North West Regional Research Framework

Later Prehistory

Resource Assessment Update

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Michael Nevell

With contributions by Mark Brennand, Kevin Cootes, Dan Garner, Mark Leah, Andy Myers, Vanessa Oakden, Rachael Reader, Norman Redhead and Sue Stallibrass

Introduction: The Resource


The early twenty-first century has continued to make significant progress in exploring the later prehistoric period within North West England. The years 2006 to 2018 have seen a considerable amount of fieldwork through developer-funded activity, landscape management projects, and research-funded exploration. Developer-funded projects have produced significant Late Bronze Age and Iron Age evidence from road schemes (such as the Carlisle Northern Development Route and the Manchester Airport Relief Route), quarrying activity (Cut Acre in Greater Manchester), and urban-fringe construction, as at Saighton Camp near Chester. Smaller evaluations and watching briefs across the region have revealed significant material from this period. Landscape management projects have added important new material to our understanding of the Cheshire hillforts and, through the Morecambe Bay Partnership, the later prehistoric landscape of the coastal fringe of southern Cumbria and northern Lancashire. Non-developer-funded research and work by the voluntary sector have contributed through several long-running excavation projects; notably at the Old Vicarage in Mellor, Greater Manchester, and Poulton, south of Chester. There have also been several important publications on sites excavated before 2006 relevant to the late prehistoric period; principally the Chester Amphitheatre, Irby, and Oversley Farm, as well as a major publication on the finds from the coastal site of Meols on the Wirral and overview work on Lancashire.

Three trends are visible in this work. Firstly, a steady, though not spectacular, increase in the number of known settlements. Secondly, the discovery that more of the region’s hillforts have origins in the Late Bronze Age. Thirdly, an increase in the volume of later prehistoric metalwork, specifically Late Bronze Age and Late Iron Age items, through items reported by members of the public to the Portable Antiquities Scheme.
In many ways the later prehistoric in the North West is an amplification of the broader settlement trends of the Neolithic and Early and Middle Bronze Age. Investment continued to be made in the landscape, such as field systems and there is a general intensification of land-use. This period also continued the development and growth of an array of artefacts associated with conflict begun in the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. Yet, there is now enough evidence to suggest a break in settlement forms and metalwork types between the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age and the Middle to Late Iron Age. There are suggestions that in the southern part of the region settlements evolved further in the later Iron Age, hinting at sub-regional differences in settlement patterns and perhaps social organisation (Rule 2018).

Environmental Evidence

Palaeo-environmental evidence for the late Prehistoric period in North West England remains scarce, and wherever encountered has the potential for regional significance. The continuing paucity of material culture for the later prehistoric means radio-carbon dating remains a vital tool in establishing chronologies, especially on seemingly earlier prehistoric sites and later, ostensibly, Roman ones.

Studies of a number of hillforts and natural deposits in central Cheshire as part of the hillforts and habitats project has provided some chronological detail on late prehistoric land use and farming regimes in the southern part of the region. Palynological analysis of natural deposits from two mere sites at Hatchmere and Peckforton were used to provide a more precise chronological framework for some of the later prehistoric and Roman periods, landscape trends recorded by the Cheshire wetlands survey in the 1990s. Both mere sites showed evidence for woodland clearance in the early Iron Age, which at Peckforton was dated to 800-550 cal BC. Cereal pollen also became more persistent in the record from the later Iron Age (Chiverrell, Davies & Marshall 2016, 267-268).

The presence of hemp pollen at both mere sites suggested that this was grown throughout the later prehistoric period. It was used in a variety of ways including the manufacture of cordage, durable clothing and food products. Palaeo-environmental samples from archaeological contexts at Eddisbury, Helsby, Kelsborrow and Woodhouse had very low levels of preservation. The exception were rampart deposits at Eddisbury. These produced evidence for crop processing of emmer and spelt wheat and hulled barley on a small-scale, day-to-day basis. A similar pattern of activity was noted at Beeston. Charcoal evidence suggested the exploitation of scrubland-type species for consumption and or domestic purposes such as bramble, hazelnut and sloe/plum/cherry-types (Garner 2016, 186-188).

Environmental evidence from the late prehistoric levels at Irby, Wirral (Merseyside), produced charred plant remains from a single Iron Age context, a post-hole. This context contained naked barley grain, emmer grain and chaff fragments, with very few weeds or other cereal taxa (Philpott & Adams 2010, 89-90). At Poulton analysis of excavated deposits revealed that a mixed farming economy was practiced with extensive bone evidence for domestic cattle, sheep/goat and pig dominating. The absence of both young and very old pigs in the assemblage is consistent with the use of the animal as a meat source, with the animals reared elsewhere and brought to the site for slaughter. Horse, dog, deer, cat, and hare were present to a lesser extent, whilst the earliest roundhouse in the sequence produced a single vertebra from a flatfish, indicating marine foods may have been eaten. Crops present included spelt wheat and barley, possibly supplemented by small amounts of emmer and wild gathered foods of oat and hazelnut. Red and roe deer antler were collected as raw materials to make a range of items such as handles and toggles (Cootes, Axworthy, Jordan & Thomas 2018).
In the northern part of the North West smaller scale research and developer-funded work has produced a small amount of new palaeo-environmental evidence. Investigations at the Druidical Judgement Seat near Appleby-in-Westmoreland, Cumbria, for instance, uncovered a charred six-row barley grain radio-carbon dated to 800-530 BC (Railton 2017). This was recovered from the enclosure ditch. Pollen profiles at Knockupworth, on the line of the Carlisle Northern Development Road appear to date to a time immediately prior to the construction of Hadrian’s Wall, indicating that, despite the lack of later Iron Age settlement evidence found on this road scheme, an increase in agricultural activity and associated woodland/scrub clearance had taken place. Large areas of the surrounding landscape had probably been cleared of trees and were under cultivation by the end of the first millennium cal BC.

The most significant palaeo-environmental evidence recovered in the southern part of the region between 2006 and 2018 comes from Chester. Here middle Iron Age settlement activity beneath the Chester Roman amphitheatre included cultivation soils and ard-marks (Wilmot & Garner 2018, 44-58). These were sealed by a late Iron Age cultivation soil and an area of parallel ridges and furrows over an area of c.15m by 6m representing the remains of cord-rig. These features immediately pre-dated the construction of the Roman amphitheatre. Archaeobotanical evidence from these soils and Iron Age features provides the first substantial study of the pre-Roman arable economy of Cheshire. Cereal chaff and/or weed seeds form the largest components for these samples. Chaff remains were associated primarily with the middle Iron Age four-post structure, suggesting both bulk processing and storage of fodder, but cereal grains were common throughout both phases. Spelt wheat, emmer wheat and hulled six-row barley were identified. Spelt was the most common grain followed by barley (which accounted for one third of the grain assemblage). The large number of seeds of wild herbaceous species were interpreted as being weeds present in the processed crop. Pollen preservation from the pre-amphitheatre deposits was low, but the relative absence of tree pollen suggests a large open area under cultivation prior to the arrival of the Romans. It seems unlikely that such levels of arable production were happening in isolation, suggesting the absence of comparable assemblages in the North West is probably the result of preservation rather than a lack of extensive cultivation.

The palaeo-environmental evidenced for the later prehistoric period gathered or published between 2006 and 2018 supports the overall landscape anthropogenic trends noted by the various wetland surveys of the 1990s (Brennand 2006; Middleton, Tooley & Innes 2014). This is a pattern of woodland regeneration in the early first millennium BC, followed by successive and larger periods of clearance in the later Iron Age, often associated with arable agriculture in the lowlands, is amplified by several detailed local studies since 2006. The most important of these are from the central Cheshire Ridge and from the Iron Age deposits beneath Roman amphitheatre in Chester.

**Settlement**

Across the region archaeological settlement evidence from the Later Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (roughly 1200 to 500 BC) remains elusive and has only been revealed with certainty with the assistance of scientific dating techniques. The evidence is often fragmentary, with radiocarbon dating of deposits being an important way of identifying such sites. In northern Lancashire and Cumbria, this problem of site visibility extends throughout the Iron Age.

In the northern part of the region fragmentary evidence for the later prehistoric has been noted at several sites. Pits excavated at Old Church Lane, Brampton (C) contained pottery of Late Bronze Age or Iron Age date (Jackson 2013). Similarly, the ring gulley of a roundhouse excavated at Micklam Farm, Lowca (C) contained hand-made later prehistoric pottery (Ross 2008). At New Cowper Quarry (C) a group of postholes post-dating Neolithic features are presumed to date from this period, as one burnt in-situ post provided a radiocarbon determination of 830-530 cal BC.
(Beta-211935), whilst burnt material within a pit elsewhere on the site provided a radiocarbon determination of 359-271 cal BC (UBA-31667) (Jackson and Churchill 2017, 66-7). At Crooklands (C) a relatively small sub-circular enclosure that was not detected through geophysical survey was revealed during a watching brief. The enclosure had an entrance to the east and contained several groups of pits and postholes representing internal structures (Morris 2011). Two of the samples taken produced radiocarbon dates of 553-399 cal BC (2415±30; BP SUERC-36862 / GU-25393) and 598-412 cal BC (2455±30; BP SUERC-36863 / GU-25394).

At the Glencoyne Park enclosed settlement (C), radiocarbon evidence indicates occupation at the start of the first millennium BC. The enclosure wall was constructed in at least two phases and with two different building techniques. Artefactual and radiocarbon evidence indicates a phase of rebuilding at the start of the Roman period in Cumbria. The first phase is dated by two radiocarbon dates to sometime after the start of the first millennium BC. The second phase is not as yet (2018) dated but appears to have fallen into disuse before the Roman period. Geophysical evidence reveals external buildings and courts which may indicate the enclosure wall had become disused. The enclosure wall pre-dates the Roman period. Internally some of the range of cut features probably belong to the latest phase before the Roman Iron Age (Hoen & Loney 2010).

In the southern part of the region, Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age activity has been recorded at several locations. The excavations at Oversley Farm, on Cheshire/Greater Manchester border, although excavated in the mid-1990s, was published in 2007. The later prehistoric evidence comprised just two pits containing LBA pottery and a structure formed by four post-holes of a possible round-house (Garner 2007, 103-4). Nevertheless, this demonstrates continued activity in this part of the middle Bollin Valley from the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Investigation of the hillforts of the Cheshire Ridge has shown that many sites had earlier Bronze Age activity (Helsby and Woodhouses) and even Mesolithic activity (Woodhouses). Both Kelsborrow (Ch) and Woodhouses (Ch) appear to be hilltop enclosures established at the end of the Bronze Age, like the origins of the Beeston hillfort (Ch) noted in the 1980s, whilst Edsibury started as an unenclosed settlement in the late Bronze Age (Garner 2016).

In the northern part of the region Mid- to Late Iron Age activity remains hard to identify. A survey project at Elm How (C) and Braesteads (C) revealed additional sites of archaeological interest including substantial earthworks forming parts of field systems, some at least associated with a known late prehistoric/Romano-British settlement. These remains represent extensive and significant evidence for activity in the valley from at least the late prehistoric period onwards, and possibly continuous activity. It demonstrates the extent to which these remote valleys were occupied, and it fits well with evidence for large-scale.

In the southern part of the region a number of community, developer-funded, and management projects have produced significant new data regarding later Iron Age settlement, revealing more examples of both small-scale and large-scale open lowland settlements. The HLF Habitats and Hillforts Project (Garner 2016) saw geophysical survey, field walking, and targeted trenching at a number of hillforts located along the Mid-Cheshire sandstone ridge. Trenching was targeted upon areas that had been subject to previous excavation work but which had remained unpublished. It revealed a wealth of information on the dating and structure of the defences as well as activity within and in the immediate environs of the hillforts. Excavations at Edsibury hillfort (Ch), produced a radiocarbon sequence and a re-evaluation of the phasing of the hillfort (Garner 2016). 12 radiocarbon dates included 10 dates from Iron Age deposits spanning the eighth to the first century cal BC. The first phase of hillfort activity was represented by a primary rampart built in the fifth century BC, with an entrance to the north, and internal metalled surfaces radiocarbon dated to 410-260 cal BC (NZA-36591). The second phase saw the addition of the outer rampart and ditch, radiocarbon dated to the period 400-200 cal BC (NZA-36654). Excavations at the
eastern entrance, which dates from this period, revealed exceptional surviving evidence for of the entrance façade stonework and massive posts. An area of burning from the southern guardroom produced a radiocarbon date of 360-160 BC (NZA-36592). The evidence suggests that the eastern entrance was clearly designed both to impress and to offer a considerable obstacle to any belligerents wishing to force entry to the hillfort Garner 20016. 191-199).

The Iron Age site discovered in the lower Dee Valley at Poulton (Ch) near Pulford Brook on the Cheshire/Wales border has been excavated since 2003. An area of c.40m by 35m has revealed an unenclosed settlement formed by multiple roundhouse ditches, post-holes and associated occupation remains spanning the 8th century to the 1st century BC, as shown by ten radiocarbon dates. The bulk of the settlement activity spanned the fourth to the first centuries BC. The ditches contained a large volume of domestic waste, charcoal and heat-affected stone and the material assemblage was unusually large and diverse for later Iron Age site in the North West, preserved by the relatively neutral soils. Industrial activity comprised small-scale iron and copper alloy working. Significant quantities of the coarse, oxidised, ceramic known as Cheshire VCP and used for salt distribution were excavated. The overall character of the site suggests a high-status trading settlement ideally located to take advantage of riverine routes and contrasting geologies of the lower Dee Valley (Cootes, Axworthy, Jordan & Thomas 2018).

In Chester, two phases of Iron Age deposits were recovered from beneath the Roman amphitheatre. The primary phase of Iron Age activity was confirmed through 14 radiocarbon dates. This comprised a roundhouse c. 8.4m in diameter and a four-post structure c. 3.5m by 3.5m square. This earliest activity was dated to c. 400-200 cal BC, with the charcoal fill from one of the post-holes of first phase of the four-poster structure dating to 390-340 Cal BC (Wk-19120). The Late Iron Age activity took the form of evidence for ploughing by ard (see above), though presumably there was a settlement close by (Wilmott and Garner 2018, 44-58).

Further excavations at The Old Vicarage, Mellor (GM) from 2006 to 2009, produced detailed evidence for the Mid- to Late Iron Age hilltop defended site. When the site was first recognised the depth and size of the rock-cut ditch led to the interpretation of the site as a hillfort. However, the site has prove to be rather more enigmatic (Hearle, Nevell & Thompson 2014). Defined by a large inner ditch on the lower saddle of the hilltop, with a smaller outer enclosure ditch encompassing a much wider area to take in the top of the hill. The inner ditch had a defended gateway on the western side of the enclosure and a possible second, a causewayed entrance, on the opposite, eastern, side. There was a palisade behind this inner ditch, but no evidence for a rampart survived. This site has produced a significant series of radiocarbon dates, with 11 of the 18 dates obtained showing later prehistoric activity spanning the fifth century cal BC to the early first century cal AD. The focus of this activity was the series of round houses in the inner enclosure and immediately north of that enclosure (Roberts 2011).

The publication of the Irby excavations, undertaken from 1987 to 1996 reveals the details of a Late Iron Age settlement re-using an earlier landscape. Two distinct phases of Middle Bronze and Middle Iron Age settlement were identified amongst the 12 radiocarbon dates from the site. The later Iron Age activity focussed on the years c. 400 to 200 BC and comprised probably two roundhouses built using post-holes and gullies sealed beneath Romano-British occupation deposits. The settlement appears to have been unenclosed. Associated material culture comprised Cheshire VCP and industrial waste characteristic of domestic occupation, with the recovery of a steatite spindle whorl from a residual context comprising an unusual and rare find (Philpott 2010, 13, 19, 105-106).

Recent research by David Matthews (2014) has explored the inter-visibility of hillforts along the northern and mid-marches including those in Cheshire and North East Wales. His premise was
that this approach would assist in revealing evidence for the role of hillforts as territorial centres and/or refugia within socio-political territories. He also explored the capacity of these sites to function as monumental expressions of group identity and a sense of belonging to a particular area in the landscape. It does seem entirely plausible that large, prominent sites of this nature will have assumed or had attributed to them elements of corporate identity and a sense of shared culture and history. The alternative would be for them to have been seen as physical expressions of dominance or oppression. In truth, with hillforts spanning several hundred years it seems likely their meanings will have changed through time as the recent online database project ‘Atlas of Hillforts in Britain and Ireland’ has emphasised (Lock & Ralston 2017). In any case, this research does show how these sites form clusters that might well equate with the spatial character of socio-political identities, perhaps the emergence of tribal kingdoms.

Finally, two Roman sites have produced evidence of Late Iron Age activity immediately prior to the Roman occupation. The first of these sites is at Chester, beneath the amphitheatre (Wimott & Garner 2016, 44-70), in the form of cord-rigg earthworks relating to arable farming (see above). The second is at Manchester, where charcoal form a pit beneath the Roman cemetery at the southern end of Deansgate, on the southern side of the River Medlock, has been radiocarbon dated to 2082+/-28 BP, calibrated to 185-39 cal BC (SUERC-81965). A nearby ditch produced a radiocarbon date from charcoal of 1980±28 BP, calibrated to 43-72 cal AD (SUERC-81969). Both are a reminder of the potential for the continuity of settlement from the very late Iron Age into the early Roman period at sites closely associated with the Roman occupation.

Buildings and Structures

Iron Age buildings and structures within these settlements continue to follow the forms identified before 2006, with the roundhouse being the most common type. The review of finds and structural evidence for the Iron Age to Medieval port of Meols on the north Wirral coast concluded that at least three roundhouses of the Iron Age were exposed and lost to sea erosion at the end of the nineteenth century (Griffiths, Philpott & Egan 2007, 386-7). At several sites, evidence has emerged for larger groupings of roundhouses, with many seeing multiple re-use. The excavations at the Old Vicarage, Mellor (GM), revealed evidence for five roundhouses, with at least four phases of occupation represented and gully diameters of 10-12m with north-west entrances. The 2007 excavations revealed a much larger sixth roundhouse of 21m diameter, again using posts set within a gully, lying within the inner enclosure (Roberts 2011). At Poulton (Ch), excavation has revealed one of the largest Iron Age settlements west of the Pennines. Iron Age features excavated comprise ten roundhouses, using posts within gullies with diameters of 7.5m to 15.6m, in the form of a ring of posts set within an outer circular ditch and circular gullies containing post holes. There was evidence for multiple sequences of roundhouse demolition and rebuilding attested by intercutting ditches. Such intensive settlement evidence remains, though, unusual within the southern part of the region and is currently unrecorded in northern Lancashire and Cumbria.

Other structures located within late prehistoric settlements in North West England include midden deposits (Poulton, Ch), four-poster structures (Chester amphitheatre, Ch), pits, and linear boundary ditches. The four-poster structure at Chester is associated with palaeo-environmental evidence for the bulk processing of cereals and probably the storage of fodder (a by-product of cereal processing; see above). This has implications for the interpretation of the cluster of four-poster structures excavated at Beeston Castle in the 1970s and early 1980s (Ellis 1993) and the single four-poster excavated at Oversley farm at Styal on the Cheshire/Greater Manchester border (Garner 2007).

It should be noted that the geophysical survey work undertaken for the Cheshire hillforts project at seven enclosure sites produced limited results in terms of identifying internal structures, from
both magnetic susceptibility and electrical resistance surveys. Yet, this was not reflected by the project’s excavations at two sites Eddisbury and Kelsborrow, which both produced internal evidence for post-holes and pits (Garner 2016, 69-71). Whilst variations in the local geology and machine specifications might be responsible for the gap between the survey work results and the archaeological excavations, geophysical survey elsewhere, in the region has produced more positive results at Poulton (Ch) and at the Old Vicarage, Mellor (GM). Garner (2016, 71), thus cautions on relying solely on geophysical survey as the only means of exploring these later prehistoric settlement sites.

Ritual, Religion and Ceremony

There continues to be a lack of evidence for ritual and mortuary practices across North West England, the evidence for bog bodies being a notable exception (Brennand 2006). However, at Poulton (Ch) ritual activity was attested through two dog burials and the deposition of an iron adze. Human remains comprised a small assemblage of fragmentary bone recovered from domestic refuse and three vertebrae from a neonate, the latter possibly comprising further evidence for ritual activity (Cootes, Axworthy, Jordan & Thomas 2018). A Bronze Age burnt mound at Nether Wasdale in Cumbria, comprising several pits and a posthole, produced evidence for later re-use in the Iron Age and dates from the early medieval period (OAN 2016).

The continuing invisibility of Iron Age human remains in the North West is intriguing, bog bodies excepted. There is a notable lack of Iron Age evidence from earlier prehistoric burial sites even at those sites which were repeatedly utilised for ritual activity from the Neolithic into the early, middle and later Bronze Age. Iron Age human remains are also absent from cave sites in the region, both those used for earlier prehistoric burials and for those used for Romano-British interments. This further strengthens the impression that Iron Age funerary, burial and corpse deposition traditions were very different to those seen in earlier periods.

Trade, Exchange and Production

It has been recognised since the 1980s that several late prehistoric pottery types were manufactured in North West England, especially in the southern part of the region (Brennand 2006, 56-56). The best known and most widely used fabric is Cheshire VCP, used to transport salt made at the natural brine springs in the Weaver Valley in Cheshire. Since 2006 further excavated and published examples of this briquetage (salt making) material have been located at Barton (GM), Chester amphitheatre (Ch), Irby (M), Mellor (GM), and Poulton (Ch) demonstrating that this fabric was widespread in the southern part of the North West. Furthermore, a study of late prehistoric salt production in Britain by Kinory (Kinory 2012) building upon Morris’ work (Morris 1985), has amalgamated a range of manufacturing deposits with briquetage and other sites with VCP fragments that have been radiocarbon dated. This confirmed that as a sub-group Cheshire VCP production spanned the entire first millennium BC, with production surviving into the very early Romano-British Period (c. 800 BC to AD 60) (Kinory 2012, 4,37). Beyond the North West, Cheshire VCP continues to be found at late prehistoric settlement sites in northern Wales, the middle and lower Severn valley, and in the upper Trent valley, with sites up to 150km from Cheshire recording finds of VCP. Cheshire VCP appears to have been in production longer and been distributed over a wider, and overlapping, area compared with Droitwich VCP.

Perhaps linked to this pattern of trade and exchange is the presence in the southern part of the region, especially in Cheshire, of gold and silver pre-conquest coinage, sometimes occurring in hoards, often recorded through the Portable Antiquities Scheme. It would seem to link Cheshire with the tribal groupings of southern England. It has been long argued that salt was being traded, using VCP via water transport around the coast to of north Wales and North West England via
Mersey estuary and the Wirral. Direct evidence for the port of Meols as the transhipment point for VCP from the Wirral, though, remains lacking, but is not surprising bearing in mind the coastal erosion of this site (Griffiths, Philpott & Egan 2007, 384-386). Cheshire VCP has yet to be confirmed at sites in southern England (Kinory 2012).

Evidence for Late Bronze Age and Iron Age metalwork from excavations across the region has been scarce (Brennand 2006, 56-57). However, between 2006 and 2018 extensive new evidence of late prehistoric metalwork has been reported, largely through the Portable Antiquities Scheme, although many of these finds lack an adequate context. This new evidence shows a notable concentration of material south of the River Ribble in Cheshire, Greater Manchester, and Merseyside, whilst metalwork reported from Cumbria and Lancashire remains rare. Of note in the northern part of the region is a Late Bronze Age hoard from the Ulveston area close to the earlier prehistoric hilltop site of Skelmore Heads. This comprised three socketed bronze axes of Sompting Type, two with rib decoration on each face (Boughton 2016, 26-31). Iron Age finds of metalwork in this period, with the notable exception of a copper alloy, socketed, leather working knife from the Penrith area of the early Iron Age, is largely confined to the Furness area in the south-west and South Lakeland. This material includes a middle Iron Age bronze brooch, with a central wheel-shaped design, from Urswick near Dalton-in-Furness, an uninscribed gold stater of North-East Coast type of c. 60-50 BC from Heversham in the lower Kent valley, and a bronze sword belt mount from Kent’s Cavern from the Late Iron Age/early Roman Period (Boughton 2016, 32-39). Lancashire has produced two copper-alloy brooches of the early to mid-first century AD. The first is a Dragonesque enamelled brooch variety made somewhere in northern England found in the Over Kellet area, north of Lancaster (Noon 2016, 30-32). The second, found in North Turton, in Rossendale, is a Roman Aesica variant ‘thistle’ or ‘rosette’ type, manufactured in the period c.60-80 AD.

In the southern half of the region, especially Cheshire, the volume of late Bronze Age and Iron Age metalwork reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme has been greater, as has the opportunity for archaeological investigation of the find spots (Rule 2018). Although no finds from this period have been reported from Merseyside since 2006, several artefacts have been reported in Greater Manchester. These include a copper alloy figurine of a bull, an iron and copper alloy linch pin, and a copper alloy harness fitting, all from Stockport and all very Late Iron Age in style. There was also a copper-alloy circular stud with a La Tene style spiralling design inlaid with enamel from Hale Barns in Trafford and a late Iron Age gold-plated stater based on coins of the Corieltavi from around the Humber estuary, found in the southern Trafford area (Oakden 2016, 22-29).

In Cheshire Early Iron Age finds reported since 2006 include a socketed axe head of Sompting-style from Wrenbury. This dates to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transitional era of 800-600 BC, as does a bronze sickle from Congleton. Later Iron Age finds from Cheshire mix functional and decorative pieces. A bronze tankard handle of the Late Iron Age is known from Great Barrow, whilst horse gear such as a copper alloy fob dangler from Malpas and a copper alloy strap union from Tarvin. Bridlip and Colchester-style brooches from Great Barrow and Bickley belong the mid-first century AD belong to the early years of Roman contact (Oakden 2015, 17-24).

Of particular note amongst the North West material discovered in the years 2006 to 2018 is the number of items related to horse gear, especially in Cheshire. The overall distribution of such material in England and Wales (Oakden 2016, 28, after Dr Anna Lewis), shows a clear focus of such material eats of the Pennines in the Ouse Valley and Humber estuary of Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire. It also shows an absence of such finds in North West England north of the Ribble and a concentration in Cheshire. This raises a number of issues including whether the metal detecting patterns reflect a true distinction between the two areas, and if it does, how this might
relate to different levels of status, horse ownership, and use in the region. This material may link into recent research by Caroline Pudney on the links between Dubunni coin production and deposition, horse iconography, and the use of space in the later Iron Age (Pudney 2019).

Conclusion

What emerges from this review of research on the later prehistoric period in North West England, from the published material, grey literature, and the conversations held at the project workshops, is that community, developer-funded, and research fieldwork on this period has continued to grow since 2006. New discoveries of objects and settlements, and the resultant theoretical frameworks are further developing our understanding of the period allowing us to better place North West England in a national context whilst identifying regional and sub-regional trends. While the volume of material and level of research remains modest compared to other periods in the region, our understanding has, nevertheless, changed significantly since 2006.

Of note is a growing difference between the level of ceramic and coin finds south and north of the Rive Ribble as recovered from excavations and the Portable Antiquities Scheme, with the southern part of the region producing noticeably more material. Cheshire remains the only part of the North West where Iron Age coins are found. Four-post structures, well-known in other parts of Britain have now been identified on several settlement sites south of the River Ribble, though they remain rare. The number of lowland rural settlements, and their size and type continue to grow, whilst further investigation of hilltop enclosures continues demonstrate the late Bronze Age origins for many of the region's hillfort sites. However, survey work now suggests that the Warton Cragg hilltop site, north of Lancaster, is not Iron Age but from an earlier period. There is also some evidence across the region to show that burnt mounds, though rare, may be been re-used during the later prehistoric.

The breadth and context of this material remains poorly referenced in wider studies of the later prehistoric in Britain, perhaps because there continues to be a low level of theoretical engagement with this evidence.

Bibliography


