

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE ASSESSMENT 2011

3) IRON AGE

Version: 28/1/2012

3. Iron Age Research Agenda

This document sets out an archaeological research agenda for Oxford covering the Iron Age periods. The document should be read in conjunction with the period resource assessment for the City (Oxford City Council forthcoming) and the Thames Solent Regional Research Agenda (2010).

3.1 Overview

Oxford has great potential for the further investigation and understanding of the Iron Age period. Nationally important Middle Iron Age settlement remains survive at Port Meadow, including extant round house earthworks and associated waterlogged deposits. The Iron Age grazing and stock management regimes at Port Meadow are of particular note because they appear to mirror subsequent patterns of use from the Late Saxon period onwards. The Local Authority Area (LAA) presents good opportunities to study settlement and land management patterns both in relation to the various topographies of the gravel terraces and Corallian Ridge and in relation to earlier Bronze Age monument complexes. Oxford has excellent potential for well-preserved environmental deposits within the river floodplains and for pollen sequences within local peat deposits. Oxford is also notable for being located on a border area between three significant tribal or dynastic groupings that emerge from the coin record in the Late Iron Age.

3.2 Zones of potential

The LAA has been divided into five broad landscape zones based on surface geology and relief (please note the geological areas have been simplified and are not intended to be used as a guide to local geology):

- A** The North Oxford terrace (Summertown-Radley and Wolvercote gravel terrace)
- B** The Thames floodplain and gravel islands
- C** The Cherwell floodplain (with pockets of gravel)
- D** The alluviated stream valleys of the Corallian Ridge
- E** The Corallian Ridge

Some research questions provide an assessment of potential for the zones listed above, these are referred to in terms of high potential (e.g. the zone has already demonstrated its ability to contribute to this agenda) or general potential based on comparison with similar landscapes.

3.3 Chronology

1. Oxford has general potential for understanding rural settlement and landscape development and a good potential for the preservation of environmental data and the use of scientific dates to refine chronologies.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D General; E General*
2. Of particular interest is the identification of sites addressing the apparent break in the archaeological record during the LBA-EIA.
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E General*

3.4 Landscape and land use

1. It has been suggested that Iron Age settlement patterns may have to some extent respected the pre-existing monumental landscape on the 1st gravel terrace, perhaps to a greater degree than on the 2nd gravel terrace. Can this theory be further tested?
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General*

2. To what extent might changes in overall rural settlement density and hydrology explain the changing patterns of land-use on the 1st and 2nd gravel terrace? How do patterns of activity compare with similar Upper Thames complexes?
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General*
3. Farming and clearance may be explored through further targeted study of deposits sealed by alluvium or colluvium (see Lambrick 2010). There is also good potential for palaeo-environmental analysis to develop our understanding of grassland, scrub, woodland cover and localised cultivation patterns in the LAA.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D High; E General*
4. Can patterns of tree clearance be identified in the different geologies of the LAA? Can any cycles of clearance and regeneration be identified?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D High; E High*
5. To what extent does the settlement evidence reflect seasonal or peripatetic activity rather than long term sedentary occupation during this period?
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D General; E General*
6. Can we further establish the origins, character and longevity of field/enclosure systems within the LAA.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D General; E General*
7. Can mixed farming patterns be demonstrated to be reasonably uniform and un-specialised across the floodplain, terrace and ridge?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E General*
8. To what extent is the regional Middle Iron Age pattern of small paddocks or cultivation plots adjacent to settlement enclosures the dominant model (given the lack of well excavated sites like Whitehouse Road)?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E General*
9. Lambrick (2010) has suggested that in the Thames Valley the transition from earlier Bronze Age hunter-gatherer groups to settled farms may have been a gradual trend from recurrent but dispersed occupation (both within and separate from enclosure) to more compact, organised settlement. By the early to middle Iron Age compact tightly constrained settlements, often indicative of more permanent year-round settlement, were typically located on topographical and/or land-use divisions. To what extent can this model be confirmed within the LAA?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E High*
10. How well settled was the landscape during the LIA to Roman transition? Did existing settlement patterns or boundaries have an effect on Roman rural landscape or the nascent 1st century manufacturing landscape (e.g. at the Churchill Hospital site)?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E High*
11. A series of investigations along St Aldates have allowed for the development of a detailed model of channel development across a north-south transect of the floodplain. Can Mark Robinson's model be further refined?
12. Can structures and deposits related to the utilisation (and crossing) of the floodplain channels be identified?
 - *Zone potential: A General; C General*

3,5 Settlement

1. Evidence for early Iron Age settlement is sparse and remains a high priority for investigation.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B General; C General; D General; E High*

2. A wide variety of geologies were occupied in the MIA-LIA. What are the similarities and differences between these and other settlements in terms of specialisation, evidence for mixed farming, un-enclosed or enclosed morphology, evidence for higher or lower status in diets and artefacts?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E General*
3. Can the intensification of settlement density and patterns of mixed farming be related to a switch from family to more communal management strategies of animals and crops that might be reflected in settlement layout and material culture? (See Lambrick 2010.)
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E General*
4. A general model for MIA settlement in the Upper Thames would be intensified occupation of the gravel terraces by the early 3rd century BC followed by a shift or abandonment in the 1st century BC possibly coinciding with the onset of clay alluviation. Can this model be confirmed and developed? How does this model for the gravel terraces contrast with activity on the Corallian Ridge?
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D General; E High*
5. Is there an 'average' population or landholding unit size underlying the distribution of Middle Iron Age settlement in the LAA; if so how does this vary between the terrace, floodplain and ridge?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E General*
6. Changes in settlement function should be compared to changes in other areas, e.g. pottery typologies, to look for relationships between them (see Lambrick 2010).
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E General*
7. Can we further identify and characterise defended sites within the LAA (both hill and valley)? Can Binsey or Osney Island be confirmed or excluded as potential LIA defended locations within the valley?
 - *Zone potential: E High B General*
8. Noting the small amount of animal bone recovered from Oxford sites careful consideration should be given to sampling strategies for well preserved pit assemblages, especially where organic waste is present.
 - *Zone potential: A High B High C General D General E High*
9. The potential for well preserved waterlogged deposits associated with Iron Age settlement should be noted (e.g. at Port Meadow).
 - *Zone potential: B High C General D General*
10. Can the partially extant enclosure at Binsey be more closely dated and further understood?
 - *Zone potential: B High - site specific*

3,6 Ceremony and religion

1. Is the dearth of human remains on some settlement sites (e.g. Whitehouse Road) a reflection of settlement longevity or some other factor to do with location or function?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E High*
2. Can character and pattern of object deposition in the Thames and Cherwell (or other streams, bogs or springs) be further understood?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B High; C General; D General; E General*
3. Can further evidence for Late Iron Age pit burials be recovered from the LAA and if so what can be inferred about local and regional burial patterns and the status of the burials? Can we identify selection criteria for pit burials?

- *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E High*

3.7 Material Culture

1. Further research is required into the LBA to EIA transition in metalworking technology (see Bayley *et al.* 2008).
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
2. The recovery of sizable assemblages of LBA or EIA date would be of great value; is the apparent absence of such material a reflection of patterns of settlement or of investigation?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
3. Do Oxford settlements have the capacity to add to our understanding of exchange patterns along the Upper Thames?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
4. To what extent can the evidence from Oxford contribute to an understanding Late Iron Age coin distribution and to our understanding of tribal/dynastic zones of influence and trade?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
5. Watching briefs on significant river-widening and dredging works are highlighted as a regional objective, relevant to the Thames and its tributaries (see Haselgrove 2001).
 - *Zone potential: N/A*

3.8 Manufacturing and trade

1. Evidence for smithing and metalworking is of interest. How was this organised?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
2. The extent and character of iron/stone extraction/working is still poorly understood and mining sites are difficult to identify and date. Can Bog Iron deposits be located? Some evidence for Iron Age limestone quarrying has been recorded at Cowley; is there further evidence for early extraction from the Corallian Ridge? Was the limestone used for metallurgy yards (or causeway construction e.g. limestone causeways at Yarnton and Abingdon)?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
3. Further research into movement of raw materials such as flint. What can this tell us about changes in landscape use and technological and social organisation?
 - *Zone potential: N/A*
- 3 What is the relationship, if any, between Late Iron Age settlement in the East and South East Oxford the subsequent 1st century pottery industry?
 - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D High; E High*

3.9 Environmental sampling

1. Identifying deposits that could provide natural pollen and insect sequences to map environmental change through the period is a strong priority. Floodplain channel sequences not disturbed by later reworking are of particular interest, e.g. deposits associated with the proto Trill Mill Stream.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D High; E General*
2. Greater use of environmental sampling to help model changes to the palaeo-hydrology throughout the Iron Age may help explain how this affected settlement patterns on the floodplain such as at Whitehouse Road and Port Meadow.
 - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C General; D High; E General*

Compiled by Ruth Beckley and David Radford

For full acknowledgements please see the online Oxford Archaeological Plan Introduction document.

Abbreviations:

LBA – Late Bronze Age

EIA – Early Iron Age

MIA – Middle Iron Age

LIA – Late Iron Age

Bibliography

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Medlycott, M, & Brown, N, 2008 Revision of the Regional Research Frameworks for the Eastern Region

Haselgrove, C, 2001 Understanding the British Iron Age: An Agenda for Action. [online]. Available at: <http://www.personal.rdg.ac.uk/~lascretn/IAAgenda.htm> (accessed 25/08/10)

Weblink:

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Fig 1: Simplified geology map (areas of gravel island and Amphthill Clay have been amalgamated and are not shown, please see introduction document for a detailed surface geology map).

