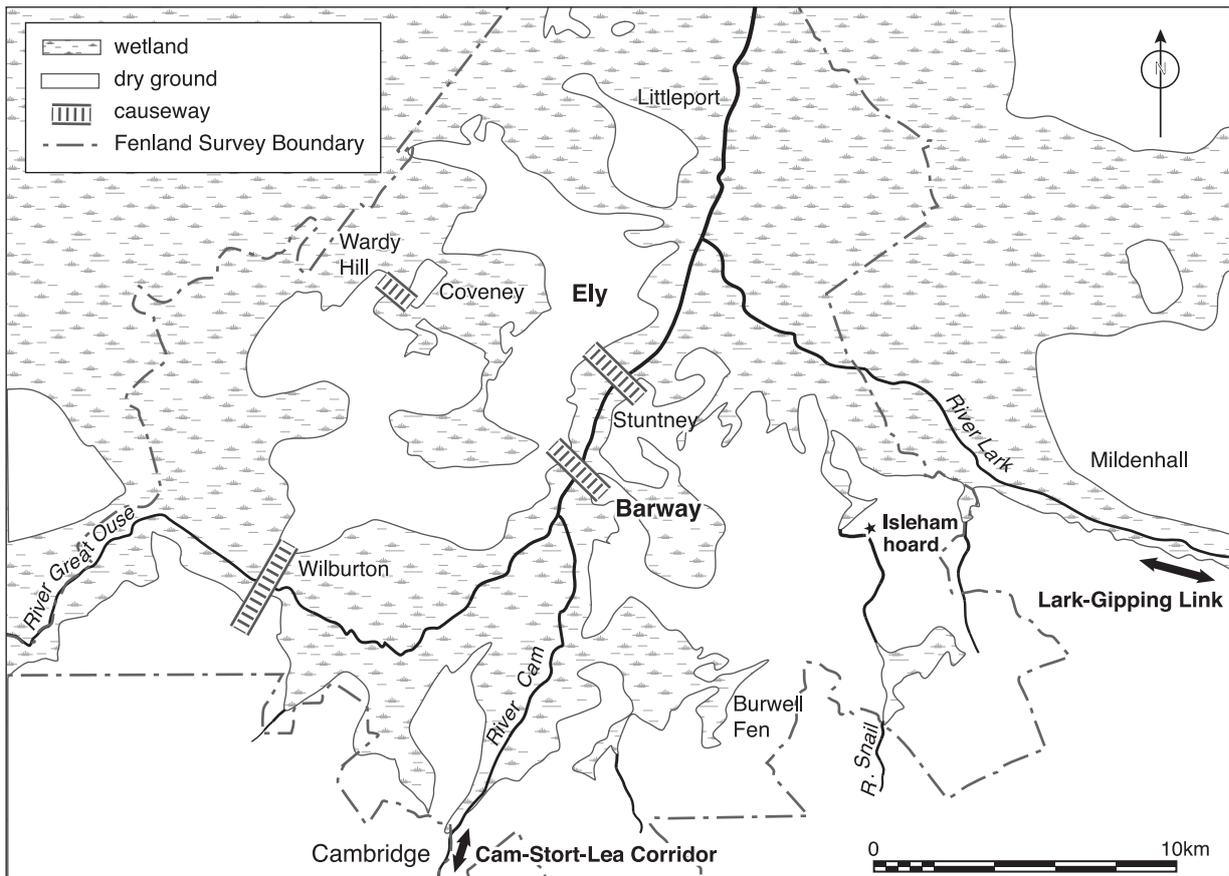


Figure 5. Map of the Isle of Ely showing the location of the causeways mentioned in the text.



Figure 6. Contemporary photograph c. 1932 of the inverted posts showing the line of the causeway. Note the pointed ends to the upturned oak piles. Photo: courtesy of Phillip Randall.

later excavated. There were over 80 objects in a cylindrical wooden tub made in two parts. Among the artefacts were three looped palstaves, socketed axes, a socketed gouge, sword fragments and ingot cakes. The typology of the implements indicate a date late in the Wilburton phase of the later Bronze Age (Clark and Godwin 1940, Brown and Blin-Stoyle 1959, Trump 1962).

Further south lies Wilburton, which is well known for its hoards of later Bronze Age metalwork. The first was discovered in Grunty Fen in 1844 in an area used by the poor for digging turf. At about a metre depth three looped axes, known as 'celts', were found and 0.3m below them a fine gold torc made of a twisted 'rod' coiled into a helix (von Hugel 1887, Taylor 1980). The metalwork is dated to the Middle Bronze Age (Brown and Blin-Stoyle 1959, 66). Another hoard, sometimes described as a founder's hoard or metal-smith's stock, was discovered in 1882. The site, occupying an area of 1.8m by 0.9m, was found in *c.* 0.7m of peat lying on clay. It contained 163 pieces that included 115 spearheads, of which 87 were complete and 28 broken; there were also one looped palstave, two socketed axes, swords, and scabbard ends (Evans 1885). Founders' hoards were defined by Evans as 'the stock-in-trade of some bronze-founder of ancient times, as they comprise worn out and broken tools and weapons, lumps of rough metal, and even moulds in the accumulation of bronze which was destined to be recast' (Evans 1881, 457).

The Wilburton hoards lend their name to the Wilburton Phase of the Bronze Age dated between 1150 and 1000 BC. Metalwork of this period is highly innovative and contains a range of new elaborate types, including extremely long and thin cast tongue chapes, hollow-bladed spearheads, cauldrons and varied accoutrements, such as the chisel found in the Barway hoard (Bowman and Needham, 2007, 96). Another radical innovation of the Wilburton smiths was their extensive use of lead as an additive to bronze. This produced alloy compositions contrasting completely with the preceding Penard phase of metallurgy, and at times with rather excessive proportions of lead rendering objects too soft to be effective cutting implements.

Found by a farmer in December 1959 when ploughing, the Isleham hoard is the largest in Britain with *c.* 6,500 bronze pieces, of which 2,500 items are from weapons and martial equipment, and 2,600 are ingots (Britton 1960; Bowman and Needham, 2007). Much of the material is similar to that in the Barway, Stuntney and Wilburton hoards, and included broken swords, socketed axes, palstaves, double-edged knives, decorated fittings and fragments of bronze vessels. This led to an interpretation of the hoard as having belonged to a founder or smith (Britton 1960, Malim 2010), much like the Wilburton hoard (above), a view supported by the presence of casting jets and pieces of moulds, although there was no evidence of casting or working on the site. A study of pollen from the site shows that the Late Bronze Age landscape was relatively clear of woodland, and was used for pasture

and arable agriculture (Malim 2010, 120). Other material included horse harness fittings and tools, as well as the cauldron and flesh-hook fragments already discussed.

The hoard had been placed in a very large ceramic Post-Deverel-Rimbury (PDR) Plainware pot dug into a pit within a Bronze Age ditch on the edge of the fen next to a rectangular house (Malim 2010, 73). This type of pottery is dated to between *c.* 1150 and 800 BC and fits well with typological analysis of the metalwork and radiocarbon dating of the site, which suggests that it is of Wilburton type and dated between 1150 and 1000 BC. Analysis of the artefacts' metallurgy shows much is of continental origin, a characteristic of Wilburton hoards, with Central Europe the probable source (Malim 2010, 74).

In addition to these, two more contemporary hoards lie within 10 km of Barway, one with broken-up weapons from Wicken Fen, and the other a pair of sheet-bronze shields from Coveney Fen (Yates and Bradley 2010, 405–415). Further away, on the western fen edge another Wilburton stage hoard has been excavated at Bradley Fen, near Peterborough (Bowman and Needham 2007, 96). Taken together these hoards represent an unrivalled concentration of Wilburton stage metalwork incorporating the most prestigious of objects and much weaponry.

Discussion

Much of the literature on later Bronze Age metalwork in the area focuses on the classification of different artefact types, and their distribution and comparison with finds from elsewhere in northern Europe. There has been surprisingly little detailed analysis of the local landscape environment of the deposits, which forms the focus of this study. Observations usually differentiate between items deposited in watery places, rivers, meres and bogs, and those deposited on dry land. The former being interpreted as ritual offerings and the latter as either 'founders' hoards', that is, as raw material to be melted down in a metal worker's foundry, or as valuables lost or hidden in time of crisis. Such interpretations are over simplistic.

Following similar work elsewhere, in Ireland (Needham 1989), the Netherlands (Fontijn 2003), and in the Fens (Yates and Bradley 2010), consideration of the Barway and other hoards reveals that particular sorts of artefact were associated with particular places in the landscape, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of metalwork deposition that moves away from a simplistic wet-dry dichotomy.

In the writer's opinion the most intriguing pattern of deposition is that of concentrations of finds alongside causeways connecting different parts of the island of Ely to each other and to the mainland. The identification of a hoard associated with the causeway leading from Little Thetford to Barway adds to pre-existing knowledge of deposits associated with causeways, including the hoard at Stuntney, which lies on the route that to this day leads to Ely. Similar

collections of metalwork are associated with Bronze and Iron Age causeways elsewhere in Britain and northern Europe. This observation suggests that this may be a widespread pattern of behaviour (Field and Parker-Pearson 2003: 179–88).

The writer's interpretation is that the Fens around the Isle of Ely represented a boundary between the Isle and the outside world, and an important aspect of these carefully selected hoard locations is that they all lie on points where that boundary is transgressed. In addition to those placed directly alongside causeways I note that Wilburton, the site of two hoards, lies on the isthmus that still connects the Isle with the Cambridge mainland, while similarly, the Isleham hoard lies on a route from Ely, via Quanea, that passes via the rivers Lark and Gipping to the east coast and a sea route to the continent (Malim 2010, 125).

The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1994) has described how the transgression of boundaries is both powerful and dangerous. As such the Fens, and in particular, crossing places may have been thought of as liminal locations, which would account for the care taken in choosing the places where deposits were made. For example, that of Isleham was only 5m from the fen edge and placed in a boundary ditch separating the domestic cultivated world of the house from the natural and uncultivated world of the fen. Douglas emphasised that the transgression of such boundaries is often circumscribed and should be maintained with ritual action. Although impossible to prove, it might not be too far fetched to believe that deposition of the hoards was related to a belief in an 'under-world'. Such a belief is widespread among many religions (Bradley 2000, 28–32). If such a world was thought to exist, then the peat bogs of the Fens might have been seen as the openings and gaps in the land by which to communicate with it. For the participants deposition represented a final loss, and whether or not those making the deposit believed in the notion of sacrifice to the supernatural or not, the different characteristics of the various types of wetland contributed to the dramatic impact of the act of deposition at Stuntney, Wilburton, Coveney and Barway–Little Thetford: the total disappearance of these objects under the black liminal waters of the Fens.

Conclusion

In the long term, the most fundamental development that takes place in the landscape during the Late Neolithic to Early Iron Age seems to be the formation of a structured cultural landscape (Fokkens 1999). Throughout the Bronze Age, the landscape became increasingly characterised by signs of the tangible, ancestral past. Barrows represented the most important and lasting intentional act of the inhabitants to shape their landscape, but to the inhabitants the ancestral nature of the landscape also came to the fore in other signs of former occupation. In the course of the Bronze Age relocating a farmstead was less a

matter of entering areas that were not yet marked by previous phases of habitation, cultivation and burial, and more a matter of returning to named places with historical ancestral meaning.

The deposition of metalwork in both watery and dry places intensified throughout the later Bronze Age, a practice found throughout northern Europe at this time (Bradley 1990). It is suggested that the significance of different types of locations, especially different watery ones, is based on widely shared religious beliefs. Whatever their precise religious motivations may have been, the presence of flowing water in rivers and still water in bogs and meres may have been qualities that gave significance to deposits (Richards 1996, 317). The qualities for which different types of water were valued may be various: purity, pollution, regeneration, fertility (Douglas 1994, 162), and the finer details of this for the prehistoric people of Ely may be inaccessible to archaeologists. What archaeology does show is that different types of watery environment were imbued with different elemental significance. This led to the differential selection of locations for the deposition of single finds and hoards, with particular places in the landscape, especially causeways, locations of intensive deposition.

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