Flint Use in Later Bronze Age and Iron Age England - Still a Fiction?

Jodie Humphrey and Robert Young

School of Archaeological Studies, University of Leicester, England, UK.

INTRODUCTION

In 1981 Alan Saville wrote a paper in this journal entitled ‘Iron Age Flint Working - a Fact or Fiction?’ In it he reviewed A. J. Smith’s appraisal of what she thought was evidence for Iron Age Flint working at Meare (Smith 1981). Saville argued that there was insufficient evidence in the archaeological record to support her contention. He maintained that the accepted archaeological wisdom that flint working disappeared from archaeological view at the end of the Bronze Age was still the correct interpretation of available date. In effect, he concluded that Iron Age flint working was a fiction.

We are of the opinion that there is now a growing body of finds which might challenge this notion. We offer this contribution to stimulate some debate on the subject.

Table 1 lists a range of sites (compiled from a non-intensive literature search) where we think that a case can be made for the continued, regular use of flint in the Late Bronze and Iron Age periods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Name, County</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dunston Park, Thatcham, Berks</td>
<td>Healey and Harding 1995, 65-92</td>
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<tr>
<td>St Ives, Cambs</td>
<td>Pollard 1996, 93-116</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lofts Farm, Essex</td>
<td>Holgate 1988, 249-303</td>
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<td>Broads Green, Essex</td>
<td>Holgate 1988a, 7-14</td>
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<td>Asheldham Camp, Essex</td>
<td>Martingell 1991, 14-28</td>
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<td>Birchanger, Essex</td>
<td>Austin 1994a, 28-45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saffron Walden, Essex</td>
<td>Austin 1994b</td>
</tr>
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<td>Grove Farm, Leics</td>
<td>Young and O’Sullivan 1992, 1-69</td>
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<td>Normanton-le-Heath, Leics</td>
<td>Young and O’Sullivan 1994, 50-56</td>
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<td>Wanlip, Leics</td>
<td>Humphrey and Cooper forthcoming</td>
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<td>West Harling, Micklemoor Hill, Norf</td>
<td>Clarke and Fell 1953, 1-40.</td>
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<td>London Road, Thetford, Norf</td>
<td>Gardiner 1993, 441-461.</td>
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<td>Silfield, Wymondham, Norf</td>
<td>Robins 1996, 241-286</td>
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<td>Hunstanton, Soms</td>
<td>Wymer 1983, 286-294</td>
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<td>Dibble’s Farm, Soms</td>
<td>Morris 1988, 23-81</td>
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<td>Meare Village West, Soms</td>
<td>St George Gray 1966; Smith 1981, 65-66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meare Village East</td>
<td>St George Gray 1966; Orme et al. 1983; Coles 1987</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glastonbury Lake Village, Wilts</td>
<td>Bulleid and St. George Gray 1917</td>
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<tr>
<td>Figheldean, Wilts</td>
<td>Harding Newman 1993, 8-57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warren Hill, Wilts</td>
<td>Stevens 1993, unpublished</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winnal Down, Wilts</td>
<td>Winham in Fasham 1985</td>
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Table 1. Sites with Later Bronze Age and Iron Age flint material

RESIDUALITY AND RECEIVED ARCHAELOGICAL WISDOM

Most lithic material from Later Bronze Age and Iron Age sites is written off as ‘residual’. Saville himself noted that this problem ‘must always loom so large in any consideration of the presence of flint work on later prehistoric sites’ (1981, 8). We would not of course wish to argue that residuality does not occur on archaeological sites. We feel, however, that this problem needs to be more rigorously considered and that the term and its implications should not be used simply as a ‘catch-all’ that might free the specialist from a detailed assessment of the difficulties of site and assemblage formation. In other words, we need to be quite clear about what activities flint and other so-called ‘residual’ material is actually ‘residual’ from. The frequent, and possibly unthinking, use of the term might allow for a massive oversimplification of a complex pattern of resource use on later sites. We think that a re-examination of archaeological approaches to this phenomenon and to the problems and challenges of identifying recovering contemporary lithic material from Later Bronze Age and Iron Age sites is both essential and timely.
Space precludes a full discussion of the individual assemblages (but see Humphrey and Young, forthcoming). Cynics may argue that much of the material from the sites listed above is residual, relating to earlier activity at the same location. This potential criticism raises a crucial point which needs to be addressed before going further.

Linked to this problem we would contend that another major stumbling block in a serious consideration of the late use of flint is archaeologists’ own accepted wisdoms and their own mind-set. No-one has a problem with Middle Bronze Age flint working (Hem 1992; Edmonds 1995) or with the idea of a gradual decline of knapping skills over time, leading to the production of a restricted range of tools from the Later Neolithic period onwards (Ford et al. 1984).

However, the problems in interpretation begin with the gradual disappearance of a wide range of formal tools, which can be easily assigned to typological categories and clear ‘period’ division. From the Middle Bronze Age onwards we are increasingly left with low quality, undiagnostic material like ‘scrapers’ and ‘awls’ - the very artefacts that make up the bulk of the formal tool types recorded on the sites in Table 1. As a result, the archaeological recognition of later flint assemblage becomes a highly variable circumstance.

Here, lithic analysts run the risk of getting caught up in a downward spiral: the range of easily classifiable and datable tools decreases over time, and therefore excavators do not expect to recover contemporary Later Bronze Age or Iron Age flint assemblages from excavations. They cease to look for such material, and in the worse case might even discard lithic finds without proper examination. This, in turn, exacerbates the tendency to write off flint from post-Middle Bronze Age contexts as ‘residual’.

If, as we will argue, lithic use was largely functional and utilitarian from the Middle Bronze Age onward and was not geared to making statements about status and prestige as had been the case in earlier periods, then the rate and scale of flint utilisation on later sites wold have depended on a range of variables. These would include the availability of flint, its ease of procurement, resource perception on the part of local communities, and regional variation in tradition of stone working. As a result, it is probably unwise to talk in blanket terms about an ‘end’ to flint working, which may have declined at different times in different places.

Maybe we need to alter our attitudes to take account of this last observation, and pay more attention to lithic material on later sites on a site-by-site basis. It may no longer be useful, or helpful, to continue to regard the presence of a small flint assemblage on a late site ‘as no more remarkable than those flint assemblages recorded from the excavations of many Romano-British and Medieval sites when full artefact recovery is practised, and no more indicative of post-Bronze Age flint production’ (Saville 1981, 8).

Scepticism about the continued exploitation of stone resources in the later prehistoric period has not always been the archaeological norm. As early as 1932, Aplin’s original excavations at Micklemoor Hill, West Harling, Norfolk, identified potential Iron Age flint working. Similar finds were also made by Clarke and Apling (1935) at Warborough Hill, Stiffkey. Writing on the ‘Iron Age in Norfolk and Suffolk’, Clarke (1939, 36) had no difficulty in accepting that ‘the abundance of excellent flint in East Anglia renders it a cheap and effective material for tool making in all periods’.

Clark and Fell (1953) discussed the results of their three seasons of work at Micklemoor Hill, West Harling, in Norfolk in a similar vein, and no-one has ever questioned their suggestion that the West Harling material dated to the Later Bronze Age/Early Iron Age.

The points we have raised thus far also resonate with remarks made by Ford et al. (1984, 157-173). In this paper the authors considered the relationship between flint technology and the development of metalworking in Britain. They suggested (1984, 161) that the lack of typological variation in flint assemblages from the Neolithic onwards may be a reflection of the fact that, over time, a smaller number of artefacts were being made of flint, and that there was a reduction in the range and number of activities for which lithic artefacts were required.

Their work showed a gradual decrease in the level of knapping skill, as evidenced by increased flake thickness, increasing bulbar angles and a decrease in the number of regular flake terminations (Ford et al. 1984, 164-165). In addition, the range of regularly retouched implements decreased from the Later Neolithic period through to the Later Bronze Age, a phenomenon which the authors linked to the gradual development of task-specific metal tools (Ford et al. 1984, 165-167).

At this point, we would like to suggest a range of criteria that we have developed for the study and identification of later lithic material. These were isolated initially as a result of the detailed examination of 15 flint assemblages from Later Bronze Age and Iron Age in the East Midland and the South of England (Humphrey 1996, unpublished; Humphrey and Yong forthcoming; see also Martingell 1988; Robins 1996). Bringing these criteria to bear upon a review of additional published sites, we have, to date, identified the 21 examples of potential Later
Bronze and Iron Age flint use documented by the sites in Table 1.
We suggest that later Bronze Age and Iron Age flint assemblages will exhibit most of the following characteristics:

- Utilisation of highly localised raw materials - some of which may be of very low quality.
- Small assemblage numbers
- Simple core/flake technology, employing hard hammer, direct percussion.
- Lack of skill in knapping, evidenced by:
  i) Obtuse striking angles.
  ii) A high instance of step or hinge terminations.
  iii) Thick, wide striking platforms
  iv) Irregular dorsal flake scar patterns on flakes.
  v) Short, squat flakes - L/B ratio 1:1
  vi) A high instance of chips and chunks.
  vii) Irregular core morphology.
  viii) The presence of incipient cones of percussion on core striking platforms.

- A restricted range of formal tool types (scrapers, awls etc).
- Crude hammerstones.
- A predominance of secondary and inner flakes.
- Possible evidence for re-cycling of earlier lithic material.

CONTEXTS OF USE, ECONOMIC CHANGES AND SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES

Based on our literature search and the above observationists, we suggest, contra Saville (1981), that it may be precisely in the domestic sphere that lithic utilisation went on the longest: continuing well into the Iron Age in certain areas. In order to set this argument into context, however, it is necessary to consider the processes involved in the ‘replacement’ of stone tools by metal artefacts.

From the Middle Bronze Age onwards certain trends are observable in lithic technology, including:

1) A decline in knapping skills.
2) The increased use of locally available raw materials
3) The non-curation of products
4) A growth in the expedient production of artefacts.
5) The restricted range of recognisable ‘tool’ types
6) An emphasis on thick, squarish flakes.
7) Flake scars on the dorsal surfaces of pieces are not regular, perhaps indicating that cores were simply rotated to find a good edge to use as a striking platform (see Edmonds 1995, 184; Herne 1992, 35-47).

Herne suggests (1992, 67) that throughout the Bronze Age the gradual decline in the use and range of flint and stone tools reflects the fact that these tools were required to fulfill fewer and fewer functions. As a result, he argues, that incentive to invest time and effort in flint procurement was lessened. At the same time and for the same reasons, less attention was paid to primary knapping or secondary flake modification. As a corollary, more attention was paid to expedient manufacture of flint tools.

It may be possible to argue, however, that the apparent decline in flint use has more important social implications that this straightforward economic picture suggests. By the end of the Middle Bronze Age nearly all of the recognisable lithic assemblages are found in settlement contexts and are intimately bound up with the domestic mode of production (Herne 1992, 67; Edmond 1995, 184-186).

It is now a commonly held view among prehistorians and others that tools and artefacts can have both utilitarian and symbolic or social functions, and that patterns of artefact use can be a medium of expression for particular social interests. In the early second millennium bc new techniques of flint working, such as invasive retouch, resulted in the manufacture of many highly formalised, ‘fancy’, lithic artefacts, including knives, daggers and arrowheads (Herne 1992, 72). Edmond had argued that the restricted distribution and consumption of these ‘fancy’ items was integral to strategies of social demarcation (1995, 122-183). By the end of the Early Bronze Age, however, with the growing (if still restricted) circulation of metal objects among elites, there was a gradual diminution of the capacity of stone tools to stand for people and practices (Edmond 1995, 187). The eventual outcome was movement away from flint as a medium for the public constitution of ideas about self and society.

At the same time as this transition was going on through the Middle Bronze Age, Edmond further suggests that the:

‘Metaphorical qualities of settlements and field systems may have come to play an increasingly important part in shaping people’s understanding of their place within the community and within the broader social landscape’ (1995, 187).

The contexts in which the division of labour operated rather than material display via artefacts, may have become the important media through which people and their social roles were defined. It is this seeming
shift in terms of social emphasis - rather than any great change in economics or subsistence - which Edmond suggests might better account for the treatment of stone by the end of the Bronze Age (Edmond 1995, 187-188).

The erosion of the prestige-based role and the overtly social dimensions of stone had a material effect on tradition attitudes to procurement, production and consumption strategies. This was probably a gradual process, and:

‘With each generation less and less importance may have been attached to the maintenance of traditional patterns of procurement... where stone tools no longer served as important metaphors for people or their roles and connections, the boundaries between formal artefact categories may have become increasingly blurred. Indeed the learning of complex knapping techniques may itself have ceased to be an important feature in the lives of many people’ (Edmonds 1995, 188).

On this reading, flint and stone tool production and use may gradually have been located solely in the domestic sphere. The range of different, easily recognisable, tools gradually decreased until they became entirely functional and utilitarian.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF LATER FLINT USE

If all of the above holds good for the fate of flint and stone tools in the Middle Bronze Age, why can researchers not accept that similar processes may have continued beyond this period, as the domestic mode of production became more important in certain areas (eg Hill 1994; 1995a; 1995b on Iron Age Wessex)?

It is our contention that all of the sites listed above have procured lithic material of Later Bronze Age/Iron Age date. We believe that there are no reasons now for doubting the continued knapping and utilisation of flint at these and other locations in late and post-Bronze Age contexts. On the basis of this brief survey, we propose that the technologic and morphological features listed at the beginning of this paper might help us to isolate Later Bronze Age/Iron Age flint working, and might equip us with criteria for the identification of later material on sites where there is also obvious evidence for residuality.

Ultimately, this contribution is a statement relating to on-going research and it is also a plea for a reconsideration of accepted ideas about the use of flint in the ‘metal age’. Lithics has always had a good reputation for the standard of its debate and we welcome any comments on this note.

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