

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Later Bronze and Iron Ages (The First Millennium BC) In Derbyshire

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Introduction

Derbyshire's landscape encompasses dramatic variations in geology, geomorphology and soil types. In the north lie the uplands formed by gritstones in the district of High Peak, and the dissected Carboniferous limestone of the southern High Peak and Derbyshire Dales. The latter is flanked on its eastern side by the gritstone outliers of the East Moors and Stanton Moor. In the north east, the Magnesian limestone of Bolsover district forms a narrow north-south ridge of higher ground. Sandwiched between the gritstone East Moors and the Magnesian limestone lie the complex, lower lying coal measures, running from the South Yorkshire border southwards through North East Derbyshire, Chesterfield, Amber Valley and Erewash. Here they give way to the Triassic marls and loams of South Derbyshire and the Trent Valley, Derby district and the southernmost parts of Derbyshire Dales.

The associated variations of topography, soil type, climatic regimes etc, have had a less than subtle impact upon historic patterns of land use and development. The pronounced differences in the historic distribution and intensity of industrialisation, mineral wealth exploitation, transportation, together with variations in the balance of pastoral versus agrarian activity have all to be suspected as contributing factors to the extreme distributional bias which exists in the current quantitative distribution of known prehistoric archaeology in Derbyshire. The relatively low intensity of erosive development and the essentially pastoral land-use of Derbyshire's upland gritstones and Carboniferous limestone allowed the survival of large numbers of upstanding earthworks of presumed Iron Age date.

The Resource

In the North Derbyshire Archaeological Survey published in 1981, Clive Hart wrote that for the first millennium BC there was such a lack of evidence that there was little point in subdividing the chapter into the geological regions, as he did for other periods. It has to be said that the situation nearly twenty years later is little changed in the north of the county. In the southern part of the county, not dealt with by Hart, the distribution maps, with the exception of the Trent Valley, are equally blank although some recent work is perhaps starting to hint at the presence of late prehistoric sites in areas previously devoid of evidence.

There is a certain difficulty in identifying sites of the first millennium on the SMR, as the term Late Bronze Age is not recognised by the SMR system and we have to rely on searching for entries recorded as being of Iron Age date. Entries on the SMR which are recorded as being Iron Age comprise only 1.1% of the total records, as opposed to 21% for the Neolithic and Bronze Age. While this almost certainly does not fully reflect the amount of evidence from recent excavations in the Trent Valley and RCHME/PPN surveys on the Gritstone moors of the Peak District (eg Barnatt 1986, 87,99; Barnatt, Bevan and Edmonds 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998; Challis 1993; Knight and Howard 1994; Knight and Malone 1997 and 1998). Even with these included the percentage might rise but the general distribution patterns would probably not greatly change. There are needless to say enormous variations in the distribution of sites, with Derbyshire Dales District, which covers 30% of the land area of the county, having 48 % of the records. Even this is misleading as the vast majority of those lie in the up-land part of the District. South Derbyshire District has 18% while comprising only 12% of the area of the county, but again the vast majority of these records fall in the Trent Valley rather than being evenly distributed through the district.

The Peak District

For the Iron Age as well as the earlier periods, upstanding earthworks are the most common form of site but in rather fewer numbers than the ritual monuments of the earlier periods. Hart identified 8 Hillforts and 9 palisaded

East Midlands Archaeological Research Framework: Resource Assessment of 1st Millennium BC Derbyshire enclosures, which he attributed to the first millennium BC (Hart 1981:73-81). A further hillfort was added by Hart and Makepeace at Meadow Place Grange, Youlgreave, which they named Crane's Fort (Hart and Makepeace 1993).

With the exception of Mam Tor there is little dating evidence from any of these sites. Excavations at Ball Cross fort produced pottery suggested to be Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age date but the enclosure on Gardom's Edge is now seen to be of Neolithic date. The known sites tend to have a single bank and ditch with the exception of Castle Naze and, on the Magnesian Limestone, Markland Grips. The larger ones lie above what are likely to have been focal settlements in later prehistory and three of them, Mam Tor, Fin Cop and the possible site of Crane's Fort near Youlgreave, are centred on relatively sheltered basins around the main rivers at the interface of the Gritstone and the limestone plateau (Barnatt and Smith 1997).

Mam Tor is the only hillfort to have been the subject of any substantial attention. The excavations by Coombes and others in the late 1960's demonstrated the evidence of Late Bronze Age settlement on the hilltop in the form of pottery and other artefacts associated with house platforms, but was not able to securely date the construction of the ramparts (Coombs 1977 and Coombs and Thompson 1979). Two C14 dates, recently recalibrated to the period 1700-1000 bc, were obtained but have to be treated with caution given the nature of the samples (Bevan 1999). The find of a socketed axe attributed to the 7th century BC has also been used to support a Late Bronze Age or early Iron Age date. The debate continues to the sequence of activity on Mam Tor, whether the whole site is of Late Bronze Age date or whether the site was reoccupied or continued into the Iron Age when the ramparts were built. The dating of the pottery from Mam Tor is of some importance as it remains a fundamental point of reference for the dating of the first millennium in the county (Guilbert and Vince 1996; Knight 1999; Bevan 1999).

Hart also identified a series of what he called palisaded enclosures, which he compared with sites in Northumberland and West Yorkshire (Hart 1981). Again there is little evidence to date these enclosures, although one, the Holmes, is cut by the Bathamgate Roman road, clearly suggesting a prehistoric date for the site.

Evidence of open sites of the period is equally rare but pottery and metal work of later Iron Age date have come

East Midlands Archaeological Research Framework: Resource Assessment of 1st Millennium BC Derbyshire

from Harborough Rocks and cave and other pottery finds have been made elsewhere in the parish of Brassington (Makepeace 1990; Radley and Radford 1969). Two burials of Iron Age date were found at Winster in 1856 by Bateman, who identified them as Saxon. However, a recent reassessment by Pauline Beswick and Elizabeth Wright have placed the burials firmly in the 2nd century BC- 2nd century AD period (Beswick and Wright 1991). Excavations at a largely Romano-British settlement site at Staden near Buxton have also produced some Iron Age pottery (Makepeace 1989,1995).

The Coal Measures and the Magnesian Limestone

Hart's distribution map of the Iron Age in North Derbyshire has changed little if at all for the area he covered in the North Derbyshire survey. The single major site on the Magnesian Limestone is Markland Grips, a promontary fort with triple ramparts. Excavations by Harry Lane were too limited to provide much information, only two fragments of pottery thought to be of Iron Age date were found along with some Romano-British pottery (Lane 1969). To the north of Bolsover a number of enclosures are recorded such as those in Whitwell Wood although only Roman pottery has so far been found in association with these (Zeffert 1994).

In the last couple of years aerial photos of the Magnesian Limestone Ridge and to a lesser extent the Coal Measures have begun to reveal previously unknown enclosures to the south of Bolsover, which may be of late prehistoric or Romano-British date. Again we have no dating evidence as yet for any of these features but it is heartening that cropmark sites are starting to be spotted in these areas of the county.

Two recent pieces of work have also produced relevant evidence, which should give us hope that we will be able to fill in these apparently unpopulated regions of the county. The first is a site which was referred to in the last seminar on the Neolithic and Bronze Age and is located near Tibshelf adjacent to the M1 (Manning 1995). Here an evaluation on a site of a proposed motorway service station revealed the butt end of a ditch containing pottery described by the excavators as being of Late Bronze Age date with a quernstone and rider. Clearly a better appreciation is needed of the pottery but the fact that such sites exist on the coal measures are important additions to our knowledge of the distribution of sites of the first millennium.

East Midlands Archaeological Research Framework: Resource Assessment of 1st Millennium BC Derbyshire

The second site is at Littlehay Grange, Ockbrook and was excavated by Alan Palfreyman with the Derbyshire Archaeology Society and the Borrowash and Ockbrook Local History Society. The site lies off the Coal Measures on the Mercia Mudstone but I think it relevant to mention here. The main impetus for the excavation was the discovery of a Roman-British period building with stone foundations similar to that found at Carsington reservoir. The building appears to be of 2nd century date but sealed a series of only partially understood ditches, up to a metre deep, dating to the Iron Age. The ditch fills contained mid to late Iron Age pottery as well as a stratified Iron Age coin and one of the ditches appeared to be associated with a timber palisade. Fieldwalking in the parish has revealed evidence of other Romano-British sites which could also have Iron Age antecedents (Southgate 1999:291-2).

Trent Valley

Between the White Peak and the Dove and Trent Valleys evidence of the first Millennium BC is rare, as indeed it is to the south and east of the Trent with the major exception of the recently scheduled hillfort at Borough Hill, Walton on Trent.

In the Trent and Lower Derwent valleys in particular, the evidence is of a very different character and quality. Much of our evidence comes of course from cropmarks, but extensive excavations over the last five years or so in advance of the Derby Southern Bypass and gravel extraction, are rapidly expanding the material available for study. Little of the recent work has yet appeared in print or like the work at Swarkestone Quarry is still underway . The Derbyshire section of the Trent Valley unsurprisingly has its share of enclosures and field systems of the period, such as that excavated by Hazel Wheeler at Willington in 1970 (Wheeler 1979) and more recently the site excavated at Swarkestone by David Knight. A previously unknown enclosure was discovered during evaluations at Chapel Farm Hemmington associated with a much larger enclosure of Romano-British date (Knight and Malone 1997 and 1998). A further class of monuments worthy of note are pit alignments, a number of examples of which are known in the valley from cropmarks and excavation, such as the section discovered during evaluations at Aston Hill (Abbott and Garton 1995) and the ones under investigation at Swarkestone Quarry (Knight and Morris 1997). Dating evidence for these monuments is hard to come by but they are generally attributed to the first millennium BC. If they are territorial boundaries they may indicate a major reorganisation of the landscape in the valley. It is interesting to speculate as to whether the progression from unenclosed to enclosed settlement as indicated by the

East Midlands Archaeological Research Framework: Resource Assessment of 1st Millennium BC Derbyshire excavations at Swarkestone are connected with this process.

With the exception of the types of sites described, records on the SMR dated to the Iron Age are scarce. There are records of one pin and one brooch and a single coin, although there is at least one other from the excavations at Ockbrook. If metal detectorists are finding coins in the county then the information is not coming through to the SMR. In addition there is the shield boss from the Trent near Ratcliffe on Soar which was rediscovered in Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum having been previously misidentified as pieces of horse armour (Watkin, J., Stead, I. and Palmer, S. 1996).

Previous Research Frameworks

As pointed out in the last seminar the priorities identified for North Derbyshire by Courtney and Hart (1977) and the Trent Valley by Wheeler and O'Brien (1977) emphasised the need to study specific known sites, usually those under some form of pressure or threat from development. In the 1980's there was a greater concern with a more thematic approach and in the document produced by Derbyshire Archaeological Advisory Committee (1986) themes such as the 'Transition to Farming', 'The colonisation of marginal land in the second millennium bc' and 'The social and ceremonial life of prehistoric farmers' acknowledged the changes in archaeological thinking to a more general concern for broad research issues affecting whole landscapes. The first millennium bc is largely dealt with in a section entitled 'Late Prehistoric Settlement' and is largely concerned with the excavation of hillforts, a further reflection of the lack of other known sites of the period in the uplands.

Recent and Current Research

One view of the prehistoric settlement in the Peak District of Derbyshire saw a retreat from the upland areas because of climatic deterioration by the first millennium BC and the region being used for pastoralism and seasonal grazing. Hodges, in Wall to Wall History (1991), adopted this model and saw the reoccupation of the White Peak in particular as coming about under the direct encouragement of the Roman Administration in the second century

Various recent pieces of work are causing a review of this interpretation. The excavations at Gardom's Edge by Sheffield University and the Peak National Park on the field systems and house sites previously assumed to be Early Bronze Age, have produced a rich artefact collection now seen to be of Late Bronze Age and possibly Early Iron Age date (Barnatt, Bevan and Edmonds 1995,1996,1997). There is now a need for a reassessment of the pottery from Mam Tor, in the light of the finds from Gardom's Edge and the review of finds from Swine Sty, another settlement site on the East Moors excavated by the Hunter Archaeological Society (Garton and Beswick in prep). It is clearly essential to clarify the chronological development of pottery in the area and to relate it to the wider sequence in the East Midlands (Knight forthcoming).

Environmental samples recently taken from mires and prehistoric boundaries on the East Moors by Debbie Long as part of her work towards her Phd, seem to confirm Iron Age activity on the moors (Long 1994, Long in prep and Long, Chambers and Barnatt forthcoming). Samples from Stoke Flat indicate arable activity associated with the field system during the first millennium BC. A core with c14 dates from Leash Fen, close to the field systems on Gardom's Edge, shows mixed arable and pastoral activity possibly situated in areas separated by woodland beginning in the second and continuing through the first millennium BC.

Work by Butcher (Beswick and Merrils 1983), Makepeace (1998) and currently by Bevan (in press), has recorded a large number of earthwork sites, mostly on the limestone plateau, which have been identified as being settlements and field systems of Romano-British date. Extensive excavations at the site at Staden by Makepeace produced some pottery of Iron Age date. Recent geophysical survey at Chee Tor, another of these sites, by T. Allen of the University of Sheffield, has revealed evidence of boundaries underlying and on different alignments to the surviving earthworks (Allen 1998). As Bevan points out the visible earthworks may be the final phase of settlements which had their origins in the first millennium BC (Bevan in press).

Outside of the Peak District the site at Littlehay Grange at Ockbrook, mentioned earlier, also displays this pattern. The Iron Age enclosed site was succeeded in the second century by a stone building but first century pottery has

East Midlands Archaeological Research Framework: Resource Assessment of 1st Millennium BC Derbyshire also come from the site, perhaps suggesting an unbroken sequence of occupation. As already noted there has been extensive work in the Trent Valley, not just in Derbyshire but elsewhere in the region and there is need of a major review of the results of this work. This is essential not just to understand the development of settlement in the first millennium BC within the valley, but the interaction between the uplands and lowlands. The question of the interaction between the Peak District and the Trent Valley and beyond is a theme which runs throughout the study of prehistory in the region, however we should also remember that the Peak District in particular looks north and west as well as east and south and interaction with these areas is clearly of equal importance.

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