



Lanton Quarry School's Pack

Iron Age Period Teachers' Information sheet

The Iron Age spans from 700 BC to 70 AD during which time there were a number of technological advances. By the end of the period coins were in circulation and wheel thrown pottery was being made. As well as this people began to pay more of an interest in personal appearance. People started to live in larger and more settled communities and funeral arrangements changed.

Settlement

The settlement record for the Northumbrian Iron Age is usually thought to consist of hillforts, hillforts and more hillforts. But such a view does not account for the range of settlement types that we now know about. Unenclosed settlements, often grouped in clusters and rebuilt over time, have been discovered recently at Pegswood near Morpeth and further north at Chevington. These small villages were almost certainly farming settlements and consisted of closely spaced timber-built roundhouses. Another unenclosed settlement has also been discovered below the Roman fort at South Shields and this had two phases of cultivation plots associated with it. The main cereals grown here were spelt wheat and hulled barley, remains of which were found inside a roundhouse. Some iron tools were also preserved in the roundhouse, including an adze, which is a type of axe that had been buried in a pit, together with a ring-headed pin, rods and a punched metal strip. The roundhouse was dated to the middle Iron Age, sometime in the period 390-170 BC, and together with the two sites mentioned earlier, this evidence has overturned the previous view held by some people that enclosed settlements predominated in the north-east at this time. Interestingly the South Shields house had been deliberately burnt down and abandoned before the area was used for agriculture later in the Iron Age. Whether this was an aggressive act or part of a ritualised 'closing' of the site, perhaps after the inhabitants had died, remains uncertain.

Diet and Subsistence

It is usually thought that people living in Northumberland in the Iron Age were mainly mixed farming groups. Due to the acidity of the soils, not much animal bone survives but occasional fragments of bone and teeth belonging to cattle, sheep and horse have been found. Barley, wheat, oats and flax were grown in the fields surrounding settlements and defended sites. These farming plots can still be seen in higher areas where the narrow ridges still survive from the last harvest. These ridges, with slight furrows between, occur in long strips, giving the ground a striped appearance. The ridges are usually set between 1m and 2m apart and are referred to by archaeologists as 'cord rigg', as it is much narrower than the more familiar 'ridge and furrow' of the medieval period. The reason for the riggs being narrow may be that they were hand-dug. However, ploughs may also have been used. The grain produced from these crops was used to make flour which could be turned into staples such as bread, together with malted barley used to make beer and oatmeal for porridge. The stalks and chaff were probably collected and used as animal feed over the winter.

Tools and Technology

The Iron Age period saw the introduction of many advances in technology, not least of which was the use of iron for making tools, weapons, armour and bindings. Greater technological expertise was required to smelt iron, due to its high melting point (1545°C), but it offered significant

advantages over bronze, including greater strength and the availability of iron ore. Unlike iron ore, copper deposits are rare which meant that during the Bronze Age the supply of copper could be strictly controlled by certain groups who would have no doubt acquired considerable wealth in the process. With the introduction of iron technology all this changed, as virtually every region had access to iron deposits. This would have had an important impact on restructuring the balance of power between different tribes.

With the availability of iron a much wider range, and greater abundance, of metal objects came into use, particularly by the late Iron Age. This included all sorts of things from buckets and mirrors to cauldrons. All the basic woodworking tools that we are familiar with today were present during the Iron Age, and the availability of these tools allowed further innovations to take place. Chariots and carts became more widely used and horse harnesses are a common find, reflecting the importance of the horse as a symbol of the British warrior. Bronze artefacts continued to be made, though, especially for intricate cast pieces such as brooches, tankard handles, rings and bindings.

Monuments and Religion

A palisaded enclosure in the Iron Age Period was a site defended by a wooden barrier. They are quite common in Northumberland and examples are known from the late Bronze Age through into the Iron Age. The need to build these types of monuments indicates increased importance of society at a time of instability and insecurity.

The most common Iron Age monument is the hillfort. Northumbrian hillforts differ from those in other parts of the country as they are generally quite small. This has led to some hillforts in Northumberland being characterised as fortified farmsteads instead. These monuments were probably home to extended farming families with between 30 and 100 people. Although the settlements themselves were small the defences were often substantial and well made which meant that they were not only defensive but also symbols of prestige and power. Hillforts in the Iron Age had gateways and ramparts which often included banks and ditches, some of these being rock-cut and since having filled with silt. Some forts had more complex defences, often having more banks and ditches on their weakest sides. Ditches tended to be around 2.5m deep while ramparts could have stood anywhere between 1.5m and 3m high. The locations of hillforts were also well thought out. They were mostly located with steeply sloping ground leading up to them which provided added protection against attackers.

Hillforts are not exclusive to the high ground of Northumberland but can also be found in the lowlands and on the coast. Out towards the coast a number of enclosed sites and hillforts can be found where evidence of them has not been completely destroyed by farming.

Another form of enclosure that is common in Northumberland is the smaller 'rectilinear enclosure'. These consist of a single or double bank and ditch with one or two entrances. They have very regular outlines and are sometimes stone-built, although they now appear as grass-covered mounds. Stone hut circles and yards can often be identified inside these enclosures which are thought to be farming settlements belonging to the Roman period.

The Romans described the druids as religious leaders, judges, philosophers, healers, magicians, astronomers, mathematicians and prophets. They seem to have enjoyed a unique status both in Britain and elsewhere. Both men and women could be druids and people could apparently join of their own accord. The druids undertook much of their training in secret and sacred places, with caves and secluded groves mentioned as being typical. Druids were able to pass on ancient teachings from generation to generation, often by way of poetry and verse. In this way many druids appear akin to the bards mentioned by other classical authors.

We know very little about Iron Age burials as few have been found, but a little more is known about religious beliefs. It was thought that the soul was indestructible and resided in the human head not the heart, hence the fascination with skulls and decapitation. People were said to believe in reincarnation and they worshipped a number of gods. Evidence for some of these gods has been found on Roman inscriptions around Northumberland, as the soldiers often incorporated the worship of local gods into their own religious duties. Sacrifices of both animals and humans were common and the druids were known for using the entrails of their enemies for divination.