

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Later Bronze and Iron Age (First Millennium BC) in Leicestershire and Rutland

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Introduction

Leicestershire and Rutland is a lowland landscape characterised by a covering of glacial drift with, to the east, a limestone escarpment - the Jurassic ridge - and, to the west, Pre-Cambrian uplands with coal measures and Mercia Mudstone. Sixty per cent of the area has a clay substrata. The landscape is well dissected and separated by rivers and many tributary streams, demarcated by the Trent to the northwest, the Avon to the southwest and the Welland to the southeast while the south-north flowing Soar neatly divides the area into two. It is an agriculturally rich area, historically famous for its sheep farming and still possessing some of the finest pasture in Britain. The area is essentially plough-zone with consequent erosion although it has some well preserved relict medieval landscapes and some potential for localised alluvial and colluvial burial and wetland areas.

In assessing the resource for the Later Bronze Age - Iron Age (and other periods) it must be remembered that systematic survey has only been undertaken in a few areas and consideration of SMRIs in isolation will inevitably produce inherent biases (Mills 1985). Extrapolation and model building from well surveyed areas will, arguably, be a better basis for resource assessment than using SMR generated distribution maps alone.

The following is based on details from the Leicestershire and Rutland SMR and three area surveys (Clay 1996). Environmental evidence has been supplied by Angela Monckton. The area has seen relatively little research for these periods with few published accounts (Liddle 1982; Clay 1989). We are fortunate in the extent of field survey generated by Pete Liddle's Community Archaeology groups over the past twenty years, prior to which we largely faced a blank sheet traditionally thought of as an area of little prehistoric settlement (Hoskins 1957). More recent survey has shown that this was more a result of difficulties in visibility (especially cropmarks), lack of fieldwork and pre-conceptions rather than a genuine lack of an archaeological resource.

For the purpose of this paper the following period divisions have been used.

Later Bronze Age - Earlier Iron Age c. 1000BC-400BC
Later Iron Age - 400BC - c. AD50

Although there are few pollen profiles for the two counties there is a developing database of environmental information with insect and plant macrofossils providing important land-use data which it is hoped will be incorporated into the SMR in the future (Monckton 1995).

The quantity and quality of information for Leicestershire and Rutland for the 1st millennium BC is similar to that for much of the rest of lowland England but does seem to show some characteristics of its own. Arguably the Iron Age, more than any other period, has been a beneficiary of the increase in fieldwork resulting from PPG16. For Leicestershire and Rutland since 1990, PPG16 led surveys and evaluations have located 20 previously unknown Iron Age sites, mainly on boulder clay substrata, and far larger scale fieldwork has been undertaken than had previously been possible (eg Hamilton; S Foreman pers comm.; Normanton le Heath; Thorpe et al 1994; Wanlip; Beamish 1998). A major problem for the 1st millennium BC, however is in establishing tighter date ranges for undiagnostic pottery styles.

The SMR for Leicestershire and Rutland records 256 possible occupation sites dating from the 1st millennium BC including 150 cropmark sites and eight earthworks (four of which are hillforts). More known sites are still to be added, however, including one discovered last week.

Later Bronze Age - Earlier Iron Age c.1000-- 400BC

The Later Bronze Age/Earlier Iron Age is elusive in the two counties. The identification of settlement of this period is often reliant on diagnostic ceramic material which has poor survival qualities within surface scatters (Jackson and Denham forthcoming). Early 1st millennium BC sites are difficult to differentiate from those of the later 1st millennium BC and some of the cropmark enclosures identified and believed to be of Later Iron Age date may have origins in the Later Bronze Age/Earlier Iron Age.

Later Bronze Age/Earlier Iron Age pottery is identifiable from 16 sites which can perhaps be interpreted as indicators of settlements. Late Bronze Age circular structures are present from Glen Parva, Kirby Muxloe and Ridlington while hilltop occupation is suggested at Mountsorrel (Budden Wood), and possibly Beacon Hill, Woodhouse Eaves. Earlier Iron Age origins are suggested for the two developed hillforts at Breedon on the Hill and Burrough Hill. (Wacher 1964; 1977). From such a small sample trends are difficult to identify, however, 60% are from clay substrata, the average altitude is slightly higher than that for the Earlier Bronze Age (105.75m O.D) and is slightly further away from water sources. More exploitation of the interfluves might be inferred.

One settlement dating from the end of the Earlier Iron Age has been excavated at Wanlip (Beamish 1998). Here an extensive programme of C14 and thermoluminescence dating was attempted to try and address the dating problem. A settlement in use between 450 and 350 BC can be suggested with circular, 4-post and 2-post structures with a small sub-rectangular enclosure. Of note is the settlement evidence situated outside the enclosure, a phenomenon commonly noted elsewhere and having implications for designing mitigation strategies. One of its aims of the dating programme was to provide tighter dating for East Midlands Scored Wares (Elsdon 1992), the dominant pottery style in the second half of the millennium in the area, and it has actually managed to lengthen its date range (Marsden 1998).

Traditionally this period is one of climatic deterioration although its impact on this part of central England is uncertain. Palynological data from Croft (Rosseff et al forthcoming), Hemington, Kirby Muxloe (Brown forthcoming) and Oakham (J. Greig pers comm) show an increase in clearance and a predominance of grassland from the Later Bronze Age onwards. Charred grains are present in Later Bronze Age contexts at Kirby Muxloe including barley, bread wheat, spelt and emmer (Monckton 1995 and forthcoming). Spelt, emmer, bread wheat and barley was recovered in small quantities from the site at Wanlip (Monckton 1998).

Long distance boundary systems appear to start in the Later Bronze Age including pit alignments (56) and double and triple ditch systems (14). Pit clusters serving as markers such as those identified by Taylor (1996) in Northamptonshire might also be present at Lockington and Castle Donington in the Trent valley. A triple ditch system sampled at Ketton showed evidence of primary filling during the Earlier Iron Age but with continued use into the Later Iron Age (Mackie 1993).

Ceremonial and burial sites are rare for this period and some flat burial cemeteries may run into the 1st millennium BC. Evidence of ritual deposition can be interpreted from the discovery of two skulls within a palaeochannel deposit at Birstall, one of which has been dated to 990-830 CAL BC (Ripper 1997). Cut marks on the atlas vertebra may indicate decapitation before deposition either in the river or surrounding marsh. These remains were close to a burnt mound and timber bridge although their association is unclear at present. A rectangular mortuary building overlying a cremation burial and special deposition of artefact groups was located at Wanlip (Beamish 1998) perhaps indicating the trend towards ritual activity being incorporated into domestic settlements.

Metalwork is present in 23 locations including seven hoards. Metalworking evidence is present at Beacon Hill, Woodhouse Eaves while parallels with central and eastern European metalwork can be found in the Welby hoard (Powell 1948). Earlier Iron Age Hallstatt type brooches are known from Barrow on Soar and Hinckley.

Later Iron Age c. 400BC - AD50

The Later Iron Age sees far more evidence for settlement and land-use. Settlement evidence can be interpreted from cropmark data (Pickering and Hartley 1985; Hartley 1989), together with earthwork, artefact scatter (querns and pottery) and excavated data. The average height above sea level is slightly

lower than that in the Later Bronze Age/Earlier Iron Age at 103m O.D perhaps reflecting a movement onto the lower floodplain areas. There is again a preference for a south-facing aspect while the average distance to water is 0.4km. From analysis of well surveyed areas including Medbourne, Oakham and Misterton (Clay 1996) a density of one late Iron Age site per 1.8-2 sq km can be extrapolated.

The settlements of this period can be divided into different types from farmsteads to hillforts with extensive lowland settlements increasingly becoming evident. Farmsteads are both unenclosed and enclosed the latter usually showing evidence of having unenclosed origins when excavated (e.g Clay 1992). The enclosures come in circular, D- shaped and sub-rectangular forms and some have survived as earthworks (Liddle 1982, 22). Although some of these may be of Roman date excavated examples seem invariably to have some evidence of late Iron Age origins.

The larger settlements, even when allowing for settlement shift, would have supported several family groups. An example of a larger agglomerated lowland settlement might be interpreted from Lockington where geophysical survey and trial trenching has shown settlement and field systems, originally identified from aerial reconnaissance by J.K.St Joseph (and scheduled along with a juxtaposed a Roman Villa), to extend over a 7 ha. area (Clay 1985a; S.Ripper pers comm). Finds distribution at Leicester suggests a large lowland settlement covering c. 8 ha. and includes imported pottery, metalwork and possible evidence of coin manufacture (Clay 1985b; Clay and Pollard 1994). A smaller defended subrectangular earthwork covering c. 3 ha. previously thought to be Roman camp at Ratby Bury has produced Later Iron Age material (Liddle 1982).

Hillforts are known from Beacon Hill, Breedon on the Hill, Burrough Hill with other possibilities at Bringhurst, Life Hill, Ridlington and Robin a Tiptoe. Breedon has been partially excavated by John Wacher (1977) and has early/middle Iron Age origins. Limited excavation around the entrance to Burrough Hill in the 1960s showed continued occupation into the Iron Age (Liddle 1982).

Palynological evidence from Croft (Rosseff et al forthcoming), Kirby Muxloe (Brown forthcoming), and Oakham (J Greig pers. comm.) and land snail faunal evidence from Tixover (Monckton forthcoming) indicates the continuation of extensive clearance and the dominance of grassland environments during the later first millennium BC.

Excavations on the clayland sites at Enderby (Clay 1992; Meek 1996) show evidence for mixed economies during the late Iron Age perhaps with a greater emphasis on a pastoral based economy with sheep and cattle dominant. A similar picture of a mainly pastoral economy is evident from excavations of an extensive clayland settlement at Hamilton, with twelve circular structures (S.Foreman pers comm.) and of a clothes line enclosure of Later Iron Age date on the marlstone rock bed at Tixover in Rutland (Beamish 1992). Cereals are consistently present from excavated sites although concentrations, despite extensive sampling, are low. Whether this reflects survival, past usage or a lower emphasis on cereal farming is unclear (Monckton 1995, 35). Spelt, barley and bread wheat type cereals are the most common. Grain rich deposits of processed cereals are known from Leicester (Rushy Mead; Pollard 1996) and Hamilton.

Circular buildings are common from various Later Iron Age sites including Breedon, Enderby, Hamilton, Mountsorrel, Normanton le Heath, Tixover and Leicester. A pattern of paired circular buildings (living/kitchen areas) can be identified at Enderby (Clay 1992; Meek 1996). Rectangular buildings are also known from Normanton le Heath and Leicester (Thorpe et al 1994; Clay 1985b). Four post and two post structures, originating in the Earlier Iron Age are very common.

Iron Age cremations are known from Enderby (Meek 1996) and Market Harborough while crouched burials are present at Leicester. Disarticulated human bones in Later Iron Age contexts are known from Leicester (Clay 1985b) and Tixover (Beamish 1992).

Iron Age coins are known from 41 sites with concentrations at Leicester and Thistleton.

Trade and Industry

Small scale iron working (smelting and smithing) is known from several sites although iron artefacts are conspicuously absent. Local trade of pottery might be inferred from different fabrics suggesting movement of raw materials or finished items from Charnwood Forest and the eastern Jurassic ridge to the Leicester area. The most interesting trading links come from Leicester itself where pre-Roman

imported pottery from Gaul, Italy and Spain is present including Arretine ware, Gallo-Belgic butt beakers and Terra Rubra/Terra Nigra ware. Imported pre-Roman brooches (making up 30% of all bow brooches from Leicester; D. Macreth pers. comm.) are also present together with fragments of flan trays conventionally thought to indicate coin manufacture. The material would suggest a high status settlement at Leicester by the Roman conquest (Clay 1985b) and it was to become the Civitas Capital during the Roman occupation.

Later Iron Age metalwork, although not abundant, is known from 29 sites with, of note, a scabbard mouth from Normanton le Heath and axle boss from Leicester. Metalworking moulds have also been found at Breedon on the Hill (Wacher 1977) and Ketton (Mackie 1993).

Conclusion

In contrast to the previous periods we now have considerable data to work on and various research questions can be examined. However, dating remains a major problem in the Iron Age. Calibration of C14 dates do present difficulties and is often used as an explanation for their not being included in research designs for PPG16 work. However there is an argument for having more C14 and thermoluminescence dating undertaken for sites of this period as was attempted at Wanlip with some success (Beamish 1998).

One of the key questions is of over the larger agglomerated settlements. Are they basically the same as hillforts without the hills or the defences? Were other means of defence used which are no longer visible? Are they more akin to medieval villages? Are we looking at a landscape of farmsteads and villages having shared outfield pasture land with their own small scale subsistence cereal production nearer to the settlements? Bearing in mind the quantity of trees needed for Iron Age structures (Reynolds 1982) how was the woodland managed/owned? Perhaps managed woodland formed part of the infield areas around the settlements.

Perhaps more tangible research questions can be addressed of the structural and artefactual evidence. Although often eroded or plough damaged there is still some potential for interpreting intra site spatial patterning and structural information (e.g Beamish 1998). More can be made of geophysical and phosphate surveys to interpret land use in addition to being prospection tools. While much attention has been paid to pottery studies another ongoing research question is in identifying continuity of flint working into the 1st millennium BC (Young and O'Sullivan 1992; Cooper and Humphrey 1998).

As J D Hill has suggested middle Iron Age should perhaps be thought of as a cultural rather than a chronological term. In Leicestershire and Rutland there appear to be relatively insular self sufficient groups perhaps sharing some resources. By the late 1st century BC there are a few larger settlements, at least one of which was producing coins, having trading contacts with the continent, supporting larger populations and serving as local points of contact and trade. However study of the hinterland Later Iron Age settlements around Leicester during the same period has shown a different culture- no imported pottery, virtually no metalwork and just one coin (from Hamilton).

Where were the centres of Corieltauvian control? Are Old Sleaford and Leicester still the main contenders? Or should we be looking at other settlements that developed into Roman small towns, for example Medbourne or Thistleton (May 1980; Liddle 1994). How did the tribe function? Are the dual names on coins an indication of a loose federation of alliances rather than a strong centralised control. Was the 'Corieltauvi' a veneer of trading contact, metalwork, coins and larger settlement which had little impact on the subsistence farming of most of the population? In fact a bit like the Roman occupation?

This brings us on to consider what happened in the middle of the 1st century AD. While there was no evidence of continuity of occupation at Hamilton and Enderby most sites have transitional styles of pottery, some showing evidence of continued occupation into the 2nd century and beyond. Study of sites which continued into the 1st/2nd century AD and those which abruptly ended around AD 50 may help to show what factors enabled a settlement to continue and what saw their demise. Are we seeing settlements dying through economic decline, military repression or the beginnings of a planned landscape? I am sure what is euphemistically called Romanisation will be discussed further in the next seminar.

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1st millennium BC Leicestershire and Rutland - Key areas

1st millennium BC landscapes

Breedon hinterland
Burrough Hill hinterland
Leicester hinterland
Swift Valley
Middle Welland (Medbourne)
Rutland Limestones (Oakham/Ridlington/Tixover)
Trent-Derwent-Soar confluences (Castle Donington)
Wreake Valley

Later Bronze Age Settlements

Bardon Hill
Barkby Thorpe
Glenfield
Glen Parva
Kirby Muxloe
Ridlington

Later Bronze Age Hoards

Beacon Hill
Cottesmore
Welby

Earlier Iron Age Hillforts

Breedon on the Hill
Burrough Hill

Earlier Iron Age Settlements

Oakham, Stamford Road
Ridlington
Wanlip

Earlier Iron Age Burials/Special deposition

Birstall
Wanlip

Later Iron Age Hillforts

Breedon on the Hill
Burrough Hill

Later Iron Age 'Larger' settlements

Hamilton
Leicester
Lockington
Normanton le Heath
Ratby Bury

Later Iron Age 'Smaller' settlements

Bardon
Belton
Enderby

Kirby Muxloe
Oakham, Stamford Road
Ridlington
Thurlaston
Thorpe Arnold
Tixover

Later Iron Age Burials

Leicester (Blackfriars)
Leicester (Rushy Mead)
Enderby
Market Harborough