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Borders and Boundaries

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Cultural and Chronological Boundaries: Views from Anthropology and Later Prehistoric Britain

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Abstract

This paper reviews how cultural and chronological boundaries and groups have been defined within later prehistoric archaeology and a selection of schools within social anthropology. These boundaries separate various peoples, practices and chronological periods, using the meanings conveyed in the terms 'culture', 'society', and 'community'. The similarities in the perspectives taken at various times between the disciplines of prehistory and anthropology are considered. Views that are recent and current within both disciplines – namely the trend towards fluidity of cultural boundaries – are evaluated. It is concluded that although these may promise more nuanced perspectives, they may instead obscure the grouping of data that is necessary for any socio-cultural interpretation. Furthermore, it is argued that informed socio-cultural interpretations should form the basis for new divisions within prehistory.

Introduction

The terms 'culture', 'society' and 'community' have an essential place in the analysis of any human group, but their definitions and applications have been long debated with very little agreement (e.g. Cohen 1985, pp. 11-12; Kuper 1999). These terms have always been contentious, but nowhere are the confusion and ambiguities more clear than in British prehistoric archaeology. Currently the term 'culture' is now largely ignored, with prehistorians afraid of being criticised or associated with out-dated theoretical models. This is in contrast to these terms in popular usage, where they are liberally bandied around and passionately used in thinking about the self and what it is to be human. This is not just a recent concern; creating a sense of communal identity is a ubiquitous feature of social life.

Anthropological Boundaries

As well as social groupings being an important part of the human experience, the creation of groups is necessary in any research pertaining to the social sciences. Some evidence has to be included in a dataset to create the basis for interpretation, whereas other evidence has to be excluded. The creation of such groups necessarily entails the creation of boundaries between them. Differing theoretical perspectives have placed these

boundaries in different places throughout the history of anthropological and archaeological research, resulting in divergent interpretations. I will argue that matching groups created for study with real social groupings as perceived by those within them will create more informed and useful categorisations.

Where boundaries have been placed in anthropology can be related to the position of the researcher on two important related theoretical trajectories. These should be considered as two continua, with extreme positions at each end. The first trajectory concerns the debate between universalism and relativism; the second between collectivism and individualism.

An extreme universalist would assume shared ideologies, symbols, practices, beliefs and values across large geographical and chronological frames, within which large cultural groups can be defined. A strict relativist, on the other hand, would only regard a very small group of people as belonging to a particular culture or sub-culture, only using information pertaining directly to this small group as relevant to their interpretation.

The second theoretical trajectory concerns the debate between collectivism and individualism. This sliding scale considers whether the individual or society is regarded as the most important object of study, and to which human behaviour and thought can be reduced to. Collectivist interpretations tend to emphasise culture, suggesting, either implicitly or explicitly, that cultural boundaries are fixed spatially and chronologically. Individualist interpretations instead tend to play down notions of culture, stressing the fluidity of any social and symbolic patterns with no clear boundaries between them.

Nineteenth Century

Prior to the work of Franz Boas and his students, anthropological interpretation in the second half of the nineteenth century was based on the cultural extension of Darwinian evolution. E. B. Tylor (1871), James Frazer (1894), L. H. Morgan (1877) and others all argued that societies progressed through a series of stages, which could be grouped and compared accordingly. This assumes a series of fundamental shared features between both societies within each group and humanity as a whole. This evolutionary perspective also provides a model for social change. Here, social change is predestined and predictable. Cultures steadily become more complex in their technology, symbolism and economic and social relationships, each heading towards the same destination.

This explodes the positioning of cultural boundaries by not placing geographical or chronological restrictions on them. Instead, a series of types were imposed that were irrespective of chronology or geography. Societies were grouped by their apparently shared technological, spiritual and other achievements. The most famous types are Morgan's (1877) 'savage', 'barbarian' and 'civilised', each following the last in development.

At this stage, the emerging disciplines of archaeology and anthropology were not yet separate. As the theoretical viewpoint did not see chronology as being particularly influential in drawing boundaries for study, anthropologists could easily cross into the world of antiquarianism and *vice versa.*

This progressivist perspective was applied directly to material culture, which led to the emergence of the Three Age system that is still used today. The primary stone, bronze, and iron tools are, in order, more technologically difficult to make and produce more functionally useful objects. As generally the main tools made from

these materials were not found together, it was deduced that these represented three different chronological periods. This provides a similar model of evolution with a predestined set of stages through which societies progress.

This model was applied not just to prehistoric Europe where it was developed, but contemporary societies across the world. This is demonstrated by the subtitle of John Lubbock's (1865) seminal book *Pre-Historic Times, as illustrated by ancient remains, and the manners and customs of modern savages,* which introduced the first subdivisions of the Three Ages periods, coining the terms Palaeolithic and Neolithic. Under this scheme, everyone across the world and throughout time could be put into a single evolutionary framework, with modern stone tool users providing direct information on the Stone Age in Europe (Lubbock 1865, p. 336).

Franz Boas and Cultural Relativity

It was the work of Franz Boas (e.g. 1940 [1930; 1932]) and his students that overthrew the evolutionary paradigm, replacing it with cultural relativity and historical particularism. Rather than regarding time, history and context as essentially immaterial to the cultural practices and values of a given society, Boas argued that the unique history of each society was fundamental in shaping their culture. Race did not determine culture, and neither did the environment (Boas 1940 [1930]). Boas and his successors argued that human groups could create limitless ways of living in the world that was not predictable by any outside factors. Understanding therefore could only be gained through the intensive and contextual study of a particular society, not through comparative work from the meagre and questionable data otherwise available from travellers and missionaries (Buckser 1997; Erikson 2010, p. 15). This transformed how anthropology was studied, drawing new epistemological boundaries that defined and contained societies geographically and chronologically.

This approach came to dominate American anthropology throughout the twentieth century, and still provides a basic building block for the modern discipline. Immersive participant observation in the field became the only method of collecting reliable data, and this was largely interpreted through relativist eyes. Prominent in this approach were Ruth Benedict, David Schneider, Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins (Kuper 1999). Examples of the extreme relativist approach include Schneider's (1984) insistence that even kinship has no basis in biology, is purely the construction of culture and can only be understood in cultural terms (Kuper 1999, chap. 4).

The effect of this relativistic perspective is that it creates specific cultures bound in space and time, each with its variety of attributes working off each other in a closed system, completely alien to any other way of life (e.g. Benedict 1934; Mead in Carrithers 1992, p. 15). Although in Britain at this time slightly less relativist approaches were dominant, functionalism – the prevailing school of thought - did agree that bounded, coherent cultural entities existed that should be studied as a whole. But what happened when two cultures inevitably meet? How could one begin to understand another if there were no shared traits or structures with which to communicate?

Having distinctly bounded cultural units, each so different from the next, does come with various problems. It makes it difficult to account for the movement, knowledge of other ways of life, and even direct cultural exchange and influence that occurs in all societies to varying degrees. Furthermore, there can certainly be understanding between two people from completely different cultures, as is

demonstrated by the many immigrants, traders and refugees that can live in their new homes while still holding onto previous values and beliefs (Kuper 1999, p. 243). This undermines the extreme relativity that dominated American and British schools. It suggests that boundaries for the study of societies should be more fluid and not only strictly defined by limited geographical and chronological fields.

1980s – Breaking Boundaries

This was what was argued by a number of authors in the 1980s, when growing contemporary globalisation began to demonstrate the lack of clear modern cultural boundaries (Clifford 1988, pp. 13-14). The subjects of ethnography could no longer be falsely conceptualised as exotic, isolated societies, it was argued, but were now seen in an interconnected web of expanded social relations with perpetual contact and exchange with others. Eric Wolf (1982) was chief among these proponents, arguing for an interconnected world with no cultural boundaries and a continuum of human relations and meaning. Although his argument mainly focuses on the period after AD 1400, he and others do consider this as a perpetual condition of human culture at any time (Lesser 1961; Wolf 1982, pp. 18-19, 387; Clifford 1988, pp. 9-12; Carrithers 1992, chap. 2).

This expanded perspective breaks down perceptions of a series of distinct 'cultures', each consisting of a set of systems, each of these dependent on the continual functioning of the others, and therefore the whole being volatile to collapsing due to change at the smallest of levels. Movement, cultural borrowing and integration do away with distinct boundaries. This perspective was clearly problematic to the received methodology of anthropology and ethnography. Boundaries for study had to be drawn somewhere for a meaningful analysis of a given people. One way was to focus on the individual and the creation of their own world by the means of various stimuli.

Although it has so far been argued that this perspective emerging in the 1980s was in opposition to that which was dominant in Anglophone anthropology, there was diversity even within the main proponents of these older schools. For example, although Boas was extremely influential in creating a relativist school that defined specific cultures bounded in space and time, Sahlins (1999, p. 405) argues that he and his contemporaries did not believe in the coherency of such well-defined and bounded entities. Sahlins (1994, pp. 386-393) himself recognises the historical and relational construction of cultures, continually feeding off 'otherness', but still fiercely argues that considerable cultural change occurs after exposure to practices that are substantially different (e.g. Sahlins 1985; 1995). This apparent contradiction is similar to the views of the father of the functionalist school, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. He insisted that cultures do not exist (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, p. 190), despite the necessary existence of coherent entities in functionalist analyses.

The increasing influence of post-modernism in anthropology in the 1980s further argued for the destruction of distinct cultural boundaries championed by Wolf (1982) and others. The hyper-relativism of post-modernism – taking the individual's experience as paramount – inevitably led to interpretations of fractured societies consisting not of distinct groups of homogenous peoples with members of each group living in the same symbolic worlds, but a mix of individuals with different world-views that was very difficult to penetrate. Fredrik Barth (1975; 1993), for example, demonstrated the considerable variations

within even very small societies (Erikson 2010, p. 25). Other examples of this individualist perspective include the highly influential *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1986, pp. 14-19), as well as the reflectivism trend, which saw the writers of ethnographic fieldwork become the subject of study in their own right (Barnard 2000, pp. 164-6).

This quick sketch of some of the various ways that anthropologists have approached the ethnographic data demonstrates how differing theoretical perspectives seriously affect the resulting interpretation. There is no doubt some truth in the positions held by universalists, relativists, collectivists and individualists. Although those in extreme positions in these camps are not persuasive, the critiques of them do not lead to their complete dismissal. There are always degrees of cultural exchange, knowledge and understanding between differing cultures, but there are also distinct practices, values and meanings shared by some and not others. The individual is not wholly the product of their surroundings and upbringing, but neither are they completely free agents acting outside of cultural influence. By bearing in mind these debates in anthropology, a more informed archaeology can proceed.

Individual and Society

Two theoretical perspectives that have had particular influence in archaeology consider both the individual and society. These are the related arguments by Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984). Both Bourdieu's habitus, but to a larger degree Giddens's structuration, regard the individual and society in a constant dialogue, both creating and being created by each other. The object of study is both the individual and how they influence the larger social whole, as well as this larger entity and its effect on the individual. These perspectives bridge the collectivist: individualist argument by allowing for the reality of the individual - their influence on cultural proceedings and their experience as not being the same as the societal whole - while remembering the existence of some form of shared practices, values and norms that are current in groups that share spatial and temporal frames and who associate with each other. Giddens is more successful than Bourdieu in placing dual importance on both, as Bourdieu still believes that although no two individuals will have the same habitus, those within the same group are limited to being part of an overarching 'class habitus' (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 85-86). Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) go beyond creating and defining cultural boundaries by having various interacting scales at which society is constructed, working from a bottom-up perspective focused on *practice,* rather than the end result of culture and society. This bottom-up focus rather than top-down imposition is one that would be profitable when constructing prehistoric units of analysis and reconstructing past social groupings.

Cohen (1985) also argues from a perspective originating from the experience of the individual, also discussing the relationship between the individual and society. He makes the important distinction between how the community is conceptualised in the minds of its many individuals, and how it looks from the outside. He argues that the experience of community is created through the idiosyncratic interpretation of shared symbols. These symbols could have very different meanings to different individuals even within the same communities, but the shared use of them and the *belief* of a shared meaning still ties individuals together, creating a community. Furthermore, what looks like cultural change from the outside may not actually be experienced as such. Practices, values and the form of symbols may

change, giving the impression to an outsider (and certainly an archaeologist!) of ideological change, but this may be experienced by individuals and the wider community as continuity. New symbols and practices can be appropriated – often referencing forms believed to have defined such identities in the past – but continuity experienced. This is because, it is argued, symbols are extremely malleable and able to take the positions of others.

This explicit separating of the internal creation and experience of community with its external referents is useful as this demonstrates that cultural boundaries cannot be easily drawn on un-interpreted material evidence alone. Instead, to fully understand community and culture, interpretation needs to be from the inside looking out; groups cannot be successfully determined by imposing boundaries on the *form* of symbol, but the *meaning* of these symbols have to be understood. This is a further perspective that will be useful in reconstructing prehistoric cultural and community boundaries.

Archaeological boundaries

By the turn of the twentieth century theoretical shifts in anthropology were being matched in archaeology. As cultural evolutionism was being replaced in anthropology by Boasian relativity, archaeology was becoming concerned with the definition and tracking of certain cultural groups through time and space. This was achieved by firstly refining chronology by creating typological sequences of objects, and through associations deducing which artefacts were contemporary. Cultural areas were then defined by the distribution of such contemporary objects and monuments. It was believed that the movement of these represented the movement of people. One of archaeology's main aims up to the 1960s was to chart this movement chronologically and spatially. Tables were drawn with time on one axis and geographical areas on the other, with thick lines separating one culture from the other (fig. 1). For this period the definition of cultural boundaries was therefore regarded as rather uncomplicated. These were defined by strictly archaeological categories - object and monument types, burial traditions, settlement forms – with little interpretation of what these can tell us about the contemporary society and its non-material culture, except simple correlations between numbers of objects and status, for example, or defensive structures and degree of warfare. The heavy emphasis on description until the 1960s was due to a distinct pessimism that aspects such as prehistoric religion, social institutions and ideology were ever knowable (e.g. Harding 1974, pp. 3-4; Hawkes 1954; Shanks and Tilley 1987, pp. 29-31).

This began to change in the late 1960s and 70s. Processual archaeology borrowed from anthropological functionalist theory of a generation earlier, using this to go beyond description to more theoretically informed social interpretations of prehistory. Systems theory regarded cultures as closed structural units, each with sets of interdependent units of which the functioning of the society was dependent of the functioning of each of these units (Clarke 1968; Renfrew 1972; Cunliffe 2005, p. 581). This is subject to the same criticism that it received in anthropology, although it is even more obvious in archaeology given the necessary expanded spatio-temporal range of the discipline. This expanded frame should demonstrate the interconnectedness and cultural contact that occurs in all societies, admittedly to varying degrees, which Wolf (1982) and Clifford (1988) were arguing. The growing unease with the belief that material culture

and other aspects of the archaeological record directly represented social, cultural and ideological processes further questioned the legitimacy of the chronological and geographical boundaries that were inevitably drawn by differences in archaeological forms (Hodder 1982; Parker Pearson 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1987, chap. 4). These developments can be seen within the history of Iron Age studies.

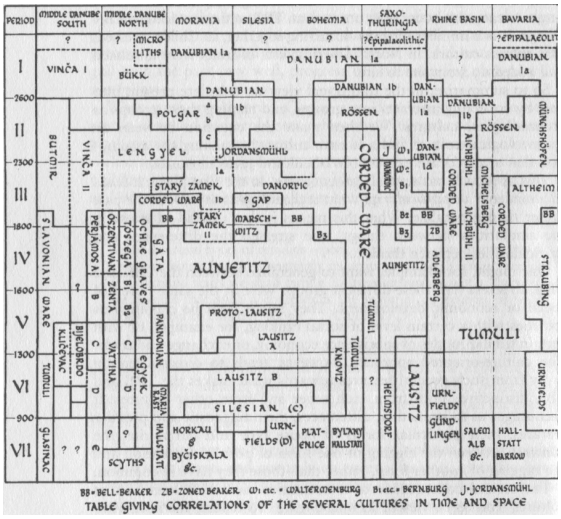

fig. 1. The early view of cultures in archaeology, being bounded in time and space. Childe 1929.

Iron Age Bound aries

The development of cultural and epistemological boundaries in Iron Age studies follows more closely changes in anthropological theory than its Bronze Age counterpart. Like the disciples of Boas, contemporary Iron Age scholars regarded their period as consisting of a series of coherent, mutually independent groups clearly definable in space and time. Most influential was Christopher Hawkes's 'ABC' sequence, set out in 1931, and culminating in his complex 1959 scheme (Hawkes 1931; 1959). This envisaged three distinct successive Iron Age periods, and dominated divisions of the Iron Age until the 1960s.

Hawkes repeatedly stated that the threefold A, B and C were '*cultural* entities', 'and not periods' (Hawkes 1959, pp. 172, 174, original emphasis). This cultural argument, with strictly defined chronological boundaries, came from the then current zeitgeist that the three substantive changes were the result of invasions, immigrations and direct population replacements (e.g. Crawford 1922; Hawkes 1931; 1959; Childe 1940, chaps. 10-12; Frere 1959). Iron Age A culture was brought by Hallstatt colonisers from France; Iron Age B from the invasions of the Marnians; and Iron Age C from waves of Belgae (Hawkes 1931, pp. 61-4; 1959, pp. 176-82). In this way cultural change was not problematised as it did not occur internally within societies. Instead, cultural change happened to *places* following invasions and migrations of the various groups, which were regarded to have existed largely independently from one another. Direct population replacements argued for strict, well defined cultural boundaries. This manifested, for example, in the common assumption that if material from more than one Iron Age period was present on a site, this represented successive abandonments and reoccupations (e.g. Harding 1974, pp. 14-15). It is far more likely that such sites saw continuous occupation with the inhabitants not being removed and replaced by invaders.

Hawkes's thesis was widely accepted until a series of papers published in the 1960s questioned the theoretical basis of both the invasion hypothesis as the primary bringer of cultural change that was current throughout much of archaeological discourse, and specifically Hawkes's ABC model (Hodson 1960; 1962; 1964; Clark 1966). This broke down the rigidity of the accepted chronological boundaries of the Iron Age, arguing for more continuous indigenous developments. Hodson (1962; 1964) further argued that chronological and geographical divisions should be based solely on groups of associated

material culture rather than interpretative historical models.

Chronological boundaries still existed, of course, and the four-fold division widely used today developed largely from Cunliffe (1984; 1991), following maturation of the Danebury project. This scheme begins with the Earliest Iron Age, being followed by the Early, Middle and Late phases. The first, Earliest phase crosses over with the latest Bronze Age metalworking phase – the Llyn Fawr – and is becoming increasing regarded as a Transitional phase between the Bronze and Iron Age (e.g. Brown 2003, p. 174; Miles *et al.* 2003, p. 116; Brown and Mullin 2010, p. 12; Sharples 2010). These terms are still essentially defined by changes in the material record – principally pottery and, to a lesser degree, metalwork and settlement forms – without explicitly arguing the existence of wider cultural aspects belonging specifically to these groups from the outset (e.g. Cunliffe 2005; Sharples 2010, pp. 318-324). Periods are firstly defined by direct archaeological criteria, with social and cultural aspects then interpreted from the contemporary evidence from each period.

Although now regarded as looser than Hawkes's (1959) rather arbitrary but strict regions, the existence of Iron Age geographical areas is more widely accepted than for the Later Bronze Age. Cunliffe (1991; 2005), in his later editions of *Iron Age Communities*, sets out a range of pottery style-zones that he tentatively suggests represent real cultural boundaries and can be used as a 'surrogate for ethnicity' (Cunliffe 2005, p. 88). This is then rationalised into five zones covering all of Britain. This rationalisation considers a wider set of evidence than just pottery. It is also guided by natural geographical divisions as well as an interpretive social and cultural system particular to each zone (Cunliffe 2005, pp. 584-600). Aside from Cunliffe's work, Iron Age research has long been more regionally focused than its Bronze Age counterparts (e.g. papers in Cunliffe and Miles 1984; papers in Haselgrove and Moore 2007a; papers in Haselgrove and Pope 2007a; Sharples 2010).

Bronze Age Boundaries

Early research into Later Bronze Age Britain followed a different direction to both its Iron Age counterpart and developments in anthropological theory. The datasets available were substantially different: for the Bronze Age they consisted of suites of bronze objects divorced from other contemporary objects or context, whereas information on the Iron Age came from more varied sources, including settlements, pottery, monuments and metal objects.

As the data allowed for the promise of more accurate chronological divisions of the Bronze Age in Britain, more effort went into resolving this issue at the expense of creating interpretative social or historical models and periods based on these changes. Early attempts at separating and chronologically arranging the hoards of Bronze Age objects include those of Evans (1881, pp. 468-470) and Montelius (1908). This became formalised into the four tiered system still used today – the Copper Age (Chalcolithic), followed by the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Ages - by two important regional studies, both published in 1923 (Callander 1922-3; Fox 1923).

The following decades saw further refinement of the metalwork sequence, eventually segregating the three periods into numerous metalworking phases or industries, each with its own type-hoard. Examples include Ewart Park, Wilburton and Penard, and this remains the most common way of subdividing the Bronze Age (fig. 2). Hawkes (in Coles 1961) and Burgess (e.g. 1968; 1974) were

instrumental in creating this sequence, although other authors contributed (see O'Connor 1980, pp. 5-11). Attempts were made to peg pottery, monuments and settlement forms to these metalwork phases via associations (e.g. Burgess 1969), creating a means by which chronological boundaries could be imposed on a mass of data. However, this proved difficult for the Later Bronze Age given the lack of bronzes excavated at settlements and monuments. This led to the erroneous assumption that the Deverel-Rimbury pottery and its associated settlements and burial mounds spanned the Late Bronze Age. It was demonstrated in 1959 that these other archaeological features in fact belong only to the Middle Bronze Age (Smith 1959), leaving a complete lack of other evidence with which to define the Late Bronze Age and interpret its social and cultural life.

While metalworking phases seemed useful in creating chronological boundaries, they did not prove so useful in the definition of geographical entities. The wide distributions of some key objects meant that only vague regions could be suggested in the Late Bronze Age, with much overlap and contacts over long distances. Regional axe types, for example, could be defined, but only by concentrations of objects and not by strict distribution. Axes from all regions of Britain can be found in virtually all other regions (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, *pls.* 123-131).

Although the many tables with their bold lines separating, for example, the Taunton phase from the Penard, giving the impression of strict, well defined phases and metalwork complexes, these usually came with the disclaimer that these were in fact permeable boundaries with much overlap (e.g. Burgess 1969; 1974, p. 200; Rowlands 1976; O'Connor 1980, pp. 273, 286; Needham 1996). Changes in bronze styles were generally not regarded as being caused by invasions and population replacements as was current in Iron Age studies, but represent continuous internal development of styles under the influence of the continent. This again shows the more unique history that Later Bronze Age research followed as it largely missed interpretations of the period being populated by independent cultures succeeding one another. Although most did regard changes to material culture as indicating social change (e.g. Burgess 1980, 79), this was never as forcefully argued as in the Iron Age and other prehistoric periods.

Actual chronological dates were given to these phases with increasing confidence through the latter half of the twentieth century with the growing number of more precise radiocarbon dates and closer alignment with the better dated continental material. A large programme of independent radiocarbon dating by Needham *et al.* (1997) largely agreed with the metalworking phases and their dating worked out by Burgess and others.

This scheme of metalworking phases pegged to other archaeological materials and sites still regarded description as the primary role of archaeology. Boundaries were being created not through social interpretations informed by the suites of material that could be shown as contemporary with ever growing confidence, but just by the suites of materials themselves.

The growing number of radiocarbon dates after the mid-1970s led to the demonstration of contemporary materials and sites that did not have cross-associations (Burgess 1974; 1980; 1986; Barrett 1980). The seminal study by Barrett (1980) finally found the pottery that was contemporary with the Late Bronze Age metalwork, leading then to a range of settlement sites and other archaeological features that could be used together to create an interpretative model for the period. This led to Needham's (1996) explicit attempt to periodise the

Bronze Age in terms of '*successive prevailing cultural characteristics*… [taking into] account all the important strands of cultural evidence*'* (Needham 1996, p. 121, original emphasis). However, this paper did not really engage in social interpretation beyond the simplest of statements,[1] but just realigned the metalwork with other types of evidence. This realignment was still quite sketchy as the chronology of pottery, landscape features and settlement forms was still rather inaccurate. Metalwork divisions were still often therefore only used for their own ends.

The more ambitious social interpretations do not really draw on metalworking phases, instead often being vague in the definition of their spatial and temporal boundaries of their study. Rowlands (1980) produced perhaps the most ambitious interpretation, considering Southern Britain as part of a series of interlinked cultural and economic systems that included coastal France and the Low Countries. This in turn was part an interlinked European-wide Bronze Age. His focus was on the 'late Middle Bronze Age', although he seems to apply his model to the entire Later Bronze Age. Social interpretations by Brück (2006a; 2006b; 2007) also do not draw on metalworking phases.

This is because typological changes do not need to be linked to any social or cultural changes. Slight changes to the form of a particular object type over time does not require a change in the ideology or social relationships of the people producing it, or even conscious knowledge of the object type changing. What these changes can, and have, led to are the imposition of sequential phases by scholars that do not necessarily have cultural validity. The material from these phases, along with distributions, depositional practices and contemporary objects and sites can then be interpreted in socio-cultural terms with greater knowledge of what is and what is not contemporary.

For example, the difference between Wilburton and Ewart Park metalwork does not suggest cultural change on its own; sword shoulders became more slender, and socketed axes gradually overtook palstaves. However, many more hoards were deposited in the latter period and over a wider area; hoard sizes were more varied and the range of common object types increased. It is these factors that suggest cultural change, rather than change in object form itself. Without such typological research and groupings, knowledge of contemporary evidence is less precise, impinging on interpretative societal models. However, care needs to be taken when thinking about what is meant by these groups, and a holistic approach is necessary in defining real social changes. Trying to move away from a reliance on typological changes in only one aspect of archaeology had led to two-fold division of the Bronze Age that is used in tandem with the three-fold Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age that was based originally around metalwork.

This consists of the Earlier Bronze Age, made up of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age; and Later Bronze Age, made up of the Middle and Late Bronze Age (Barrett and Bradley 1980). This division considers a range of evidence including settlement and monuments, as changes in the middle of the second millennium BC to the wider archaeological record seem the most dramatic (fig. 3). This is also part of a move away from the Three Age System, as this position is also where a two-fold division of British prehistory has been placed. This allies the

[1] The only comment is on the introduction of Penard metalwork, when 'swords and shields… would have wrought radical changes in warfare and the first metal cauldrons…would have allowed new modes of ostentatious eating' (Needham 1996)

Earlier Bronze Age with the Neolithic as monument construction, an emphasis on the dead and the invisibility of settlements continues in this period. It also allies the Later Bronze Age with the Iron Age due to a lack of visible burials and the presence of small settlements populated by roundhouses that are present in both periods. Although this classification is useful as it goes beyond one type of evidence and considers a range of material, this division still takes material culture as the basis for classification over social and cultural interpretations. Although there certainly was some degree of continuity between the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, as well as important changes between the Early and Middle Bronze Age, large social changes seem to have occurred between the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age that the two-fold division of prehistory does not account for.

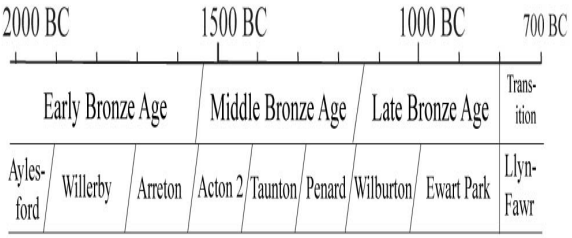

Fig. 2. Metalworking stages and divisions of the Bronze Age, after Roberts et al. 2013.

New directions

The breaking down of boundaries that was occurring in anthropology in the 1980s was, and still is, being propounded in archaeology. As in anthropology, for some this has meant a focus on the individual – both as part of the source of social practices (Shanks and Tilley 1987; Barrett 2001; Whittle 2003), and in attempts to reconstruct prehistoric personhood boundaries (Shanks and Tilley 1987, pp. 61-7; Fowler 2004; Bruck 2006a; 2006b). Other ways in which the breakdown of defined chronological and spatial boundaries has manifested itself has been an emphasis on the diversity of the archaeological record, rather than trying to find similarity that can be grouped and named. This in turn has resulted in a series of short narratives and almost anecdotes of the past, as opposed to wide synthesis (e.g. Whittle 2003). There is even a desire to get rid of the long-established period names to highlight this diversity (Whittle 2003, p. xv).

In a recent interpretation of the Iron Age of Wessex, Sharples (2010, chap. 2) also highlights diversity through a thorough examination of the seemingly familiar Wessex landscape, demonstrating its geological, topographical and archaeological complexity that is far beyond the hillfort-dominated chalk downland of most people's expectations. Even 'Wessex' cannot serve as an entity, despite the firm place it has had in the study of British prehistory.

Chronological boundaries have also been attempted to be replaced by more fluid and continuous schemes of change. Collis (2008) suggests that material culture types across Europe tend to end gradually with no clear limits separating phases from each other. The move to replace both the four-fold Iron Age division and the Three Age system set out above, amalgamating the earlier and later sets of phases to create two-fold systems, is also going in this direction. For the Iron Age, this attempts to allow for more nuanced interpretations by not being too restricted by a series of phases (Haselgrove and Pope 2007b; Haselgrove and Moore 2007b; Garrow *et al.* 2010, 81). However, this may have the effect of social interpretations instead being restricted even further by creating only two models spanning the entire Iron Age. There were clear socio-cultural differences between all four of the currently used Iron Age periods; perhaps effort should be

focused on trying to separate these out to create more accurate suites of contemporary materials upon which socio-cultural interpretations can be made, which can then define sub-periods.

At a site level it has been suggested that we should move away from thinking in phases and periods of activity and instead think in terms of fluidity, where the site and its landscape setting are in a continual dialogue with the contemporary inhabitants, even at times of supposed inactivity (e.g. Lock *et al.* 2005, pp. 11, 133). However, this has limited success when it comes to writing up the site report, as clunky relative stratigraphic phases linked occasionally to clunky typological phases by virtue of associated finds still has to occur. The application of Bayesian statistics on carefully selected radiocarbon dates attempts to bypass this problem (e.g. Allen *et al.* 2009). This has the advantage of breaking away from dating via the typology of associated objects and an increased level of accuracy, as well as providing chronological relationships for site events with no stratigraphic associations.

Beyond the site level, attempts to become emancipated from chronological boundaries have been of limited number, but successful. The Bayesian method is again necessary as otherwise dating has to be undertaken through object form comparisons that are shacked to sequential phases. A major programme of dating Celtic art in Britain using this method has demonstrated that the consecutive typological stages previously used to date objects are misled (Garrow *et al.* 2010). Rather than objects fitting nicely into chronological boxes with each period being represented by homogenous contemporary decorative styles, it was shown that different styles could be contemporary with no clear chronological boundaries separating them (Garrow *et al.* 2010, p. 107). This scientific critique was preceded by a theoretical one arguing for the fluidity and diversity of art styles and their chronology (Macdonald 2007).

The *Gathering Time* project is to date the largest application of the Bayesian method in archaeology, and has also demonstrated the fluidity of change in the Mesolithic to Neolithic transition in Southern Britain (Whittle *et al.* 2011). It has demonstrated that even within one region it took a number of generations for all of the Neolithic 'things and practices' to be present after the introduction of the first. This is in contrast to the belief of many that the Neolithic came as a 'package', with farming, pottery, polished axes, monuments and a profoundly different mind-set arriving all at the same time, and therefore it being possible to define a definite chronological boundary between the Mesolithic and Neolithic (e.g. Richards and Hedges 1999; Schulting 2000).

Although this recent argument for fluidity with its new methods of analysis does have certain attractions, the creation of groups is still necessary for the successful study and interpretation of past societies, even if material culture typologies and phases are over-simplified. Socio-cultural interpretations still need to be based on suites of contemporary material that are largely differentiated in later prehistory by means that are not necessarily related to social-cultural changes. In the future we will be able to increasingly date changes to different types of archaeological evidence independently from each other, and this can lead to new periods that are defined by social interpretations based on holistic understandings of contemporary evidence. However, at the moment the danger of the fluidity argument and attempting to break down boundaries is losing what is most important for successful socio-cultural interpretations – the range of contemporary evidence. It is fundamental

to know what is and what is not contemporary before interpretation can proceed. This might become blurred and lost if we think in terms of only Earlier and Later Bronze Ages and Iron Ages, or attempt to do away with some of these categories altogether.

There is a further danger that theories of fluidity and continuity at times of social change precede interpretation based on a fair reading of the available evidence. For example, the trend towards regarding the Bronze Age to Iron Age transition as fluid with large degrees of continuity was in fashion in the wave of post-processualism in the 1980s and 1990s, purposefully in opposition to previous theoretical standpoints and in line with then current wider trends in anthropology and elsewhere. Brück (1997, pp. 30-35) reviews and agrees with the theoretical arguments that change should be a continual, internal and ever-present force that does not consist of short and quick transitions, but still argues that the evidence from the Early to Middle Bronze Age suggests a period of quick and substantial change (Brück 1997; 2000). The tide is now changing regarding the Late Bronze to Iron Age transition, and it is again being regarded as a quick and considerable change (e.g. Needham 2007; Haselgrove and Pope 2007b, pp. 6-7). We are hopefully now in the position of being theoretically informed, but not letting fashionable ideas swamp the data.

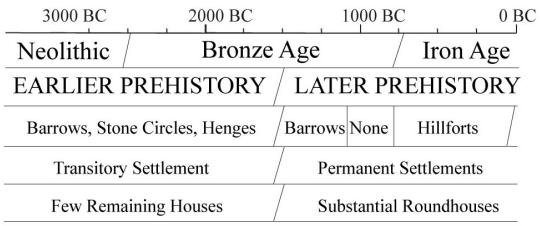

Fig. 3. Prehistoric divisions and main archaeological characteristics

This position of researchers being theoretically informed from a variety of angles but not having to conform to explicit theoretical standpoints or schools is now commonplace amongst both prehistoric archaeologists and social anthropologists (Barnard 2000, pp. 173-5; Hodder 2001, p. 5; Johnson 2010, chap. 13). It is not necessary to have to have particular definitions of culture and preconceived ideas where their boundaries should lie, but boundaries do nonetheless need to be drawn to create suites of evidence that can provide the basis for social interpretations. These socio-cultural interpretations should then become the basis of new periods in prehistory based on a holistic reading of the evidence.

Conclusion

Recent trends towards the fluidity of cultural and chronological boundaries have advantages by allowing for outside influences to be better understood, and objects and other archaeological features to be dated independently from each other. However, this should not go too far by taking away the epistemological need for grouping that is necessary in socio-cultural interpretations. Boundaries are needed in the study of people and societies from any place and period. Thinking about how these are created in the humanities is particularly salient as boundaries, identity, differentiation and inclusion play a part in virtually every cultural milieu.

Hopefully this overview of how cultural and chronological boundaries have been defined in the study of prehistoric Britain and its relationship to theoretical positions in social anthropology will be useful to others thinking about similar boundaries in other fields within the humanities.

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