In search of the Iron Age

Proceedings of the Iron Age Research Student Seminar
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Edited by
Martin Sterry, Andy Tullett
and Nick Ray
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INTRODUCTION

Andy Tullett
University of Leicester

The tenth Iron Age Research Student Seminar (IARSS) held at the University of Leicester in 2008 was the latest in the illustrious history of this remarkable forum. The origins of the conference are publicized in each of the volumes of the proceedings that have been published to date but it is appropriate that we briefly note them once more here.

The first IARSS was held in 1998 at University of Wales, Newport, with the proceedings being published in 2003 in conjunction with those of the subsequent conferences at Southampton and Leicester (Humphrey 2003). Since that time IARSS has been held all around Britain: Durham (2001), Glasgow (2002), York (2004), Edinburgh (2005), Cardiff (2006) and Southampton (2007). Unfortunately the only other volume of proceedings to make it into print from all these conferences is that from the excellent 2006 Cardiff conference (Davis et al. 2008). The Seminar has a prestigious heritage and many of the early presenters have gone on to take places in academia, chairing sessions and guiding their students to participation in the IARSS tradition.

One of the aims of the first IARSS was to broaden the base of Iron Age studies and involve a wide range of individuals and interests from within British Archaeology. This has continued within recent years and the Leicester 2008 conference in particular managed to attract a very broad base of interest. The scope of the conference has expanded now to cover Europe not just in terms of attendees but also of studies. It shows the range and community of Iron Age archaeology has continued to grow, and that it is truly a European forum in which we operate.

The range of topics presented also reflected the expansive spectrum of research that our discipline now pursues. Whilst the conference saw a lot of contributions researching the continental Iron Age, this has unfortunately not followed through into the publication; something that following volumes will hopefully achieve. This range was also matched in terms of chronology, with papers stretching from the English Late Bronze Age through to the end of the ‘long’ Iron Age in Scotland (that might conceivably be labelled early medieval elsewhere in Europe).
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The conference and its name remain close to that of the Iron Age Research Seminar (IARS) that produced the seminal ‘Understanding the British Iron Age: an agenda for action’ (Haselgrove et al. 2001). IARSS is very much the ‘student arm’ of Iron Age research and indicates the direction that future studies will head. It is not surprising therefore that all papers follow the strands of inquiry that IARS highlighted as essential to the progress of Iron Age studies.

One of the key points raised by IARS was to develop a more nuanced chronology for the changes witnessed during the Iron Age. Guy de Mulder’s paper demonstrates the application of new dating methods to the continental material and how advances in scientific understanding and techniques can overthrow established typological chronologies and challenge quite entrenched beliefs. The continual improvement of chronological finesse in the study of the Iron Age, especially in areas outside of Wessex, remains a key challenge to future research.

The second section addressed by the IARS committee (‘Settlements, Landscapes and People’) has attracted the most attention over the years and did so again in 2008. The East Midlands, typically one of the underrepresented regions of the UK, received much attention, benefiting from the location of the conference with papers, from John Thomas and Gavin Speed. The latter shows in his work how some of the observations made from the Wessex material remain valid when transposed to another area of the UK. The spatial grammar contained within the structure of enclosed settlements in the East Midlands holds as true here as it does in Wessex. Thomas’ paper however focuses on a much more poorly understood area of the settlement record, that of open settlements. The scale of habitation in these locations again raises concerns as to how valid our current models of Iron Age society are. These are heavily based upon our understanding of either small enclosed farmsteads (e.g. Hill 1995) or upon hillforts (Cunliffe 1984), and either statements of isolation and independence, or dependence upon power bases. Two papers in this volume start to question these dominant narratives that have been largely unchallenged in the last ten years. Community is a term often used in later prehistoric literature but authors often prefer to leave its definition vague, and so it is rarely defined. The first paper by Andy Tullett explores what we mean by the term and posits that as community is the social unit that links wider society with more organic units, such as the household, it represents the most appropriate level to study Iron Age society. This is a trend followed by Oliver Davis as he explores the varying scales at which society operated. Both papers acknowledge that ‘the settlement’ does not encompass the entirety of social interaction and as a result we have to look beyond these boundaries to a landscape-wide study when looking at society. The second paper by Andy Tullett further explores the scales at which interaction takes place and how
affinity and community can be constructed through one aspect of life, that of journeys, travel or movement. It moves away from the strictly site based narratives that assume that the gamut of social life was contained within the sphere of the settlement, upholding the argument of the preceding papers for a landscape approach to social studies. These three papers have a more traditional Wessex focus showing that the wealth of archaeological data available in this region means that it remains an important area for the development of theories that can be extrapolated across a broader area. This large scale approach to social studies is further advanced by Greta Anthoons’ paper that focuses on long distance elite networks made visible in the burial evidence from north-western Europe. She considers how small contacts are added, changes in network systems can reflect changes in societal makeup.

Connected to the study of people in a more fundamental way, two papers seek to understand Iron Age life through physical human remains. Whilst human remains are ubiquitous on Iron Age sites, the presence of identifiable burial rites remains notoriously elusive. As human remains are the most direct contact that we have with Iron Age peoples, their study remains fundamental to the discipline. IARS highlighted the need to link burials and funerary rituals to their place in the surrounding landscape and the conduct of ‘off-site’ rituals (Haselgrove et al. 2001: 14). This is a theme picked up by Fiona Tucker in her summary of the Scottish material which presents a varied and difficult to interpret set of data, along with a greater chronological depth than faced by many of us. The second paper dealing with human remains is Sarah King’s study of violence in prehistory, though it is challenged by interpretative issues surrounding the ‘conflict’ versus ‘warfare’ debate (James 2007). Vicky Score and Jen Browning also examine the negotiation of power relationships through the manipulation of material culture in their investigation of Hallaton, the site of the East Leicestershire hoard. The site suggests that rather than the large tribal group assumed to exist in this region, there existed much smaller political groups that were much more dynamic, producing small circulations of coinage and enacting ritual acts away from formal buildings and structures. It therefore potentially provides a key to understanding other similar deposits in areas that lack the same scale of excavation.

The reassessment of the ‘massacre’ deposits from South Cadbury by Sue Jones and Clare Randall shows the potential for returning to previously excavated sites for a reassessment of the data using modern methods; a topic again highlighted by IARS (Haselgrove et al. 2001). Their work suggests that far from a single act resulting from continental invasion, the deposits relate to a broader pattern of changing social practice concerning the deposition of humans, animals and metalwork. They posit that society was already in a state of flux by the time of the arrival of the Romans, showing the ongoing importance of such studies.
Finally Jeanette Wooding’s work on the occurrences of bovine tuberculosis in domestic fauna displays the symbiotic relationship between people and their stock. It demonstrates the potential for studying the pathologies in archaeofaunal assemblages to understand animal husbandry practices and the transmission of diseases.

Whilst the conference and proceedings volume owe much to those that presented and authored papers, a great deal of thanks must go to the other parties that played their part in making the conference a success and led to this publication. Thanks must go to the University of Leicester Research Training Innovation Fund who were prepared to fund the conference and the publication of this volume. Without their help the conference would have been a much more expensive and poorly attended affair. Appreciation must go to Prof. Colin Haselgrove who gave his full support and provided an excellent closing address. Prof. Sir Bob Burgess, Vice-Chancellor was kind enough to host and fund a wine reception at the end of the first evening. We are also very grateful to the four chairs, Dr. Simon James, Dr. Jeremy Taylor, Dr. Patrick Clay and Dr. Rachel Pope, who facilitated a lively discussion of the papers and also the referee’s who donated their valuable time to review the papers and provided excellent feedback. We are indebted to ULAS for providing permission for the use of images and support during the conference. Dr. David Edwards gave invaluable advice throughout the preparation of this publication and his patience is much appreciated. Finally thanks must go to the PhD community at the University of Leicester who helped organize and support the conference.

**Bibliography**


