



Lanton Quarry School's Pack

Bronze Age Period Teachers' Information sheet

The Bronze Age period lasted from 2500BC to 700 BC. At this time, differences in social organisation became more obvious, so that by the early Bronze Age some people in society were viewed as more important than others. At around 2500 BC the first metalwork arrived in Britain which provided a new way for people to express their wealth, status and power. It is important to realise that the first metal objects in Britain are usually status objects such as earrings and decorated daggers. The functional tools used for everyday tasks do not appear in metal until the end of the early Bronze Age, and as a result flint tools continue to be used. The middle and later Bronze Age was a time of significant change both in the organisation of people's lives and in the way the landscape was used. The old religious monuments that were prominent in the Neolithic period were abandoned and there do not appear to have been any monuments dating to the Bronze Age period. These Bronze Age groups were devoted almost exclusively to farming, which meant that they could not simply move on if they were threatened by raiding groups, new settlers or invaders.

Settlement

Settlements belonging to the earliest phases of the Bronze Age are rare. Settlement, it seems, became geared towards staying in one place for early Bronze Age groups. Physical remains of early Bronze Age agriculture have recently been recognised in the Cheviots in the Breamish valley. Below the Brough Law hillfort a series of cultivation terraces were identified and subsequent excavation produced early Bronze Age dates for their earliest phase. By the middle Bronze Age permanent settlements became widespread and archaeological remains of these structures can be found across Northumberland and elsewhere in England. They consisted of timber-built roundhouses, usually between 6m and 8m in diameter, and the evidence for these can be found dotted all over the Cheviot Hills. Some lower-lying examples are also known, such as the house excavated at Lookout Plantation near Ford. Occasionally some of these houses had stone wall footings but they were otherwise constructed from timber and/or turf.

Diet and subsistence

Evidence from some sites in Northumberland has shown that naked and hulled barley were grown, together with wheat varieties including emmer and spelt. Occasional hazelnut shells and wild fruit pips have been found but these are much less common than in previous periods. It was not just foodstuffs that were grown, as some sites have produced evidence for the production of flax which can be used both for fabric and oil.

At some sites the presence of pottery fragments, flints and charcoal in the field plots suggests that manuring took place by spreading domestic refuse over them. The plots, though, are generally small, extending over an area of 0.2ha on average.

There is virtually no direct evidence for the type of animals kept by the Bronze Age farmers, mostly because the higher soils are now too acidic for the survival of bone. However, in lower and waterlogged settings evidence for Bronze Age animal husbandry should eventually be discovered. If Northumberland was not too different from neighbouring regions it can be fairly assumed that

sheep, cattle and pig were kept, together with goats and possibly, towards the end of the period, horse.

Tools and Technology

It was at the beginning of the Bronze Age period that stone tool manufacture achieved its most sophisticated and elegant forms. These high-status pieces included arrowheads, chisels, axe-heads, daggers, maceheads, battle axes and carved stone balls. Many of the stone tools dating to this period that have been found in Northumberland are made from high-quality flint. This flint has few impurities, is often very dark grey or black in colour, and can be recognised by its thin chalky outer crust.

Around 2500 BC a new type of pottery arrived in the Britain from the continent. 'Beakers', as they are commonly known, are finely-made pots, assumed to be drinking vessels on account of their shape. They have a thin fabric, bulbous profile, flat base and intricate decoration. The ornamentation of Beakers includes the zoning of decoration by incised lines and the use of fine points to mark the surface. Common designs include lines, dots, zig-zags, cord impressions and comb impressions. Beakers have been classified in different ways by archaeologists over the last century according to different criteria such as size, shape and decorative motifs.

Monuments and Religion

During the Bronze Age small burial cairns became a very familiar site. There are thousands of stone cairns across the moors of Northumberland marking the graves of Bronze Age people. On the lower ground these burial mounds were sometimes made in earth, although most of them have been ploughed flat by later farming. There are also cases where burials were placed directly into pits cut into the ground, with no evidence for a mound above. Most of the stone cairns and earth burial mounds are small, measuring only a few metres in diameter and about half a metre in height. In the early Bronze Age, 'cist' burials were popular, consisting of stone-lined graves covered by a large capstone with a stone or earth mound on top of it. The body was placed inside the cist in a crouched position and sometimes accompanied by grave goods such as a pottery vessel, flint tools and metalwork.

It is not clear whether there was organised religion in the Bronze Age in the way that we would understand it today. However, the use of burial mounds throughout the Britain and the inclusion of beakers, food vessels and urns, implies that there was a commonly held perception of death and the rituals associated with it at this time. Although there is a great deal of variation in the size, shape and location of burial monuments in the Bronze Age this seems to reflect regional variation of a widely held set of beliefs, rather than separate belief systems.

During the middle and later Bronze Age the evidence for burial decreases and it is supposed that bodies were either buried in shallow graves that have left no trace or disposed of in other ways. This may have included burning them and scattering the ashes, or disposal in rivers and wet places together with metal objects.