

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AGENDAS 2011

2) NEOLITHIC TO BRONZE AGE

Version: 28/1/2012

2. Neolithic to Bronze Age Agenda

This document sets out an archaeological research agenda for Oxford covering the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. The document should be read in conjunction with the period resource assessment for the City (Oxford City Council forthcoming) and the Thames Solent Regional Research Agenda (2010).

2.1 Overview

Oxford is of particular interest for the further investigation and understanding of the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods because it contains an extensive and well-studied landscape of ritual and funerary monuments located on the 1st and 2nd gravel terraces. These Middle Neolithic-Early Bronze Age monument groups can be seen as part of a series of monument landscapes located close to the river confluences of the Upper Thames. Along with the Stanton Harcourt and Dorchester-Radley complexes Oxford forms part of a distinct cluster of landscapes with similar characteristics. Oxford is of particular interest because these other complexes have both been archaeologically investigated, providing comparative information, and have also been extensively quarried, leaving the Oxford complex, despite its urban location, comparatively well preserved. The landscape of barrows and later monuments at Port Meadow are recognised as nationally important.

The Local Authority Area (LAA) presents excellent opportunities to study settlement, mobility and land management patterns in relation to these monument complexes and has excellent potential for well preserved environmental deposits within the River floodplains and for important pollen sequences within local peat deposits.

2.2 Zones of potential

The LAA has been divided into five broad landscape zones based on surface geology and relief (please note the geological areas have been simplified and are not intended to be used as a guide to local geology):

- A** The North Oxford terrace (Summertown-Radley and Wolvercote gravel terrace)
- B** The Thames floodplain and gravel islands
- C** The Cherwell Floodplain (with pockets of gravel)
- D** The alluviated stream valleys of the Corallian Ridge
- E** The Corallian Ridge (limestone, sandstone, mudstone)

Some research questions provide an assessment of potential for the zones listed above; these are referred to in terms of high potential (e.g. the zone has already demonstrated its ability to contribute to this agenda) or general potential based on comparison with similar landscapes.

2.3 Chronology

1. The chance to investigate sites with both late Mesolithic and early Neolithic material present would be of great value, especially where these can be linked to environmental and datable sequences (Bradley 2010).
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E General*
2. The identification and scientific dating of further Neolithic monuments on the 2nd gravel terrace would contribute to the existing data set from a wide range of earlier Neolithic funerary monuments in the region.
 - *Zone potential: A High*
3. Early Bronze Age material is of particular interest because of the need for further refinement of regional early Bronze Age chronologies. There is further scope for dating of flint chronologies and dating residues on ceramics, particularly those of early Bronze Age date.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D General; E General*

4. There is considerable potential for the investigation of peat deposits within the LAA to contribute towards our understanding of climatic and environmental change during these periods, including patterns of woodland clearance and evidence for the development of agriculture. The careful examination of tree bowls may also be fruitful with regard to understanding patterns of tree clearance during these periods.
 - *Zone Potential: A General; B High; C General; D High; E General*

2.4 Landscape and Land use

Neolithic-Early Bronze Age

1. Investigate the process of tree clearance, especially in relation to expanding settlement and monument complexes. The existing evidence implies some element of tree clearance by the Middle Neolithic on the 2nd gravel terrace. Can further examination of either terrace monuments or peat deposits around the LAA produce further information on this process?
 - *Zone potential: A High; B General; C General; D High; E General*
2. Is there direct evidence for cultivation, perhaps below barrows or elsewhere (e.g. the ard marks at the Hamel). Understanding the development and extent of early agriculture is of great interest. When do we see the introduction of agriculture in the LAA?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B High, C General, D General, E General*
3. The balance between cultivation and herding regimes during this period is of great interest in terms of understanding developing patterns of settlement, mobility and landscape utilisation. Can patterns of land use between different geological and environmental zones be identified?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
4. There is good potential for significant sites to remain hidden under colluvium and alluvium on the Thames and Cherwell flood plains. Can evidence for tree clearance or environmental sequences from palaeo-channels be identified under the alluvial cover on the floodplain?
 - *Zone potential: B High, C General, D General E General*
5. Bearing in mind the observation of a prehistoric 'compacted clay surface' at St Aldates was there a north-south (or indeed any identifiable) prehistoric route-way across the floodplains?
 - *Zone potential: , B High, C General*

Late Bronze Age

6. Is there any evidence for co-axial fields? If so when were they laid out and what were they for (e.g. stock enclosure)?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
7. What do boundary morphologies, bone assemblages and plant remains from Oxford tell us about the character of farming in the LAA?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
8. Does the small number of boundaries identified in the LAA accurately reflect the scope of land division in the Late Bronze Age? Can we find evidence to demonstrate either more extensive landscapes or the integration and re-use of boundaries in later landscapes? What was the scale and form of land divisions? How long did they last?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

2.5 Settlement

Neolithic-Early Bronze Age

1. Is there evidence for an increase in settlement activity in the locality during the Neolithic? The potential for early riverside settlement sites to be sealed below floodplain alluvium should be noted.
 - *Zone potential: A High, B General, C General, D General, E General*
2. Identifying and characterising Neolithic and Early Bronze Age settlement sites continues to be highly problematic (Bradley 2010). Establishing the extent and character of settlement on the periphery and further away from monument complexes is an important objective. How does settlement density correlate with evidence for monument construction?
 - *Zone potential: A High, B General, C General, D General, E General*
3. Can we identify evidence of domestic or episodic 'ritual' activity close to areas of monumental earthworks? Can zones of activity or settlement be associated with specific complexes of barrows? Can activity be demonstrated to be episodic or one-off? The need for better understanding of pit deposits and their more careful registration is noted by Bradley (2010).
 - *Zone potential: A High B High*
4. Palaeo-environmental sampling strategies need to be strengthened for deposits of this period (e.g. 100% flotation of well sealed Neolithic pits to maximise chances of recovering macro-botanical evidence, particularly of cereals).
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
5. Further comparison with nearby landscapes is likely to be enlightening; e.g. Yarnton, Radley and Stanton Harcourt provide parallels for the Neolithic to Bronze Age landscape in Oxford.
6. Why is there comparatively little evidence for Early Bronze Age settlement in both region and LAA? Does the presence of large concentrations of round barrows have any bearing on the character of settlement on the gravels, floodplain and ridge?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
7. What is the density and character of settlement activity on the Corallian Ridge and to the east? The potential for further field walking surveys around the eastern fringe of the LAA to aid our understanding of activity patterns is noted.
 - *Zone potential: E General*
8. The potential for identifying preserved ground surfaces below both alluvium and prehistoric monuments such as ring ditches should be highlighted, noting the desirability of maximising the environmental potential of these. To-date excavated barrows on the gravel terrace have demonstrated heavy truncation, however the conditions on the floodplain are likely to be more favourable.
 - *Zone potential: A General, B High, C General, D General, E General*

Late Bronze Age

9. Were highly dispersed later Bronze Age settlements only seasonal places of occupation?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
10. Why, when and where did settlements start to become more intensive and how did this vary?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

11. Does this reflect a switch from family to more communal management of animals and crops?

- *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

2.6 Warfare and violence

Neolithic-Early Bronze Age

1. A rare example of Early Bronze Age violence may have been identified at the University Science Area; can further investigation of Bronze Age inhumations provide further insights into day-to-day or ceremonial violence?

- *Zone potential: A High, B General, C General, D General, E General*

Late Bronze Age

2. Is there any evidence for Late Bronze Age defensive enclosures in the L AA?

- *Zone potential: E General*

Can further military metalwork be recovered from the rivers? If the river was a tribal boundary did weapon deposition have a political meaning too?

- *Zone potential: B & C General*

2.7 Crafts and Trade

Neolithic-Early Bronze Age

1. The nature and extent of regional, national and international contact (i.e. monument comparisons, stone axe trade, other artefact types) is an area of considerable interest. Especially regarding metalwork which appears to be disproportionately prevalent in the Upper Thames.

- *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

2. Can evidence of early metalworking be identified?

- *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

Late Bronze Age

3. What were the functions of common objects like loom weights/oven bricks; antler combs; and grooved and polished metapodials?

- *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

4. Where was pottery made? Are there sub-regional styles of pottery and do they reflect social groups? What were the patterns of exchange?

- *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

2.8 Ceremony and religion

Neolithic-Early Bronze Age

1. Can further evidence of early-middle ritual/funerary Neolithic activity be identified on the gravel terrace? Can we identify the origins of this complex and establish how it evolved? Can any associations with sites utilised in the Mesolithic be identified?

- *Zone potential: A High, B General, C General*

2. Most people would not have been buried within monumental landscapes; therefore how were most dead bodies treated? Were the majority exposed in mortuary enclosures in the 4th millennium? What happened in the 3rd millennium

when burial monuments were few? Was cremation burial more common during this period than we have imagined?

- *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
3. Small amounts of Peterborough Ware have recovered from Oxford sites, sometimes in association with structures that have been assumed to be Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age funerary monuments (e.g. Logic Lane Barrow, Kings Weir Barrow). Can earlier Neolithic activity be identified in the vicinity of these sites?
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General, D General, E General*
 4. What was the function of the Upper Thames large henges? As they tend to be found in the northern part of the Solent Thames region is this pattern of henge types reflected elsewhere in the archaeological record?
 - *Zone potential: A High*
 5. The Oxford funerary/ritual complex can be usefully compared and contrasted with other Upper Thames Valley landscapes and more distant landscapes on the chalk and limestone geology.
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General*
 6. Why and how did some monuments attract further monument building and become more important complexes? Could these be described as pilgrimage or exchange sites? If so does peripheral material culture from pits and ditches support this interpretation?
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High C General*
 7. Within the monumental landscape zones it is explicitly recognised that the areas around, and in between, barrows warrant investigation as well as the mounds and ditches of the monuments themselves because of the potential for antecedent, satellite or other contemporary features.
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General*
 8. There is a suggestion at a regional level that smaller monuments are found in areas of settlement; is there any evidence for this? What is the significance of small burial monuments in relation to the development of monument complexes?
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General, D General, E General*
 9. Early Bronze Age barrows are proving to be more complex than previously thought in terms of their content, forms and the burial practices and other ritual activities associated with them, such as processions. Some of this evidence is found in the upper deposits of the barrows or beyond their physical extents and can be easily damaged if not recognised. Further analysis of their chronology and function is needed.
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General*
 10. Secure scientific dating of monuments and related features from this period is essential. Noting that the classic period sub-divisions of this period are largely based on non uniform typological sequences derived from material culture (Medlycott & Brown 2008).
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General, D General, E General*
 11. There is considerable scope for geophysics and LiDAR to contribute to our understanding of the Oxford funerary complex.
 - *Zone potential: A High, B High, C General, D General, E General*
 12. What impact did the introduction of metal have on society? Can distinctions be made between burials where metalwork is present/absent?
 - *Zone potential: A High, B General, C General, D General, E General*

13. The further identification and investigation of flat grave cemeteries would be of great interest.
 - *Zone potential: A High, B General, C General, D General, E General*
14. What is the character and extent of votive/placed deposition along the Thames and Cherwell at Oxford? Why is deposition in rivers favoured in some areas (for example the Middle Thames), whereas deposition in graves is more common elsewhere (such as the Upper Thames). Is there further evidence for this pattern in the LAA?
 - *Zone potential: B General, C General*

Late Bronze Age

15. Why and when did people stop building and using funerary monuments during the period?
 - *Zone potential: A High, B General*
16. Is there a shift of activity away from the floodplain and 2nd gravel terrace towards the Corallian Ridge in the Late Bronze Age?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
17. How far might biases in fieldwork be preventing the discovery of more urn fields and other cemeteries?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*
18. How common were cremations and burials in boundaries, fields and settlements before monuments stopped being used?
 - *Zone potential: A General, B General, C General, D General, E General*

2.9 Material Culture

1. Are further comparisons possible with pottery from the county and region – can we see patterns of distribution in terms of style and fabric; what can this tell us about movement in the region?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
2. Can further information be obtained from the two recorded Bronze Age hoards from Oxford?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
3. Can a review of recovered flint artefacts produce more insights?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
4. What can regional studies of metalwork tell us about technology, production and distribution of raw materials?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*

Compiled by Ruth Beckley and David Radford

For full acknowledgements please see the online Oxford Archaeological Plan Introduction document.

Bibliography

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Fig 1: Simplified geology map (areas of gravel island and Amphthill Clay have been amalgamated and are not shown, please see introduction document for a detailed surface geology map).

