The Iron Age

by Stewart Bryant

I. Introduction

East Anglia has a long history of high quality Iron Age research, from the pioneering study by Cyril Fox on the Cambridge region (Fox 1923) to the work of Christopher Hawkes on Colchester (Hawkes and Hull 1947), Barry Cunliffe's pottery typology for the region (1968) and the several recent county studies (Bryant 1995; Sealey 1996; Davies 1996). However, the Iron Age of East Anglia has historically received generally less attention than other regions in southern England, especially compared to Wessex and the Thames valley (see Fitzpatrick and Morris 1994, as an example of the wide range of Iron Age research being undertaken in Wessex). This situation is beginning to change, as is typified by the forthcoming publication on the Iron Age of northern East Anglia (Davies and Williamson eds 1999). Nonetheless, the character of the Iron Age settlement of East Anglia is generally less well understood that those regions and there is a need to encourage further research. It is hoped that the following summary will help to identify some priority areas where work might be undertaken.

II. Gaps in knowledge

Chronology
The dating of Iron Age sites and artefact assemblages is currently problematic and it is not possible to date most to within 200 years, and for many this figure rises to 500 years or more (Bryant 1995; Davies 1996; Sealey 1996, 47). This is in part due to the difficulties with the calibration curve of radiocarbon which reduce its usefulness for dating in the Iron Age, and the fact that closely datable artefacts are rare. There is also a lack of stratified pottery groups which span the period, and which have been analysed.

The scale of the problem varies through the Iron Age and across the region but is most acute from the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age transition to the later Iron Age (800 to 100 BC) and in Norfolk, North Cambridgeshire and North Suffolk throughout the period. For the later Iron Age of Hertfordshire and Essex, a finer degree of dating (to between 50 and 100 years) is possible for most sites from 100 BC (Sealey 1996).

The absence of a clear chronological framework for the Iron Age of the region is a major barrier to the understanding of social and economic processes beyond the very local level. It also severely hampers the understanding of vegetation and land-use changes, which in some instances cannot be dated more closely than later Bronze to early Roman periods.

Economy and agriculture
A greater knowledge of the agricultural economy of the region is likely to be crucial in understanding the social, economic and cultural processes which took place during the Iron Age. Developments such as increasing agricultural specialisation, the intensification/ extensification of production and evidence for colonisation, land allotment and woodland clearance need to be better understood. However, the region, especially the south (Hertfordshire and Essex) has relatively little palaeoenvironmental evidence which can be used to address these subjects (Murphy 1996, 30).

More information is required in the following areas:

- Palaeoecological analysis of dated sediment sequences such as overbank alluvium, peats and palaeochannel fills, which are immediately adjacent to known settlement sites.
- Palaeoecological analysis of dated buried soils beneath dykes and other earthworks.
- Analysis of large samples of animal bone and charred crop remains from sites outside of the Fens, especially 'oppida' sites.

Industry: production and distribution
In comparison to many other regions such as Wessex, the Thames valley and the South West, relatively little is known of the production and distribution of Iron Age artefacts in East Anglia (Bryant 1995; 1997).

The location and distribution of settlements
The extent and distribution of the known Iron Age settlements in the region is likely to represent only a small fraction of the true number of sites. This is primarily because of the problems of locating settlements of this period, due to the likelihood that most of them were unenclosed and are therefore difficult to locate from aerial photography (Bryant 1997, 25) and also because a significant proportion of them appear to have been located on the extensive clay soils of the region which are relatively unresponsive to aerial photography. However, the likelihood that the clay areas of the region do contain significant numbers of later Bronze Age and Iron Age sites has been demonstrated by several recent studies (*e.g.* Brooks and Bedwin 1989; Rogerson 1995).

There has also been, historically, a considerable variation in the intensity of archaeological fieldwork across the region. The combination of these factors has resulted in a heavy bias in favour of places such as the Thames valley, the Chilterns and the Fens and against the extensive clay areas of the region, of which relatively little is known. The *Resource Assessment* (Bryant 1997, fig. 5) shows a distribution of major Iron Age sites in the region.

The full analysis and publication of pottery assemblages
The region has few published examples of Iron Age pottery assemblages which have been subject to full analysis and quantification. The exceptions are a few smaller and recently published groups in Essex, Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, such as Little Waltham (Drury 1978) and Wendens Ambo (Hodder 1982). The absence of quantified assemblages severely limits the degree to which comparisons between sites can be made.

Plate III Aerial view of the earthworks at Stonea Camp near March, Cambridgeshire. Built by the Iceni on an island in the Fens, this is Britain's lowest-lying Iron Age fort at only 2m above sea level. *(Copyright Ben Robinson and Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit)*

The potential value of quantified assemblages is probably greatest for the later Iron Age where quantification could substantially improve our understanding of the chronology and relative importance of imports and the introduction of wheel-thrown pottery. The lack of quantification for the earlier Iron Age also adds to the general problem of making intra-site comparisons caused by the difficulties of dating earlier Iron Age assemblages in the region (see above).

III. Potential of resource

Settlements
With the exception of the Fens, the region contains few Iron Age settlements which have not been significantly damaged by ploughing. The archaeological potential (*i.e.* the range of questions which can be asked of the evidence) for these plough-damaged sites is relatively low. Well-preserved sites which have been buried by colluvium or alluvium can however occur within plough-damaged landscapes. The surviving earthwork sites, which have the highest archaeological potential, tend to lie in marginal agricultural locations. Recent research has also shown that some ancient woodlands contain extensive Iron Age earthwork remains (Morris and Wainwright 1995) and it is possible that the ancient woodlands of the region could provide one of the most important areas of surviving, well preserved Iron Age remains.

Artefacts
For the later Iron Age, even heavily plough-damaged sites can contain large quantities of inorganic artefacts, especially pottery and metalwork. These sites have a high potential for artefact studies. The fact that many of the richest Late Iron Age ritual sites lie within the region (*e.g.* Essendon, Harlow and Snettisham) suggests that there remains a high potential for the discovery of metalwork, including coins.

Linear boundaries and field boundaries
Recent research has revealed that there are significant areas of the region which contain landscapes of surviving co-axial field boundaries. The dating of these landscapes is not clear, but it is possible that they may be Iron Age. Even if only a small proportion of the field boundaries can be demonstrated to date from the Iron Age, they will provide an important resource which is likely to be of high archaeological potential.

The region contains a range of Iron Age linear boundaries and dykes, many of which are well preserved landscape features. Such boundaries are an important resource for the study of the evolution of social, economic and political organsation in the region. The buried soils beneath the banks are an important source of palaeoenvironmental evidence.

IV. Research topics

Chronology
Research into methods of providing a means to date Iron Age sites is a high priority. A suite of the following lines of study is recommended to address this problem.

Absolute dating
Despite the calibration difficulties with radiocarbon, consideration should be given to further research into the dating, using serial dating of stratified deposits and mathematical modelling. Other absolute dating methods such as dendrochronology and thermoluminescence should also be considered. In addition, the dating of key palaeoenvironmental deposits should also be considered.

The establishment of regional pottery sequences
Consideration should be given to the analysis of assemblages throughout the region which have high potential for producing long-lived, local, relative sequences. This should include an assessment of existing assemblages and the targeting of the investigation of suitable deposits.

The investigation of datable pottery assemblages
Priority should be given to the investigation and analysis of pottery assemblages which have a low proportion of residual forms and which can be dated by means of artefacts or absolute dating techniques. The standardised reporting of such assemblages, including full quantification, is essential.

The development of the agrarian economy
Increasing agricultural production is probably the most important economic development in the Iron Age of the region. Evidence for the nature of the Iron Age agrarian economy in all parts of the region is therefore a high priority. This includes evidence of the agrarian landscape such as trackways, enclosures, drove routes and fields. At present there are only a few published examples of this type of evidence and the excavation and publication of more sites is a priority.

In addition, specific priorities for excavation and analysis include:

- charred grain and animal bone from settlements. As with pottery, the standardised reporting of assemblages, including full quantification, is essential.
- micromorphological analysis of agricultural soils.
- palaeoecological analysis of dated buried soils, and alluvial and colluvial deposits adjacent to settlements.

A recent review of the evidence for prehistoric field systems in the Thames valley has suggested that substantial parts of the valley contain evidence for Late Bronze Age field systems which probably had a pastoral function (Yates 1999). The eastern region contains significant areas of extant, regular 'co-axial' field systems which probably have pre-medieval origins and which may be planned. The date of the field systems is as yet unclear but they probably have Iron Age or Late Bronze Age origins. Like the Thames valley field systems, they also appear to have had a pastoral function (Williamson 1987; 1999; Bryant *et al*. forthcoming). Further investigation of the distribution, dating and origins of these field systems is a priority.

Settlement chronology and dynamics
The relatively large number of Late Iron Age settlements (dating to after *c*. 150BC) in the region, in comparison to those of the earlier Iron Age, suggests that population increased and/or there was a discontinuity of settlement between the earlier and Late Iron Age. There also appears to be a significant degree of continuity of settlement from the Late Iron Age to the Early Roman period, and localised shifting of settlement foci appears to be a common feature of sites throughout the Iron Age of the region.

A recent review of the evidence from excavated Iron Age sites on the gravels of southern England (Fulfurd 1992) provides an example of the type of questions which might be asked of the evidence for the region. This has suggested that the Late Iron Age (1st century BC to mid 1st century AD) is the period when the Roman settlement pattern was established on the gravels, and that sites founded in the earlier Iron Age invariably did not last beyond the Early Roman period and exhibit less evidence of Romanisation than sites founded in the Late Iron Age. The reasons are unclear but may be due to a reorganisation of the rural landscape into larger farming units in the Late Iron Age as well as a drift of population to nucleated settlements, especially in the Early Roman period.

In order to address questions such as this for the region, the investigation is required of a range of Iron Age and Early Roman settlements for which the ground-plans are recovered and which have good evidence for chronology and agriculture. It is also necessary that, wherever possible, the local landscape context of sites is investigated.

Processes of economic and social change and development during the Late Iron Age and Iron Age/Roman transition

The adoption of Aylesford/Swarling and Roman culture across the region
The various elements that make up the Aylesford/Swarling culture (wheel-thrown pottery, cremation burial and rectangular architectural forms) appear to have been adopted in Essex, Hertfordshire and South Cambridgeshire during the later 2nd and 1st century BC and spread into parts of Suffolk and Norfolk in the first half of the 1st century AD. However, there are many anomalies in the distribution of these elements, and the social and political mechanisms by which they were adopted is still relatively poorly understood. The investigation of this issue has a high potential to elucidate the processes of social change in the Late Iron Age.

The development of tribal polities in the Late Iron Age
The appearance of social/political territories for *pagus* or tribal social groupings in the Late Iron Age is evidenced in the region by the issuing of inscribed coinage, the presence of wealthy burials, the construction of linear boundaries and 'oppida', and the administrative control of production and exchange. The evidence for such territories should continue to be examined by the assessment of a wide range of evidence classes including the location of ritual sites, artefact and coin distributions. Evidence for the development of some territories into larger political groupings and client kingdoms (*e.g.* the Iceni) in the Late Iron Age and Early Roman period should also be considered.

Oppida and ritual sites

New types of settlement appear within the Late Iron Age landscape of the region. These include large rectilinear enclosures, with probably a burial or ritual function, such as Folly lane, St Albans (Niblett 1999), and the group of sites in Norfolk and Suffolk including Fison's Way, Thetford (Davies 1996; Gregory 1992). Ritual sites at which votive deposits include coins and metalwork are also known at Harlow (France and Goble 1985), Essendon (Esmonde Cleary 1995) and Snettisham (Stead 1991), and some settlements are associated with large cremation cemeteries *e.g.* King Harry Lane, St Albans, and Baldock (Stead and Rigby 1986; 1989; Burleigh 1995). Some of the above sites form part of large settlement complexes or 'oppida' with evidence for imports, high status activities, burial and ritual.

It is likely that these sites, although probably forming a small proportion of the total number of Late Iron Age settlements, are of key importance in terms of understanding the social and economic developments in the Late Iron Age.

The following areas of study are suggested as priorities:

- detailed examination of the landscape setting of sites, especially in relation to the visual relationships between the constituent elements (dykes, cemeteries, enclosures), and the relationship to earlier prehistoric sites;
- the spatial and chronological relationship to earlier Iron Age and later, Roman settlement;
- the excavation and quantification of artefact-rich deposits, with respect to evidence of chronology and ritually structured deposition;
- evidence for internal zoning or spatial organisation including areas for ritual and burial, specialist industrial manufacturing or processing, habitation, agriculture and stock management;
- comparison with the evidence from other regions and countries, especially northern France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Germany and Ireland;
- the nature and development of ritual and religion, including evidence for the relationship between rituals associated with burial, and other rituals; evidence for ritual abandonment or 'closing' deposits on settlements; the importance of water and river cults; evidence for ancestor worship, such as association with, and reuse of, earlier prehistoric sites;
- the dating and characterisation, in terms of function, of linear boundaries including multiple linear boundaries and dyke systems.

Social organisation and settlement form and function in the Early and Middle Iron Age

The evidence for the nature of social organisation and its relationship to settlement form and function in the region could be a fruitful area of study. In particular, the potential should be considered for the recognition of patterns of differing social organisation which are linked to settlement form, such as have been identified within Oxfordshire (Hingley 1984) and north-east England (Ferrell 1997).

Artefact production and distribution

The following areas of study are suggested:

- The role of flint manufacturing in the region during the Iron Age.
- The mechanisms involved in the distribution and production of fine-ware pottery in the region. The potential of geological analysis of pottery by thin-sectioning should be considered as one method of study.
- The development of industrial production from the household to the commercial workshop level, especially wheel-thrown pottery, iron and salt.

The Bronze Age/Iron Age transition

The social and economic effects of the ending of bronze production and exchange networks and the introduction of iron technology are as yet poorly understood. There is some evidence for a dislocation in the settlement pattern in some areas such as the Lea Valley. The further examination of this and other evidence within the region is a priority.

V. Project

Area survey of Hertfordshire and Norfolk river valleys

In order to address the above research themes, it is suggested that a programme of systematic area survey is undertaken which is centred upon two river valleys; the Tas valley in Norfolk and the Mimram valley in Hertfordshire. The methodology would comprise fieldwalking survey followed by targeted landscape and environmental analysis, and the targeted excavation of sites. It would be comparable to the recently undertaken survey of the Aisne valley of northern France (Haselgrove 1996).

The following are some of the key ways in which a survey would address the above research themes:

- it would help to counterbalance the geographical bias in the evidence by providing a representative sample of later prehistoric (Late Bronze Age through to Early Roman) settlement and landscape of the region;
- it would enable the chronological issues of settlement continuity/discontinuity (*e.g.* Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age and Late Iron Age/Early Roman) to be addressed;
- it would provide data to place the 'oppida' within their temporal and landscape context;
- by selected environmental sampling and the identification of broad land-use patterns, such a survey would contribute to the key area of agrarian development;
- by considering two contrasting parts of the region, in terms of the Late Iron Age evidence, it would have the potential to contribute towards an understanding of the social processes occurring at that time.

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