THE TOM HASSALL LECTURE FOR 1996

Conflict and Complexity: The Later Prehistory of the Oxford Region

By David Miles

SUMMARY

This paper is based on the Tom Hassall Lecture delivered to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society in 1996. It presents a synthesis of recent work on the Later Bronze Age/Iron Age in the Oxford region in the light of new discoveries and changes in archaeological thinking over the past two decades.

INTRODUCTION

The Tom Hassall lectures aim to present an up-to-date synthesis of archaeological work in the Oxford region, relating local discoveries to the changing methodologies and theoretical approaches of wider archaeology. What do we think we know about a particular phase of our region's past, and why do we know it? More importantly perhaps, what do we not know? And what questions should we be asking? This paper, like the lecture, is a personal view of the main trends and results of recent work on the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age in the Oxford region. It follows previous lectures by Derek Roe[1] on the Palaeolithic and Richard Bradley[2] on the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Because of the large amount of relevant fieldwork which is currently being carried out I have tried to update the text of the lecture. Inevitably it will be overtaken by events.

The period under consideration stretches from the late second millennium BC to the mid-first century AD. It is a period of major change in the archaeological record: from a landscape dominated by ceremonial enclosures and burial mounds to one of farmsteads, fields, demarcated territories; a time of population growth and agricultural intensification. Common sense might lead us to think we are observing the change from a society focussed on ritual activity to one more concerned with daily life and the economic grind of farming.

Archaeologists still have a problem with names. The Three Age System of Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages was devised by European antiquaries seeking to organise rationally objects in museum collections. In spite of our reservations about this 19th-century system and our more precise awareness of chronology, thanks especially to radio-carbon dating, the Stone/Bronze/Iron concept is difficult to dislodge. As Richard Bradley emphasised in the previous lecture, the Neolithic is no longer viewed as a period defined by the 'Agricultural Revolution' and new stone technology. In a sense the real farming revolution began in the Middle Bronze Age

[1] D.A. Roe, 'The Palaeolithic Archaeology of the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 1–15.

[2] A. Barclay, R. Bradley, G. Hey and G. Lambrick, 'The Earlier Prehistory of the Oxford Region in the Light of Recent Research', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 1–20.

when the widespread human impact on the landscape registers clearly in the archaeological record. No longer is the beginning of the Iron Age equated with the arrival of iron technology, the construction of hillforts and the invasion of Celtic speakers from the Continent. The major processes of change can be traced back several centuries or even a millennium earlier to the Middle Bronze Age.

TRENDS IN ARCHAEOLOGY: POLITICAL AND PRACTICAL

The Oxford region has played an important part in the study of the Iron Age, since 1857 when Stephen Stone first observed cropmarks from horseback, and excavated the Iron Age settlement at Standlake.[3] He noted, still appositely: 'If the acquisition of knowledge be more his object than the acquisition of wealth, he may perchance reap a rich harvest here'.

The 1930s saw the first systematic attempts to study the Iron Age of the region, with excavations, albeit small scale, of several hillforts and the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch. Attempts were also made to salvage data from sites which were being destroyed by gravel extraction. Dennis Harding, the author of the first regional synthesis of the Iron Age, emphasised that in spite of the intensity of work, its piecemeal nature meant that no coherent picture of the period had emerged.[4] Nevertheless, Harding's book put the Oxford region on the Iron Age map and increased awareness both of the shortcomings of past approaches and the potential for future work.

The scale of Iron Age excavations increased dramatically in the early 1970s with the influx of significant government funding for rescue archaeology. The establishment of the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record in 1966, the first in the country, meant that by the early '70s there was a significant county database (although that term was not in use at the time). This facilitated the rapid production of the first of the Thames gravel surveys,[5] which mapped the prolific results of aerial photographers, notably Allen, Riley and St. Joseph. This survey, by presenting cropmarks in map form within the modern landscape, encouraged archaeologists to question the relationship between sites and their context. It also illustrated that there was a wide range of potential late prehistoric settlement types, most of which had never been examined. Consequently we knew virtually nothing about their date, function, status, economy, population or inter-relationships.

The formation of the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1973 put in place an established team of professional fieldworkers who could plan a relatively coherent policy of selective large-scale excavation, orientated to specific questions with systematised data retrieval. Field archaeologists are not, of course, free agents and must operate within legal and financial constraints. In the 1970s and 1980s the protection of archaeological sites in England was extremely weak, both in terms of national legislation and local planning policies. Excavations were determined by the threat to (usually) visible, known sites and the availability of government funding. As a result of extensive threats to cropmark sites from mineral extraction the vast majority of excavations in that period took place on the gravel terraces.[6] Aerial photography also

[3] S. Stone, 'Account of certain (supposed) British and Saxon Remains', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Lon.* 1st ser. 4 (1856–9), 92–100.

[4] D.W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972).

[5] D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels* (1974).

[6] R. Hingley and D. Miles, 'Aspects of Iron Age Settlement in the Upper Thames Valley', in B. Cunliffe and D. Miles (eds.), *Aspects of the Iron Age in Central Southern Britain* (Oxf. Univ. Committee for Archaeol. Monograph No. 2, 1984), 52.

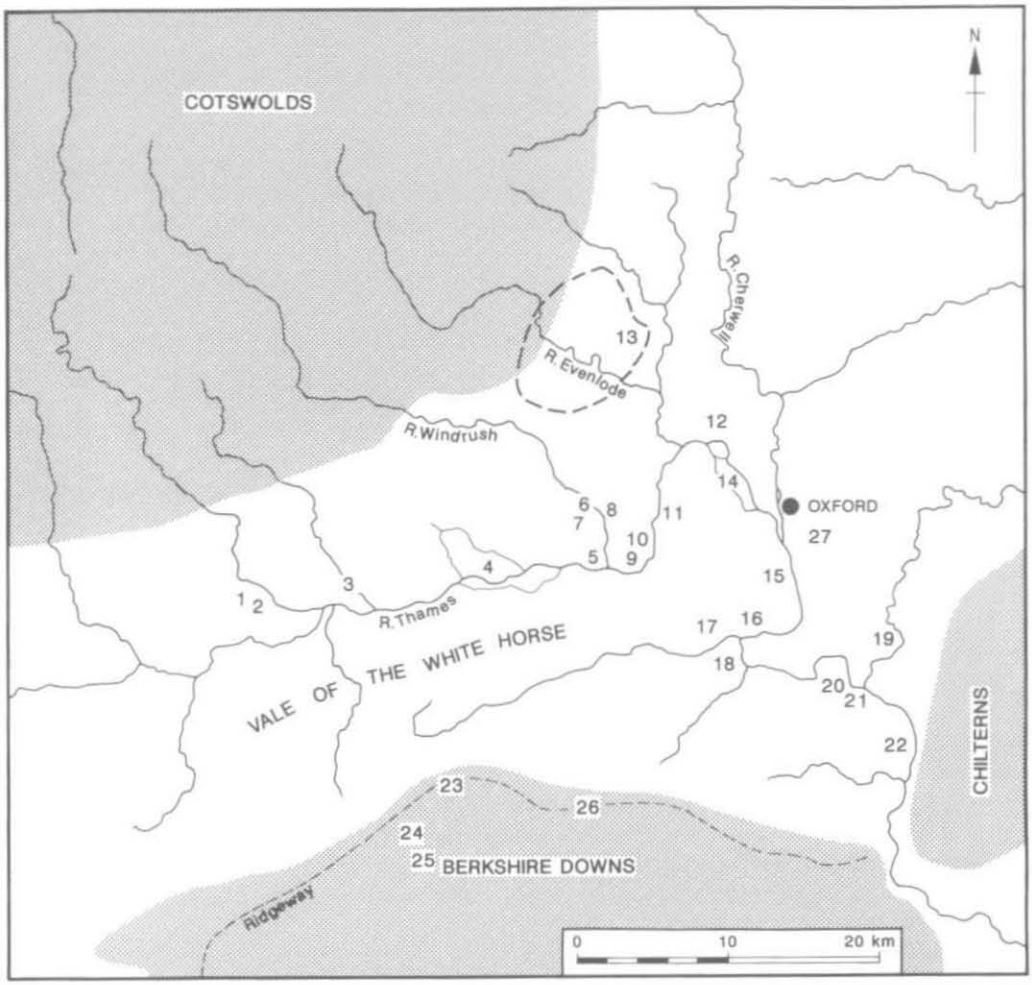

Fig. 1. Principal late prehistoric sites mentioned in the text: 1. Thornhill Farm. 2. Claydon Pike. 3. Butler's Field. 4. Burroway Valley Fort. 5. Old Shifford. 6. Mingies Ditch. 7. Smith's Field. 8. Gravelly Guy. 9. Northmoor. 10. Watkins Farm. 11. Farmoor. 12. Yarnton. 13. North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch. 14. Port Meadow. 15. Eight Acre Field, Radley. 16. Barton Court Farm. 17. Ashville. 18. Drayton. 19. Mount Farm. 20. Dyke Hills. 21. Castle Hill. 22. Wallingford. 23. White Horse Hill. 24. Tower Hill. 25. Weathercock Hill. 26. Segsbury Camp. 27. Blackbird Leys.

continued to promote that bias as surveys in the 1970s concentrated on the productive, free-draining gravel soils.

Nevertheless significant advances were made. Excavations were concentrated at several Thames confluences, notably the Coln/Leach near Lechlade; the Windrush around Stanton Harcourt; the Ock at Abingdon; and the Thame at Dorchester. Within these areas a wide range of settlement types (chosen usually on the basis of cropmark morphology) was investigated. There was a particular emphasis on the systematic retrieval of biological data –

carbonised and waterlogged plants, animal bones, molluscs and insects.[7] The preliminary results of much of this work were brought together in a collection of papers in 1984 and a summary was included in *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*.[8] A synthesis of some aspects of more recent work was published by George Lambrick.[9]

In the late 1980s local planning authorities began to take a much more proactive (a very '80s word) role in archaeology. Planning policies began to emphasise that archaeological deposits were a dwindling resource. Consequently developers had an obligation to provide sufficient information so that the impact of their proposals on archaeology could be assessed and a mitigation strategy devised. This approach was formalised in 1990 with the implementation of *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Archaeology and Planning)*, which encouraged all planning authorities to adopt such policies.

While field archaeology in the 1990s is no less development-led than 20 years ago, it is not so dependent upon the visibility of sites as earthworks or cropmarks. A characteristic of '90s archaeology is the evaluation, often consisting of surface collection surveys, extensive geophysics and selective trenching. This approach allows for a more coherent management of the archaeological resource. The most obvious benefit to archaeological knowledge has been the opportunity to locate previously invisible and often well preserved sites – notably beneath alluvium on the floodplain. The results can be most clearly illustrated by the dramatic increase in the discovery of Late Bronze Age sites in the Middle and Upper Thames. Development pressures are still greatest on the lower ground of the river valley. However, recently evaluations have led to new discoveries on the clay land, east of Oxford, near Didcot, in the Vale of the White Horse and on the Cotswold limestone slopes.

With these policies professional archaeology has entered the market place. A single local Unit no longer carries out all local excavations; instead a wide range of organisations may be given developer-funded contracts to investigate threatened sites. Consequently, there is considerable responsibility on the local planning/curatorial archaeologists to ensure that excavation briefs reflect current (and changing) research priorities and methodologies. Archaeology is now taken much more seriously by planners and developers. Archaeologists are, however, struggling to assimilate the mass of new data and to put in place research policies and standards which will ensure that fieldwork is consistently of a high quality. This is particularly significant for the study of later prehistory because of the quantity of new material which is appearing.[10]

Another major contribution to our knowledge of late prehistoric sites has come from aerial photography. When the Benson & Miles survey was published in 1974 I was frequently confronted with the opinion that most sites in the Thames Valley must now be known. Nevertheless in the next three years, as a result of the dry summers of 1975 and 1976, cropmark discoveries in the Oxfordshire Thames Valley increased by 30% and in Gloucestershire by 50%.[11]

In recent years the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments (England) has systematically

[7] M. Robinson, 'Environment, Archaeology and Alluvium on the River Gravels of the South Midlands', in S. Needham and M.G. Macklin (eds.), *Alluvial Archaeology in Britain* (Oxbow Monograph 27, 1992), 197–208.

[8] Cunliffe and Miles, op. cit. note 6; D. Miles, 'The Iron Age', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986).

[9] G. Lambrick, 'The Development of Late Prehistoric and Roman Farming on the Thames Gravels', in M. Fulford and E. Nichols (eds.), *Developing Landscapes of Lowland Britain. The Archaeology of the British Gravels: A Review* (Soc. Antiqs. Lon. Occas. Paper 14, 1992), 78–105.

[10] With the rapid expansion in both the number of archaeological organisations and the quantity of field investigations there is at present no reliable means of obtaining the results.

[11] R. Hingley, 'The Upper Thames Valley Survey', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, 10 (1980), 141–3.

surveyed parts of the Oxford region. In the Thames Valley the most important discoveries have been of earlier prehistoric monuments. However, on the Cotswold slopes the results have been of major significance for the Iron Age. With the ending of the Cold War U.S. Air Force bases in the region, notably at Upper Heyford, have been closed, enabling aerial surveyors to fly in parts of the Cotswolds which were previously almost inaccessible. As this access also coincided with ideal conditions the RCHM results have been spectacular.[12]

Large numbers of late prehistoric sites have been located, many of the banjo type but others of unusual shapes. The Cotswold slopes were known to be an area of distinctive settlement types – isolated, single, enclosed and widely scattered settlements. The new discoveries show that enclosure is still characteristic, that there are many more settlements than previously suspected, and that they can sometimes occur in groups.

TRENDS IN ARCHAEOLOGY: THEORETICAL

Field archaeologists are constrained and influenced by the society in which they operate. But they are also influenced by the currents of archaeological theory. Dennis Harding's 1972 survey of the Oxford region reflected the culture orientated themes and invasion hypotheses which had dominated British archaeology since the 1930s. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Iron Age of that period was an invention of Christopher Hawkes.[13]

By the 1970s the research agendas of the culture hunters appeared sterile, mechanistic and simplistic. In Iron Age archaeology the Little Woodbury Culture model was of little relevance to the Oxford region, where aerial survey revealed an enormous range of sites, most of which, in the valley, appeared to be unenclosed.

The excavations campaigns of the 1970s and '80s were influenced by other ancient British traditions such as the ecologically orientated work of Grahame Clark and the geographical approaches of Cyril Fox. Economically orientated, open-area excavations pioneered by Bersu at Little Woodbury were continued in the 1960s on a large scale by Geoffrey Wainwright at Tollard Royal.[14] These approaches also influenced strategies in this area, combined with the New or Processualist Archaeology from across the Atlantic, particularly Lewis Binford's advocacy of research design in a regional context.[15] New Archaeology in Britain was most influentially transmitted in David Clarke's article on Glastonbury, which was inspirational even if its conclusions were not believable.[16] However, Clarke promoted the study of regional site hierarchies, relationships between settlements and intra-site activities. Just as scanning maps of cropmarks encouraged the fieldworker to look beyond the site in isolation, so the Glastonbury study provided theoretical justification for a more regional approach.

The campaigns of the 1970s and '80s provided a mass of new information: settlement layout, structures, chronology; the detailed environmental and economic data at the local and regional

[12] R. Featherstone, P. Horne, D. MacLeod and R. Bewley, 'Aerial Reconnaisance in England, Summer 1995', *Antiquity*, 69 (1995), 981–8.

[13] For example, two of his more influential articles: C.F.C. Hawkes, 'Hillforts', *Antiquity*, 5 (1931), 60–97; C.F.C. Hawkes, 'The ABC of the British Iron Age', *Antiquity*, 33 (1959), 170–82.

[14] G. Bersu, 'Excavation at Little Woodbury, Wiltshire. Part1: The settlement revealed by excavation', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 6 (1940), 30–111; G.J. Wainwright, 'The Excavation of a Durotrigan Farmstead at Tollard Royal in Cranborne Chase, Southern England', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 34 (1968), 102–47.

[15] L.R. Binford, 'A Consideration of Archaeological Research Design', *American Antiquity*, 29 (1964), 425–41.

[16] D.L. Clarke, 'A Provisional Model of an Iron Age Society and its Settlement System', in D.L. Clarke (ed.), *Models in Archaeology* (1972), 801–69.

scale, and the evidence of change through the first millennium. They also confirmed that the regional Iron Age was far more complex than culture-based archaeologists had predicted.

Inevitably the 1980s saw a reaction to the systems-orientated, economy-dominated and functionalist approaches of the previous decade. Not surprisingly, perhaps, with its theoretical roots in the world of the Rand Corporation, New Archaeology could appear soulless and inhuman. Pete Seeger captured the spirit in a 1960s song:

> The Rand Corporation's the boon of the world
> They think all day long for a fee
> They sit and play games about going up in flames
> For counters they use you and me.

One of the most influential works of anthropological theory in the 1970s was Bordieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*,[17] which emphasised that neither people nor artefacts are powerless puppets pulled by the massive forces of time. People and things have creative lives; they dwell within a landscape and constantly react to the past and the future. In the 1950s and 1960s messy subjects such as ritual and religion were deeply unfashionable among prehistorians. Christopher Hawkes had put religion bottom on his famous list of the archaeologically attainable. In the number-crunching world of systems-theorists, ritual did not count for much either. Bone deposits were seen as rubbish, subject to mechanical and depositional processes but basically straightforward evidence of economic activity. Semioticians, and Bordieu in particular, legitimised the study of rituals, the idea that bone deposits, for example, could play a symbolic role promoting fertility, reconciling contradictions or reflecting gender differences. In his study of the peasants of Kabylia (Algeria), Bordieu placed rites in the real world where they are not separate from or different to everyday existence, rites relating to activities such as ploughing, reaping and weaving, to places such as thresholds and boundaries and to objects like metal tools. Bordieu argues that rites take place because they have a *raison d'être* in the conditions of existence, embedded in practical necessity'.

Archaeologists have also seized on new theoretical ideas about the biography of things: the concept that different artefacts, whether pots, paintings or automobiles, have complex lives with changing roles. In their lifetimes, they may have moved through different locations and suffer different forms and rates of discard.[18] This broadens the study of the artefact in the archaeological record from the functional approach of Schiffer[19] to an appreciation of the potentially complex symbolic role that things can play in society. These ideas appealed to archaeologists chilled by the logical world of New Archaeology and seeking different and new ways of investigating the past which could put people more prominently back into the landscape. For our period the past-processualist agenda has been most thoughtfully discussed by Barrett: 'Archaeologists should seek to understand how people may once have lived out their lives, and not limit themselves to the more restricted quest of interpreting the archaeological record'.[20] To this I will return, in examining new and future lines of enquiry.

Before moving on, however, I should mention another recent trend in Iron Age studies – the reaction against Celticism. In most people's minds the Iron Age is synonymous with Celtic Britain. In recent years many archaeologists have questioned the Celtic cliché – the world of

[17] P. Bordieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

[18] I. Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: commoditization as a process', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (1986), 64–91; M. Thompson, *Rubbish Theory* (1976).

[19] M. Schiffer, *Behavioural Archaeology* (1976).

[20] J.C. Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity: an archaeology of social life in Britain* (1994).

bards and druids, autocratic, if inebriated, warriors, mystic festivals and pan-European language and culture. This image, it is argued, is the invention of 19th-century historians and folklorists using anachronistic sources from early medieval Ireland or the Classical Mediterranean world. The result is a timeless, unchanging, pseudo-ethnicity of the Celts, which takes no account of regional differences and change in the first millennium. In particular, it is pointed out, no ancient writer specifically refers to the inhabitants of Britain as Celts.[21]

It is hardly surprising that in the competitive and neophiliac world of academic archaeology there is a constant struggle to plant new paradigms on top of the heap of past ones. We have seen invasionists and economists supplanted by model builders and symbolists. As an archaeologist working in the public arena, with real sites to tackle (sixteen this week, as I write), these theories and ideas influence the practicalities of excavation and interpretation. I would agree with John Collis,[22] however, that a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Be aware of the new paradigms but don't necessarily throw out the old ones.

SO WHAT'S NEW?

THE ENVIRONMENT

A major advance of the past two decades has been the growth of knowledge about the late prehistoric environment of the area.[23] In the Thames Valley the most important development has been the realisation that human activities – forest clearance, ploughing, the cultivation of winter wheat, cutting drainage ditches – have been instrumental in altering the hydrological regime of the Thames Valley: causing the water table to rise, over-bank flooding and alluviation. This parallels similar processes of colluviation (soil erosion and deposition on dry slopes) on the higher ground of the Downs and Cotswolds.[24]

Erosion, flooding and deposition have had a major impact on the character of the valley floor and led to local people developing new strategies to cope with the wetter environment – for example, seasonal pastoral settlements at Farmoor in the Middle Iron Age, drainage ditch construction at the same period at Claydon Pike[25] or hay meadow cultivation at both places in the Roman period. This is a classic example of human beings altering their own environment and adapting to the consequences, but in the context of wider social, political and economic influences.

Iron Age alluviation not only influenced the strategies of Iron Age farmers, it has an ongoing effect – on the topography of medieval Oxford and the behaviour of present day archaeologists. Because alluvium blankets archaeological deposits it helps to preserve them from plough erosion. These well preserved sites are also often waterlogged, though lowering water tables are a widespread and serious problem, causing desiccation to some of our most important sites.

[21] One of the clearest deconstructions of Celtic pseudo-history is Ronald Hutton's analysis of the supposed Celtic calendar and festivals in R. Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (1996), 408–11.

[22] J. Collis, 'Dynamic, Descriptive and Dead-end Models: views of an ageing revolutionary', in A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove (eds.), *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies* (Oxbow Monograph 7, 1997), 301.

[23] M. Robinson, 'Environmental Archaeology of the River Gravels: Past Achievements and Future Directions', in Fulford and Nichols, op. cit. note 9, 47–62.

[24] M. Bell, 'Environment in the first millennium BC', in T.C. Chapman and J.R. Collis, *The Iron Age in Britain and Ireland: Recent Trends* (1996), 5–6.

[25] G. Lambrick and M. Robinson, *Iron Age and Roman Riverside Settlements at Farmoor, Oxfordshire* (Oxf. Archaeol. Unit, Rep.2/CBA Res. Rep.32, 1979).

With the development of evaluation techniques it is now possible, however, to locate buried sites. The most notable and intensive investigations of the Thames floodplain are the current projects at Yarnton, Oxon and the Eton College Rowing Lake, Dorney, Bucks,[26] both stretching over some 3 km. of the floodplain.

At Yarnton the rise in the water table has been dated to the Middle Bronze Age and was probably caused by the clearance of woodland on the nearby gravel terraces – rather than the clearance of the Cotswold slopes which promoted the process at a later date. The Yarnton evidence supports that from Farmoor, that clean water flooding occurred before alluviation. Alluviation itself began late in the Middle Iron Age. South of Abingdon, at Drayton, magnetic dating has recently confirmed that alluviation was also occurring in the Late Iron Age.[27]

Below the Goring Gap the geomorphology of the Middle Thames Valley is different to upstream where channels cut deeper leaving the floodplain terraces relatively high and dry. In the Middle Thames there were waterlogged deposits from the start of the post-glacial and much of the prehistoric floodplain became backswamps. The current extensive work on the Eton Rowing Lake site at Dorney is providing a superb sequence across the floodplain and through a series of braided channels, including a major channel of the Thames active in the Bronze Age and into the Roman period.

The background environmental picture provided by analysis of flood deposits has recently been supplemented by pollen studies.[28] The Upper Thames Valley, dominated by calcareous rocks and base soils, is not noted for the survival of pollen deposits in spite of the pioneering work at Cothill Fen in the 1930s.[29] Petra Day has revisited Cothill Fen, on the Jurassic Corallian limestone south-west of Oxford, and also sampled at a new site at Sidlings Copse, 4 km. north-east of Oxford on similar geology. Whereas the Cothill Fen sequence runs from 100,000 BP to 6,500 BP, that at Sidlings Copse continues to the present. At Sidlings Copse the mineral content in the deposits increased sharply about 2000 BC, and remained at a high level suggesting that woodland clearance was causing erosion. By the Roman period hazel, oak, and alder had declined to such low levels that it is probable all woodland had been cleared around the site. The woodland did, however, regenerate about a thousand years ago in the Middle Ages. Parker has also recently undertaken pollen analysis from Daisy Banks, north-east of Abingdon, between the well-known archaeological sites of Barton Court Farm and Barrow Hills.[30] This confirms the open character of the gravel terraces when the spectacular sequence of monuments was constructed from the Middle Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age. More importantly, Parker estimates that as many as 70 fen and fen-and-peat sites exist in the Oxford region where further pollen studies could be undertaken.

Forest clearance can also be traced by the location of tree-throw holes, cavities in the sub-soil where the boles of trees have been removed, probably for land clearance.[31] Many of these contain charcoal and artefact deposits and so can be dated. They survive best on the flood plain and have been extensively plotted, particularly at Drayton, Yarnton and the Eton Rowing Lake site.

[26] T. Allen, G. Hey and D. Miles, 'A Line of Time: approaches to archaeology in the Upper and Middle Thames Valley', *World Archaeology*, 29 (1997), 114–29.

[27] G.H. Lambrick and J.P. Moore, 'Drayton Cursus', *South Midlands Archaeology*, 17 (1987), 85–6.

[28] S.P. Day, 'Post-glacial Vegetational History of the Oxford Region', *New Phytologist*, 119 (1991), 445–70.

[29] A.R. Clapham and B.N. Clapham, 'The Valley Fen at Cothill, Berkshire: data for the study of post-glacial history II', *New Phytologist*, 38 (1939), 167–74.

[30] A.G. Parker,'Late Quaternary Environmental Change in the Upper Thames Basin, Central-southern England' (Oxford Univ. unpubl. D.Phil. thesis, 1995).

[31] Robinson, op. cit. note 23, 50.

These approaches all confirm the scale of woodland clearance in the Thames Valley by the Late Bronze Age, and indicate that in the Iron Age the process of clearance was extending into the tributary valleys such as the Windrush and on to the limestone hills. The chalk downlands, it seems on present evidence, were cleared of forest at an earlier date than the Cotswolds.

THE LATE BRONZE AGE: FIELDS, CROPS AND ANIMALS

The most characteristic feature of the Middle to Late Bronze Age in Britain generally, and in the Thames Valley in particular, is the appearance of a managed and established farming landscape with land divisions and fixed and identifiable settlements. Even in the 1970s we were almost completely unaware of this organised farming landscape in the Oxford region.

Regular co-axial field systems and trackway-based fields have been identified on some 16 sites in the region from aerial photography. Not all of these necessarily belong to the Later Bronze Age. However, several excavations and evaluations have confirmed that organised farming landscapes were widespread. This is most evident in the Middle Thames near the Thames/Kennet confluence at Reading. A remarkable concentration of settlements has been located in recent years, mostly associated with field or paddock systems. The best preserved and documented are on the valley floor, notably at the Reading Business Park.[32] Nearby at the Eton Rowing Lake site another extensive co-axial system has been recently confirmed by evaluation to belong to the Middle/Late Bronze Age and to include settlements and cemeteries.[33] At present biological and other evidence suggests that these valley floor farming systems are dominated by pastoralism – principally cattle and sheep – and that secondary products such as milk, cheese and textiles were important. Francis Pryor has pointed out the sophistication of stock control systems in the Fens.[34]

The evidence is beginning to accumulate for a similar emphasis in the Middle Thames Valley. Richard Bradley noted: 'We should not prejudge the nature and extent of Bronze Age settlement in any single area' – that must be established by fieldwork and analysed at the local level.[35] This has certainly proved to be the case in the Upper Thames Valley. A decade ago the Later Bronze Age was notable only for its absence, and for the dramatic contrast with the Middle Thames. The picture is now not so clear.

In addition to the convincing aerial photographic evidence for Bronze Age enclosure systems (for example at Northfield Farm, Long Wittenham[36]) there are now several excavated sites. At Butlers Field, Lechlade a large block of second gravel terrace was divided by a complex system of boundaries in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. This included pit alignments and segmented ditches. Single round houses were integrated into the boundary system. Further evidence has been found at Radley, Didcot, Mount Farm, Berinsfield, Dorchester and most

[32] J. Moore and D. Jennings, 'Reading Business Park: A Bronze Age Landscape' (Oxford Archaeol. Unit, 1992); see also C. Butterworth and S. Lobb, 'Excavations in the Burghfield Area, Berkshire' (Wessex Archaeology, 1992); I. Barnes, W.A. Boismier, R.M.J. Cleal, A.P. Fitzpatrick and M.R. Roberts, 'Early Settlement in Berkshire. Mesolithic to Roman Occupation Sites in the Thames and Kennet Valleys' (Wessex Archaeology, 1995); J. Barrett and R. Bradley, 'The Later Bronze Age in the Thames Valley', in J. Barrett and R. Bradley (eds.), *Settlement and Society in the British Later Bronze Age* (Brit. Archaeol. Rep. 83, 1980).

[33] Allen et al., op. cit. note 26.

[34] F. Pryor, pers. comm.

[35] R. Bradley, 'Rethinking the Later Bronze Age', in O. Edwin (ed.), *The Archaeology of Essex* (1996), 44.

[36] R. Thomas, 'A Bronze Age Field System at Northfield Farm?', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 310–11.

importantly in the large scale excavations at Yarnton.[37] Here a particularly well documented sequence of changing land-use and settlement is emerging. Also at Mead Farm, Eynsham, only 1.5 km. to the west of Yarnton, further Later Bronze Age settlement and an enclosure were located.[38] While the density and complexity of sites does not match that of the Middle Thames, systematic land division and settlement was taking place in the Upper Thames Valley.

This is also the case on the downlands of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. Although many of the so-called 'Celtic' fields are now known to have been in use in the Roman period,[39] a pattern of large scale boundary ditches, resembling medieval strip parishes in shape, and integrating hillforts, is now thought to belong to the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age.

In the Earlier Bronze Age pastoralism was the dominant economic activity – though herds may have played an important symbolic and status role. There is relatively little evidence for crops, even in the Middle Bronze Age. However, by the Late Bronze Age spelt wheat appears and the cultivation of emmer expands. Arable agriculture seems to become more significant and there are hints of specialisation in farming settlements. In the Oxford region the crop evidence is still, however, relatively slight.

LATE BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENTS

From recent discoveries in Southern Britain three classes of Later Bronze Age site have emerged as of particular significance: enclosed ringworks, large open settlements and sites on islands/riverbanks. The first of these, ringworks, are a characteristic of the Lower Thames, for example at Mucking and Springfield Lyons, both in Essex.[40] None has been found in the Middle and Upper Thames Valley, though the section of deep curving ditch beneath Eynsham Abbey may be of this date.[41] On the higher downland the enclosed site at Rams Hill has recently been re-dated to the Middle/Late Bronze Age.[42] At present Rams Hill is the only known site in the region of this general category.

These sites also give rise to questions about the origins of hillforts. Until the late 1960s these were assumed to be type-sites of the Iron Age. Then early radiocarbon dates generated a fashion for Bronze Age origins. The appreciation that some key radiocarbon samples were faulty, that there were notorious wiggles in the radiocarbon calibration curve at this point, and that some hillforts overlay earlier enclosures, generated a reaction in the 1980s to the belief in Bronze Age origin. Now an earlier origin for some hillforts seems reasonable.[43] Preliminary results from White Horse Hill and Segsbury Camp and the re-examination of pottery from Liddington Castle suggests that these Ridgeway hillforts might have their origins in the

[37] G. Hey, 'Yarnton, Cresswell Field', *South Midlands Archaeol.* 26 (1996), 63–7; G. Hey, C. Bell and M. Parsons, 'Yarnton Floodplain', *South Midlands Archaeol.* 23 (1993), 81–5; A. Mudd, 'The Excavation of a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age Site at Eight Acre Field, Radley', *Oxoniensia*, lx (1995), 21–65.

[38] Oxford Archaeological Unit evaluation.

[39] S. Ford, M. Bowden, G. Mees and G. Gaffney, 'The Date of the 'Celtic' Field System on the Berkshire Downs', *Britannia*, 19 (1988), 401–4.

[40] D. Bond, *Excavations at North Ring, Mucking* (East Anglian Archaeol. 43, 1988); D. Buckley and J. Hedges, *The Late Bronze Age and Saxon settlements at Springfield Lyons, Essex: an interim report* (1987).

[41] Graham Keevill (pers. comm.): radiocarbon dates are imminent from bones from the lower fill, and Late Bronze Age pottery was found in the upper fill. Richard Bradley speculates that the ditch and nearby slab of concreted gravel may belong to a Neolithic monument (pers. comm.).

[42] S. Needham and J. Ambers, 'Re-dating Rams Hill and Re-considering Bronze Age Enclosure', *Proc.Prehist. Soc.* 60 (1994), 225–44.

[43] For a fairly local example see H.S. Green, 'The Dating of the Ivinghoe Beacon', *Records of Bucks.* 23 (1981), 1–3.

Late Bronze Age.[44] Early hillforts are known to contain round houses, storage structures and timber ramparts like the Essex ringworks. However, the dating of internal features from White Horse Hill and Segsbury Camp must await more detailed analysis.

The role of these enclosed sites remains uncertain. Richard Bradley[45] has pointed out that the 'intuitive' interpretation as residences of an élite may not necessarily be correct. The recent discovery of huge Late Bronze Age midden sites (lacking evidence of permanent settlement), and possible temporary buildings at Flag Fen and Runnymede Bridge associated with offerings of weapons and animal sacrifice, suggest that large seasonal, temporary gatherings may have taken place, drawing people from a wide area.[46] Such sites are causing questions to be asked about simple site hierarchy models based on status, and the role of enclosed sites.

These ideas are also relevant to the island or riverside sites. These are a relatively new phenomenon, located as archaeologists increasingly explore the potential of wetlands. At Runnymede Bridge rich midden deposits are associated with timber buildings and evidence of craft working. South of Wallingford a similar site was located on a Bronze Age island, also with middens, timber structures and exotic artefacts, such as goldwork.[47] Excavation here was limited as the new bridge over the river for the Wallingford by-pass was designed to preserve most of the site *in situ*.

Initially these sites were interpreted as high status settlements controlling the movement of prestige goods along the Thames. Now this interpretation is less convincing as inland sites with similar characteristics have been found. A series of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age bridges – or timber structures projecting into the Thames – has recently been found at the Eton Rowing Lake site.[48] These are associated with deposits of human bone, food deposits and artefacts such as a 'new' ard made of field maple (*Acer campestre*), apparently carefully placed in the shallows or on small sand banks. The role of the island and riverside sites may, therefore, be more complex than first thought.

The growing complexity of the Late Bronze Age archaeological record is clearly demonstrated by the number of known open settlements. In the Kennet Valley the largest complex of fields and settlements has been excavated at the Reading Business Park.[49] More recent excavations (adjacent to the published ones) have revealed an extensive zoned settlement of round houses, four-post structures (granaries?) and pits adjacent to a stream along which are extensive deposits of burnt mounds and water holes. These sites seem to be involved principally in pastoral farming and the production of secondary products, including textiles. There are contrasts with neighbouring sites such as Aldermaston Wharf which has greater quantities of finer pottery. The slightly higher and drier sites also produce evidence of spinning and weaving. The lower sites, in contrast, produce loom weights. This is a pattern also observed on Upper Thames Iron Age sites. At Farmoor, for example, a site which has been convincingly shown to be occupied by livestock herders only in summer also produced loom weights.[50] This

[44] Information from Richard Bradley for Liddington Castle, the author's excavations at Uffington Castle, and also further work by Gary Lock and Chris Gosden: see G. Lock and C. Gosden, 'Hillforts of the Ridgeway Project: excavations at Uffington Castle 1994–5', *South Midlands Archaeol.* 27 (forthcoming); G. Lock and C. Gosden, 'Hillforts of the Ridgeway Project: excavations at Segsbury Camp 1996', *South Midlands Archaeol.* 27 (forthcoming).

[45] Bradley, op. cit. note 35, 40–1.

[46] Ibid. 42.

[47] S. Needham, *Excavation and Salvage at Runnymede Bridge, 1978: the Late Bronze Age Waterfront Site* (Brit. Museum Publ., 1991); G. Lambrick, 'Wallingford By-pass: Late Bronze Age Settlement', *South Midlands Archaeol.* 17 (1987), 99–100.

[48] Allen et al., op. cit. note 26.

[49] Moore and Jennings, op. cit. note 32.

[50] Lambrick and Robinson, op. cit. note 25.

suggests that the seasonal shielings were occupied by family groups including women and that weaving was not just a winter activity as in some societies.

Excavations at Yarnton are revealing similar patterns in the Upper Thames. In the Middle Bronze Age there were small groups of four to six buildings with wells, cooking areas and a relatively high density of artefacts. In the Late Bronze Age there are houses in the flood plain, on slightly raised islands, with no ditch systems and a low level of artefacts. These preliminary results suggest a pattern similar to that in the Reading area. Like the Kennet Valley this is a landscape subjected in the Late Bronze Age to the increasing problems of flooding.

At these Later Bronze Age sites deposits of burnt stones or burnt mounds are frequently found – usually along the edges of watercourses. The process which produced burnt mounds is still not clear but suggestions include saunas and feasting. The common elements are small stones (quartz pebbles from the second gravel terrace at Yarnton) which have been subject to heating, water troughs or streams and generally a lack of artefacts or animal bones. The aim seems to have been to produce hot water or steam. Of course, several activities may lie behind these deposits, including craft or industrial activities, washing or steaming wool. They are, at any rate, a common element in the Later Bronze Age landscape and often lie close to settlements.

A third area, the Downlands around White Horse Hill, has also produced evidence of intensive Late Bronze Age occupation. The Rams Hill enclosure was excavated in the early 1970s.[51] More recently field survey and small scale excavations have produced interesting results. The hillfort at Uffington Castle has its origin in the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age transition and is associated with major linear boundaries. Nearby are a number of sites which have produced Late Bronze Age metalwork – at Weathercock Hill, Wayland's Smithy and, most spectacularly, the bronze worker's hoard of unfinished axes, casting debris and scrap at Tower Hill.[52] This hoard was buried in a shallow pit in the doorway of a roundhouse, within a large open settlement on the promontory of Tower Hill overlooking Wayland's Smithy. Although archaeological investigations on the Downs are on a small scale they are revealing a dense and complex pattern of landuse and settlement. Most enigmatic of all is the famous White Horse itself, whose origins have long been disputed. Recent dating by Optical Stimulated Luminescence has indicated an origin for the White Horse in the early first millennium BC.[53] It is possible that the Horse appears, as the most spectacular of territorial markers, just when the surrounding landscape is systematically divided up by competitive agricultural communities.

EARLY/MIDDLE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT AND SOCIETY

The excavation programmes of the 1970s and '80s attempted to examine a wide variety of Iron Age sites in close proximity to each other. Behind this strategy lay the concept of site hierarchies and central places. This fitted into the general concept of Iron Age societies as hierarchical and dominated by a warrior élite.

At a functional level this programme was very successful. Floodplain settlements at Farmoor were shown to be seasonally occupied by pastoralists with houses and paddocks occupied for the period of only a few years. At Claydon Pike, in similar but slightly drier locations,

[51] R. Bradley and A. Ellison, *Rams Hill* (Brit. Archaeol. Rep. 19, 1975).
[52] Author's excavations.
[53] D. Miles and S. Palmer, 'White Horse Hill', *Current Archaeology*, 142 (1995), 372–8.

pastoralists expended energy in the Middle Iron Age on the construction of drainage systems. Sheep and cattle were kept, with the latter more significant on low lying sites, and horse rearing became increasingly important.[54]

In contrast, on the higher gravel terraces permanent farmsteads practised a mixed economy, and from the Late Bronze Age arable farming became increasingly intensive and spread on to heavier, damper soils. Emmer wheat production significantly decreased after the Late Bronze Age; six rowed hulled barley (*Hordeum vulgare L. Emend*) and spelt wheat (*Triticum spelta L.*) became the principal cereal crops in the region. The importance of bread wheat may have been exaggerated in recent accounts.[55] Palaeo-botanical studies have increased enormously our knowledge of late prehistoric crops and the ecology of their fields. They have also highlighted the presence of so-called 'consumer' and 'producer' sites. These terms have caused some confusion.[56] However, the basic premise, originally proposed by Martin Jones, remains intact: the spelt/barley settlements of the region fall into two patterns – those growing, processing and consuming grain, and others receiving crops grown at separate but nearby localities. The pastoral sites fall into this category, while settlements such as Ashville, Abingdon and Gravelly Guy belong to the former.[57]

It is becoming clear that in order to understand the relationships of these Iron Age settlements to one another that we need to investigate on a large scale and persist in the examination of an area for many years. We can now see, for example, that the 1973 excavation at Ashville, Abingdon, was no more than a key-hole into an extensive Early/Middle Iron Age landscape. This site pioneered biological studies but it is not possible from the 1973 excavation evidence to understand the scale or organisation of the settlement within its landscape.

In contrast the Gravelly Guy farmstead can now be seen within a much broader context (see Fig. 2). It is one of a series of mixed farming settlements established around the edge of the gravel terrace in the Early Iron Age. A deterministic site-catchment analysis would probably suggest to us that the light soils of the central terrace provided the main arable resource for the settlements. In fact this area remained as pasture, perhaps the common grazing of the local communities. The principal factor behind this appears to have been the presence of the Devil's Quoits henge monument and the rash of barrows around it. An ancient pattern of grazing survived until the Roman period. The principal arable land lay beyond the settlements, on the edge of the terrace and on to the lower ground. Linear bands of storage pits occupied the area between the zones of different land use.

At Gravelly Guy some 700 pits and approximately 30 houses probably represent an extended family group (or possibly two). The neighbouring settlements are similar in scale. The round houses are remarkably alike with a similar range of domestic and processing activities around each household; only metalworking is separated from the everyday, common household activities.

The evidence suggests that the Iron Age settlements on the Stanton Harcourt gravels were of similar status. There is no evidence of a hierarchical structure in terms of buildings or artefacts. As the nearby floodplain area was cleared of woodland, enclosed farmsteads were established, slightly later in the Middle Iron Age, such as Watkins Farm (Northmoor) and

[54] Hingley and Miles, op. cit. note 6, 59, Fig. 4.4.

[55] Mark Robinson pers. comm.

[56] M. Jones, 'Plant Exploitation', in T.C. Champion and J.R. Collis (eds.), *The Iron Age in Britain and Ireland: Recent Trends* (1996), 34–5.

[57] M. Jones, 'Regional Patterns of Crop Exploitation', in Cunliffe and Miles, op. cit. note 6, 120–5.

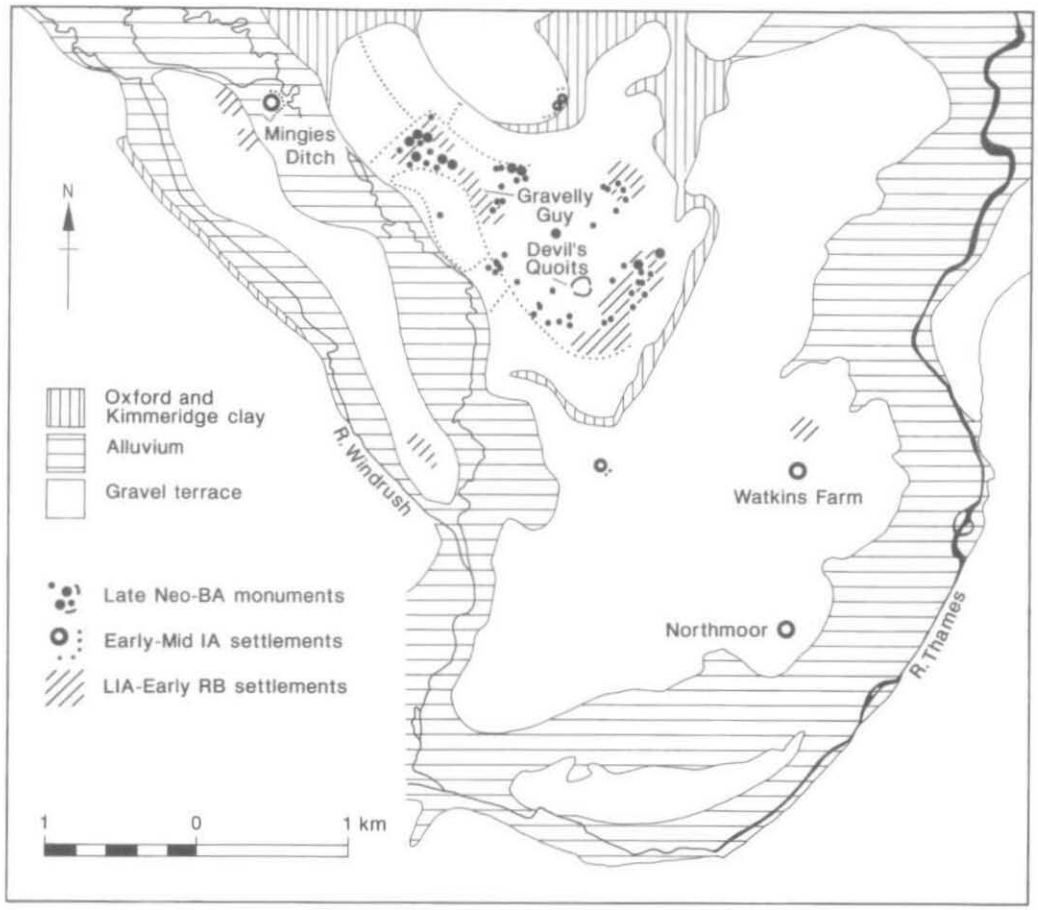

Fig. 2. Late prehistoric settlements around Devil's Quoits, Stanton Harcourt.

Mingies Ditch.[58] These are pastoral farms but again based on family units with no evidence of higher social status. All indicate an integrated system of family farms. Similar patterns can be seen (albeit less clearly) at Claydon Pike, Yarnton and in the Abingdon area.

These sites provide useful data for examining the hierarchical models proposed by Hingley[59] and Cunliffe.[60] Hingley argued the interesting proposition that settlements on the Cotswolds represented new colonizing sites, more socially bounded (symbolised by their enclosures) and

[58] T.G. Allen, *An Iron Age and Romano-British Enclosed Settlement at Watkins Farm, Northmoor, Oxon.* (Thames Valley Landscapes: the Windrush Valley, Vol. 1, 1990); T.G. Allen and M.A. Robinson, *The Prehistoric Landscape and Iron Age Enclosed Settlement at Mingies Ditch* (Thames Valley Landscapes: the Windrush Valley , Vol. 2, 1993).

[59] R. Hingley, 'Towards Social Analysis in Archaeology: Celtic society in the Iron Age of the Upper Thames Valley', in Cunliffe and Miles, op. cit. note 6, 72–88.

[60] B. Cunliffe, *Danebury* (1993).

in areas less subject to traditional tribal/clan ownership. This may have launched a pattern of 'private' ownership in the Iron Age, resulting in the Roman period in the development of villas. We can now see a similar pattern of colonization by enclosed sites on the floodplain. But these sites were integrated into the local system of family farms and communal activities; artefactual and structural evidence does not indicate higher status.

Cunliffe's hillfort model based on Danebury has been subject recently to much debate – only possible, of course, because of the scale and detailed publication of this excavation. There is not sufficient space to rehearse the complex arguments here. In brief one can simply say that the scale of grain storage and the range of artefacts at Gravelly Guy and other sites is comparable to Danebury and does not support the idea of hillforts acting as central places, dominated by a warrior hierarchy and providing a tribal granary for the purposes of redistribution. An alternative view is that hillforts acted as social and religious centres and temporary refuges for the surrounding communities. Unfortunately no hillforts in the region have been excavated on a sufficient scale to compare with those in Wessex.

If hillforts had a religious role, then so, it can be argued, had sites such as Gravelly Guy. In fact, this may be the wrong way to express it. Ritual observances were probably integrated in a cyclical and repetitive fashion into every aspect of daily life.[61] Hill and Cunliffe have pointed out the frequency with which special or placed deposits occur in the pits at Danebury and elsewhere.[62] Human remains, animal bones, pottery and other artefacts also occur frequently in pits in the Oxford region – most notably at Gravelly Guy. These also can be found in boundary ditches and the entrances to enclosed settlements. At the Eton Rowing Lake site pots, querns and a wooden ard deposited in watery locations support the idea that a single object can have the same function as a hoard.[63] There is no doubt that the symbolic and ritual nature of much Iron Age material has been underestimated in the past. However, it is not particularly convincing when archaeological missionaries of the symbolic argue that virtually all deposits are of a ritual character. The detailed studies of bone and ceramic scatters at Mingies Ditch, in the processualist tradition of Schiffer and Binford, indicate that there is still a need to identify discard patterns and appreciate the biography of rubbish.[64]

When Harding described the Upper Thames Iron Age 25 years ago he could cite only a handful of convincing house plans. Now there are scores, with particularly well preserved examples of round houses at Mingies Ditch and Claydon Pike.[65] Unfortunately there is still relatively little evidence of *in situ* activities: artefacts are rare, there are only a few examples of interior hearths, though rather more clay-lined pits of uncertain function inside the doors. In the Oxford region the pattern of east/south-east entrances is especially clear. A functionalist interpretation would explain this pattern in terms of prevailing wind from the west and morning light from the east. However, Oswald[66] has argued that this orientation was of cosmological

[61] Bordieu, op. cit. note 17.

[62] J.D. Hill, 'Re-thinking the Iron Age', *Scottish Archaeol. Review*, 6 (1989), 16–24; J.D. Hill, *Ritual and Rubbish in the Iron Age of Wessex* (Brit. Archaeol.Rep. 242, 1995).

[63] For the symbolic role of boundaries and placed deposits, see the recent articles by Richard Hingley: R. Hingley, 'Boundaries surrounding Iron Age and Romano-British Settlements', *Scottish Archaeol. Review*, 7 (1990), 96–103; R. Hingley, 'Iron, Ironworking and Regeneration: a study of the symbolic meaning of metalwork in Iron Age Britain', in Gwilt and Haselgrove, op. cit. note 22. Local deposits include a hoard with a sickle at Madmarston hillfort and a ploughshare from the Iron Age levels below the Frilford temple site. Like the ards from Eton and Ashville, Abingdon, they may be ritually connected with the agricultural site.

[64] Allen and Robinson, op. cit. note 58, 125.

[65] T. Allen, D. Miles and S. Palmer, 'Iron Age Buildings in the Upper Thames Region', in Cunliffe and Miles, op. cit. note 6, 98–9.

[66] A. Oswald, 'A Doorway on the Past: practical and mystical concerns in the orientation of roundhouse doorways', in Gwilt and Haselgrove, op. cit. note 22, 87–95.

rather than purely functional significance and that entrance orientations do not always reflect the prevailing wind direction. He would explain them in relation to significant points on the solar calendar (the sunrise at the equinoxes and the midwinter solstice).

Theories about Early/Middle Iron Age belief systems, rituals and symbols have not been made easier by the lack of cemeteries. It is now clear that fragments of human skeletons are frequently found in pits, along with animal remains. Perhaps these are metaphors in the cycle of life and death, described by Bordieu and argued by Hingley.[67] The lack of formal burials, however, suggests that the common rite (such as excarnation or burial in rivers) led to the disappearance of most human remains from the archaeological record at this period.

The recent discovery of a Middle Iron Age cemetery at Yarnton is, therefore, particularly important. Thirty-five crouched burials were lain with their heads to the north facing south. They were of mixed age and sex and had no grave goods. The cemetery was about 50 m. north-west of the settlement of round houses. Nine of the burials were dated by radiocarbon determination, indicating that the cemetery was in use in the period 300–225 cal BC (88% probability).[68] In view of this discovery, it may be useful to examine the regional record for other possible Iron Age burials.

THE LATE IRON AGE: HIERARCHIES AND LONG DISTANCE TRADE

The archaeological record for the Middle Iron Age suggests an expanding population of farmers in an intensively exploited landscape. There is, however, relatively little evidence for social and economic hierarchies or large agglomerations of people in single sites – in other words people lived in small, albeit inter-connected communities, and were for the most part self-sufficient.[69]

In the Late Iron Age (from about 100 BC) there is evidence of change. New sites appear in the landscape such as the rectangular enclosed farmstead at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon and the horse ranch at Thornhill Farm, near Lechlade.[70] There also seems to be increasing regional variation. The Upper Thames Valley, west of Oxford and east of Lechlade, remains relatively unchanged; an area of traditional Iron Age farming. In contrast around Abingdon and Dorchester the pace of change is more rapid. We know from coin evidence that this is an area on the boundary zone of tribal groups. The Thames may have acted both as an artery of communication and a frontier. The most important site for this period is the 47 hectare oppidum of Dyke Hills, Dorchester in the confluence formed by the Thames and the Thame. Unfortunately, except for some small scale work by General Pitt Rivers it has never been excavated. However, cropmarks suggest that occupation in Dyke Hills was on a scale not seen in any other Iron Age settlement in the region.[71] Cropmarks also indicate that there may be wharves along its bank with the Thames.

Dyke Hills has enormous potential for research but we now know it is not the only such

[67] Bordieu, op. cit. note 17; Hingley, op. cit. note 63.

[68] G. Hey pers. comm.

[69] While most households produced their own food and undertook essential crafts, certain goods were brought long distance. At Gravelly Guy querns came from Sussex, Hertfordshire and Herefordshire, and the northern England salt came from the Droitwich area.

[70] D. Miles (ed.), *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon.* (CBA Res. Rep. 50/ Oxf. Archaeol. Unit Rep. 3, 1986); D. Miles, 'Romano-British Settlement in the Gloucestershire Thames Valley', in A. Saville (ed.), *Archaeology in Gloucestershire* (1984), 91–211.

[71] Hingley and Miles, op. cit. note 6, 67, Fig. 4.9.

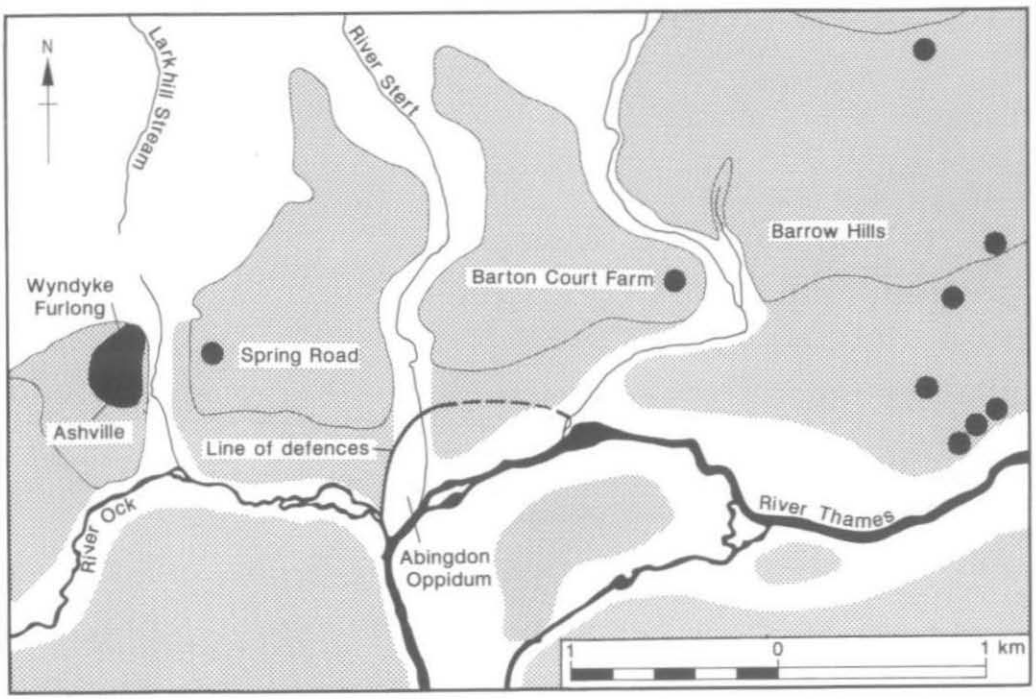

Fig. 3. Late prehistoric sites around Abingdon.

site on the Thames below Oxford. Recent excavations by Tim Allen beneath central Abingdon have located another massively defended oppidum at the confluence of the Thames and the Ock[72] (Fig. 3). Like Dyke Hills this also probably channelled water along its ditches; inside there was dense activity, with round houses, craft and metal working and exotic imports.

At this period south-east England is being drawn into the Roman World System. The evidence is clearest to the east, for example around St. Albans, with its spectacular chiefly or royal burials and imported Roman prestige goods.[73] Dyke Hills and Abingdon were probably on the edge of this new economic and political system, perhaps acting as entrepôts between the south-east and inland Britain. We might expect to find agricultural produce, raw materials, textiles and slaves being drawn through them into the Roman sphere of influence. It is in this context that new farms like Barton Court appear. This, perhaps, does fit Hingley's Cotswold model of a privately owned farm belonging to an aspiring British family; defining their property with a rectangular enclosure, using coins and wheel thrown pottery and practising farming which, unlike their more traditional neighbours at Ashville, did not lead to nitrogen deficiency in the soil. Barton Court Farm continues on its Roman trajectory, building a rectangular house in the first century AD and subsequently a Romanised villa, expanding its holdings down on to the floodplain.

[72] Tim Allen, pers. comm.

[73] S.R. Bryant and R. Niblett, 'The Late Iron Age in Hertfordshire and the North Chilterns', in Gwilt and Haselgrove, op. cit. note 22, 270–81.

Another pattern of Late Iron Age change can be observed in the Lechlade area, where specialised horse ranches are established within the sphere of influence of the Bagendon oppidum. Later, arguably following a period of Roman military control, villas appear.

WHERE NOW?

What have we learnt from the past two decades of work?

- That persistence pays. Only after 25 years of work in Abingdon was the oppidum located. Now a mass of small observations begin to make sense.

- Prehistoric sites and activities are virtually everywhere and no area should be assumed to be lacking archaeological interest. It is necessary not only to examine supposed settlements, but the areas in between. Buried soils, fields, watercourses, scattered burials, 'isolated' activities occur off-site, but contribute to our picture of how people, crops and animals move about and relate with their landscape.

- Sites should not be studied on their own. They need to be sampled in a structured way so that comparison can be made between neighbouring settlements. This is especially important in the new world of contract archaeology. Comparisons also need to be made with other, particularly neighbouring regions.

- We now know that economic and ritual activities take place across the countryside. Programmes of systematic fieldwalking, metal detecting and sampling have worked spectacularly well at Yarnton (previously a virtual blank on the archaeological map). Survey programmes need to be expanded.

- We know very little about hillforts and valley forts of the region. Geophysical survey has worked well at Segsbury Camp. More is needed along with sampling exercises to establish chronology and the density and character of settlement.

- We should be capable of more structured, less destructive forms of investigation, targeting specific questions.

- Environmental studies should exploit the possibilities of the newly discovered peat fen deposits.

- The Cotswold slopes have enormous potential and represent a huge gap in our knowledge of the region. Aerial photography has shown the variety of sites. This is an area of outstanding importance which deserves to be the subject of further intensive investigation and programmes of site management should be developed.

- The emphasis on rescue archaeology has led to a neglect of synthetic work on artefacts. Detailed analysis is needed, particularly of ceramic fabrics, vessel types, size and function.

- We now have a mass of evidence about late prehistoric Britain, but it is not properly represented in museum displays, educational material or books for the general public. Archaeologists need to make this information available to the widest possible public.

In a recent survey of the Iron Age, Gwilt and Haselgrove said that Wessex and the Upper Thames Valley were 'over represented in relation to the rest of (Iron Age) Britain'.[74] We should not be modest about this region. We have learnt quite a lot in the past two decades, but Richard Hingley and I prefaced our 1984 survey of the region with a quote from Karl Popper: 'The further we progress in knowledge the more clearly we can discern the vastness of our ignorance'. That much has not changed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In order to produce a reasonably up-to-date synthesis I have had to pick the brains of many colleagues working in the Oxford region and ask them to summarise new data, often ahead of publication and even their complete analysis. The conclusions could, therefore, change – and no doubt will. I am particularly grateful to Tim Allen, Richard Bradley, Roger Featherstone, Gill Hey, Graham Keevill, George Lambrick, Gary Lock, Andy Mudd, Mark Robinson and Dave Yates. The illustrations have been produced by Sam Whitby.

[74] Gwilt and Haselgrove, op. cit. note 22, 1.