The Rise of the Individual in Late Iron Age Southern Britain and Beyond

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This paper examines the archaeological evidence which exists for the increased visibility of the individual in Late Iron Age (c.150BC-AD43) southern Britain, in contrast to the preceding Middle Iron Age (c.500/450-150BC). Using mortuary data from fifty sites in southern Britain, it demonstrates how, at the beginning of the Late Iron Age, there was an increased emphasis on individual identity. This change can be detected through the emergence of archaeologically visible mortuary rites, as well as new forms of material culture recovered from domestic and mortuary contexts. This abundance of new artefact types includes personal adornment and toilet equipment, and appears to reflect an increased emphasis on individual, as opposed to communal, identity. This period also sees the emergence of elite dynasts who supplanted the earlier, egalitarian leadership. Contextualised within the broader world of Late Iron Age Atlantic Europe, we observe that the communities of southern Britain were not alone in seeking to emphasise individual identities. Comparable developments in mortuary rites are observed in Ireland and Atlantic Scotland, as well as the appearance of metalwork and sculpture in Britain, Britany and North West Iberia which depicts human form.
Introduction

In the later first millennium B.C.E., the communities living on the English Channel coast in Britain engaged in a variety of ritually structured practices, ranging from placing weapons in rivers to offerings of animal parts and domestic objects in pits. One aspect of ritual existence that has left limited evidence, however, are mortuary practices. This lack of evidence is particularly stark when we consider the data for certain areas of contemporary continental Europe. For example, a single cemetery from Bobigny, Seine-Saint-Denis, contained c.530 inhumation burials, approximately equal to the entire inhumation dataset in the author’s present study (N=527). Nevertheless, thanks to an increase in fieldwork over the past 40 years, this dataset is now sufficiently robust and varied, to allow new conclusions to be drawn. This paper presents one aspect of the author’s ongoing research - the emergence of archaeologically identifiable individualised identities in the final centuries of the Iron Age.

The Channel communities in the Later Iron Age

The period examined is termed the Later Iron Age dating from c.500/450 B.C.E until the Roman invasion of 43 C.E. Additionally, data for the period 43 C.E. to c.70 C.E have been included, because it is accepted there is little observable discontinuity between pre- and post-conquest Britain until the Flavian period (69-96 C.E.). This timeframe is subdivided into three phases: Middle Iron Age (MIA), c.500/450-150 B.C.E., Late Iron Age (LIA) c.150 B.C.E.-43 C.E. and Early Roman Iron Age (ERIA) 43 C.E.-c.70 C.E. (although it may date as late as the mid-second century C.E.). The archaeological justification for these phases are outlined below.

The area in question (Fig. 1) consists of counties which border the English Channel (including the Isles of Scilly, Cornwall, Devon, Sussex, Kent, and the counties of Wessex). Of these the Wessex dataset is the best researched. It reveals a general pattern during the MIA where human remains are largely represented by disarticulated human bones, often recovered from pits and other non-funerary contexts (not formal graves), as well as a smaller number of inhumations and articulated sections of human remains from the same types of contexts. The small numbers of inhumations from this period (N=218 for the author’s dataset) appear to be non-normative. The bodies within them display a lack of uniformity in terms of positioning and orientation. Furthermore, certain sections of the population are over-represented, rather than displaying a balanced or ‘standard’ demographic profile. The items associated with these remains are typically...
broken and arranged seemingly randomly without reference to the human remains.

A particular focus of deposition appears to have been the hill-forts of the region, which likely functioned as communal centres. The exact differences between hill-forts and other enclosed settlements are beyond the scope of this paper. However, hill-forts may be contrasted with other enclosed settlements in that they occupy upland locations in the landscape, possess extensive, often multi-vallate earthworks, and are located away from agricultural lands. Support for the theory that hill-forts were communal centres may be seen in their substantial enclosing earthworks. The earthworks of Maiden Castle, Cadbury Castle and Danebury, for example, would have required large numbers of people to construct. The large numbers of pits and granaries at sites such as Danebury, which were well in excess of the number of possible inhabitants, suggests that produce from the surrounding area was stored in them. Other settlements have also produced human remains from the same context types.

It is broadly agreed by mortuary specialists, field archaeologists, and osteologists of this period, that the lack of human remains recovered stems from an archaeologically invisible rite, such as excarnation, being employed. Excarnation is the practice by which the dead are exposed, rather than interred in the ground. The result is that the chances human remains entering the archaeological record are greatly reduced, as parts of the corpse are lost to the effects of weather and scavengers. There is no standard method of excarnation, with considerable differences between societies.

During the LIA important changes occurred. In eastern Wessex many hill-forts were abandoned and new inhumation and cremation cemeteries were established at smaller settlements. In the west of Wessex, hill-forts remained in use, albeit with some decline. Normative inhumations, in which the majority of the cemetery population is orientated in the same way, with no marked overrepresentation of males or females in adult graves, appears earlier in this area. Such cemeteries emerged in both the west and east of Wessex. Of these the Durotrigian group of the east is of note as it appears to represent a historically attested group who inhabited the area. Durotrigian cemeteries were typically located in association with either new settlements, or the entrances of old hill-forts.

A similar pattern is also recorded in Kent and Sussex as that observed in Wessex. There is less evidence for disarticulated human remains, although this may stem from the more limited nature of archaeological fieldwork in the region and acidic soils of Kent that limit preservation. As in Wessex, new, normative inhumation cemeteries were established. The earliest example of one such cemetery is that of Mill Hill, Kent dating to c.250 B.C.E. In the first century B.C.E. the Aylesford-Swarling mortuary culture also emerged in this region. This culture employed Gallic-style cremation rites and was subsequently adopted in Wessex (as described above), and also in the counties north of the Thames. In both Wessex and Kent/Sussex, there is limited evidence to suggest the existence of elites during the MIA. During the LIA, however, there is increased evidence for social stratification. Coinage was minted and circulated, and ceramic forms changed from vessels apparently designed for communal use to personal dining. Post 50 B.C.E., several kingdoms became established in this region.

In the western portion of the study area, the Isles of Scilly, Cornwall and Devon, the data is more distinct. Despite the existence of numerous enclosed sites comparable to those observed in Wessex, disarticulated remains and non-funerary context depositions are unknown. As with Kent, this may be due to the acidic soils of the region, but may also be a reflection of depositional practices. Normative inhumation appears in the mid-third century B.C.E., but does not appear to have been widely adopted until the LIA. However, this late abundance of burials may reflect the lack
of modern excavations undertaken in this
region. At the poorly recorded site of Harlyn
Bay, Cornwall c.130 graves were excavated in
the 19th century, with grave goods appearing
to indicate a fourth century B.C.E. origin for
the cemetery.

The Rise of the Individual

Using data from 60 sites it is possible to
detect some interesting patterns. Upon initial
glance (table 1) it would appear that there is
no great difference in the number of MIA
and LIA/ERIA inhumations: MIA N=218,
LIA/ERIA N=297. However, of the MIA
inhumations, only 40.3% (N=88) occur in
funerary contexts, with 50% (N=44) of MIA
funerary contexts being from a single site, Suddern Farm, Hants. At
this site inhumations, although placed within
purpose dug graves, were situated within a
disused quarry; a practice without parallel
in the LIA/ERIA. 44% (N=97) of MIA
inhumations occur as pit deposits, with the
forementioned non-normative characteristics
and the remainder of inhumations come from
other, non-funerary contexts. Turning to the
LIA/ERIA there is a marked increase in the
use of funerary contexts (79%, N=236). The
change is even more apparent for cremations,
with all but five examples (unknown contexts,
N=3; pit contexts N=2) having been placed
in funerary contexts (N=216). Of these only
2.7% (N=6) are date to the MIA. Thus, in both
inhumation and cremation categories we see
a large increase in the number of individuals
being afforded normative burial rites.

Additionally, there is the evidence from grave
goods. The debate surrounding the significance
of grave goods has varied over the years. Initial
interpretations by Culture Historians held
grave goods as being indicative of ethnicity. For
processualist they represented idealized
social personas, in which grave goods could
be used to reconstruct roles within a society. Post-processualists have instead viewed them as a form of communication intended for those who witnessed the funeral. Whether
grave goods represent social personas, were a
form of communication, or a combination of
both, their inclusion is significant. By placing
grave goods with the deceased, mourners
sought to add new variables to the identity of
the deceased; emphasising their distinctiveness
within the community and informing witnesses
how they should interpret the deceased. By
contrast their exclusion may be viewed as a deliberate attempt to deny witnesses
information as to the deceased, in particular
the distinct nature of the individual within the
community.

Of the MIA normative inhumations only
13.6% (N=12, 5.5% of all MIA inhumations)
were recovered with grave goods. Grave goods
from Suddern Farm consisted of only two
items from two individuals (a ring and a brooch,
respectively). By contrast, 45% (N=107) of
LIA/ERIA normative inhumations were
furnished with grave goods. Of the cremations
of the same period 94% (N=206) were
provided with grave goods. Although this
figure may result from unfurnished graves
having been missed during excavation, it does
appear that the vast majority of cremation
graves were provisioned with grave goods.

At the same time we do detect similarities
between the MIA and LIA/ERIA datasets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data type</th>
<th>Middle Iron Age (N)</th>
<th>Late Iron Age/Early Roman Iron Age (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funerary</td>
<td>Non-funerary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhumation</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cremation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Distribution of data according to context and period.
In both cases sub-adults, between 2-18 years of age, are under-represented (MIA 13%, N=29; LIA/ERIA 8.7%, N=26). Likewise, adult men and women, albeit with variation according to sites, tend to be represented in approximately equal numbers. Thus, although individuality is apparent in the archaeological record, the individuals were permitted to retain their individuality accorded to earlier practices. It may be that the lack of cremated remains representing entire individuals (1,200g for an adult) in cremation burials (mean of 204.5g for N=165 of dataset) represents a continuation of the MIA practices of depositing elements of excarnated bodies in other contexts.

In terms of placement of graves we may also detect continuity. Within Dorset, the LIA largest cemeteries, Maiden Castle (N=52) and Poundbury (N=49), were set within MIA hill-fort ramparts. At the site of Westhampnett, E. Sussex, the circular arrangement of the cemetery with its possible cosmological alignment echoes the spatial arrangement of an Iron Age roundhouse (Fig. 2). It has been demonstrated that these structures, which are very much a British and Irish form of architecture (although a few continental examples are also known), have a cosmological alignment (Fig. 3). Sharples has suggested that such houses in the MIA were intended to last only as long as their occupants lived. Parker Pearson and Sharples have suggested that spatial organisation within roundhouses was governed by age, with elder members occupying a position in line with the sunrise. This structuration, according to cosmology and age, is observed at Westhampnett, where elder members were positioned closer to the centre of the cemetery. A similar arrangement may also be observed at Mill Hill cemetery, which, based on the author’s analysis of grave goods, expands in a southeasterly direction.

Although the number of individuals provided with grave goods increases, such grave goods occur within a restricted range. With the exception of the site of Owslebury, Hants where some graves were provided with an excess of 10 vessels, most inhumations and

Figure 2: Theorised cosmological alignment of the Westhampnett cemetery. (Reproduced with permission of A.P. Fitzpatrick 1997b, fig. 137).
Figure 3: Cosmological alignments of Iron Age roundhouses in Britain. (Reproduced with permission of A. Oswald 1991, fig. 19)
cremations elsewhere received two to four ceramic vessels. A similar pattern is observed with brooches. 81% (N=68) of graves possessed a single brooch, and no grave contained more than three. This confirms past studies of grave good quantification among Aylesford-Swarling cremations, and Durotrigian inhumations. However it also demonstrates that cemeteries outside of these cultural zones, namely those of the West Country, likewise constrained access to grave goods. We are thus witnessing a combination of social personas, and conveyance of messages. In the MIA mourners who did not know the deceased personally were provided with little information. In the LIA and ERIA a variety of variables surrounding the deceased were now communicated to witnesses. Some of the items interred may have been personal possessions used in life, such as the brooches, but others, such as the ceramics from the Westhampnett.

The only exception to the above is a group of burials that were provisioned with weapons and/or mirrors, a tradition which is found elsewhere within southern Britain (Fig. 4 for examples). Within the study area ten examples of weapon burials are known, of which eight were excavated and published to a sufficient degree to permit analysis. Such burials display an even distribution across the study area (Isles of Scilly/Cornwall N=1, Dorset N=2, Isle of Wight N=1, Hampshire N=2, W. Sussex N=1, Kent N=3). Four examples of mirror burials,
of which 4 examples are included in this study (Isles of Scilly/Cornwall N=1, Dorset N=1, Hampshire N=1, Kent N=1). As with the weapon burials they represent a rite found elsewhere in LIA Britain.

It is the weapon burials which are of greatest interest; displaying many characteristics that are not observed elsewhere in the dataset. Firstly, the Hampshire, Sussex and Kent examples do not subscribe to established cosmological conventions. In contrast to MIA and contemporary LIA/ERIA burials, the human remains are not in crouched positions on their sides (exempting the Bryher, Scilly and Whitcombe, Dorset example), but rather are extended and supine. Although they are orientated in accordance with established patterns for inhumations for their area, they acted as foundation burials, around which other, later burials were positioned. Indeed, at the site of Hayling Island, one such individual appears to have served as the focus for a Later Iron Age temple. This association with religion is also found at the Mill Hill, Kent cemetery where the individual was provided with what appears to have been religious regalia, and at Brisley Farm, Kent where two weapon burials were the focus of subsequent acts of feasting. Secondly, the degree of variation observed in their grave goods, in particular the provisioning of weaponry, sets them apart from contemporary burials, with their restricted range and quantity of grave goods.

It has been argued that this period witnessed the rise of warrior nobility, some of whom subsequently founded the dynasts which Roman writers record for LIA Britain. Alternatively, they may represent individuals associated with religious or ritual duties. Many of the weapons recovered from these graves were broken, a feature found on weapons included as votive offerings in river and at sanctuaries elsewhere in Britain and the continent. The headdresses recovered with the Mill Hill and North Bersted individuals were also ornate and impractical for warfare. Furthermore the Mill Hill and Bryher individuals were of very light build. Mirrors likewise, by virtue of their unique properties, may have been viewed as weapons of a sort also. The possibility exists then that these burials represent a new class of individual who manipulated the existing cosmological and ritual framework of society by virtue of their religious occupation. They thus established themselves as rulers within their respective communities. The appearance of similar mirror and weapon burials elsewhere in Britain demonstrates that this was a form of rite restricted to elites, rather than based on local customs.

The Later Iron Age Atlantic Community

Contextualising this data against other datasets for this region, and within the broader area of Atlantic Europe (British Isles, Northern France, Western Iberia), we observe similar patterns. This period appears to have been one of population growth, facilitated by climatic improvements in the form of a warmer climate. New technologies for food processing, such as the rotary quern were introduced, and improvements in crop management adopted. Combined with the warmer climate this permitted an increase in agricultural output and probably population expansion. Combined with this is evidence for intensification of existing trade networks. It is likely that population growth, coupled with intensification of contacts between different regions, resulted in similar approaches to viewing the world, including disposal of the deceased, being adopted by these communities. Added to this is the possibility that some developments were introduced by population movements, for which there is increasing evidence in this part of the world. Examples include a likely the Durotrigian cemetery at Urville-Naqueville, Normandy as well as a probable Gallic female at the British site Westhampnett. Isotopic analysis also indicates the burial of non-local individuals among cemetery populations in southern Britain.

Elsewhere in the British Isles, the LIA witnessed many communities that had formerly disposed of their dead by archaeologically
invisible means, adopt formalised burial rites. Comparable, contemporary inhumation burials and cemeteries to those in Dorset and Kent emerge in the Western \(^{31}\) and Northern Isles \(^{32}\) of Scotland and eastern Ireland \(^{33}\) during this period. On the continent we find parallels to the developments in Britain. These include the long recognised links between the Aylesford-Swarling and north Gallic rites \(^{34}\) but also weapon burials, which are primarily located in in coastal regions and the Ardennes. \(^{35}\) Although absent from the mortuary record, the adoption of larger swords, gold coinage and increased evidence for horses at settlements may attest to the presence of such individuals in the Lower Rhine. \(^{36}\) The use of certain individuals as focal points for cemeteries is likewise attested to on the continent, as for example at Acy-Romance, Champagne-Ardennes. \(^{37}\)

An increased emphasis on the individual may also be detected elsewhere in the form of new styles of anthropomorphic artwork. Compared to the Mediterranean world, human forms are not a common feature of the communities of Iron Age central Europe. However, they occur in sufficient quantity to suggest that anthropomorphism was not taboo. Examples include the bearded figures on flagons and discs of Jacobsthal’s Early and Waldalgesheim phases of Celtic art, \(^{58}\) and human faces on torcs and *Markenfibel*. \(^{59}\) A small number of stone statues from south west Germany, \(^{60}\) wooden and stone totems from the Swiss Plateau \(^{61}\) and from rock art at Valcamonica, Italian Alps \(^{62}\) also depict human forms. More common is the wide variety of Celtic coinage, which depicts human forms from c.250 B.C.E. onward. \(^{63}\) By contrast, in Britain, such depictions are virtually unknown before 100 B.C.E. outside of Yorkshire (where a normative burial culture exists from the end of the fourth century B.C.E.) save for two wooden figurines from Argyllshire and Devon. \(^{64}\) Although this may be a result of survival in the archaeological record, it is possible it stems from a deliberate avoidance of representing the human form. In much the same way that much of the population was disposed of in a way which left limited trace, and the few which were buried in a normative fashion lacking grave goods to convey messages. So the lack of anthropomorphic representation may be viewed as an attempt to erase or diminish representations of individuals.

During the LIA this apparent aversion to anthropomorphic representation changes, to an extent. Examples from within the study area include the semi-realistic depictions of human heads on the Aylesford bucket, Kent, and a bucket mount from Marlborough, Wiltshire. The LIA also witnessed the production of abstract, albeit still anthropomorphic artwork, such as the shield mounts from Wandsworth, Middlesex and Tal-y-Llyn, Gwynedd. This is also the period, which saw the introduction and adoption of coinage in Britain. Early coin issues (pre-50B.C.E.) depicted abstract portrayal of human heads. An increased interest in depicting human forms is also observed in contemporary communities on the Atlantic coast. Examples include the stone sculptures from the hill-fort at de Paule, Côtes-d’Armor \(^{65}\) and around 20 second to first century B.C.E. anthropomorphic statues from Galicia and Portugal. \(^{66}\)

**Conclusion: New identities, old traditions**

The changes we observe in the mortuary record for the LIA in this region of Britain appear to represent a new emphasis on the individual at the expense of the communal identity. In contrast to the MIA deposition practices where members of the community appear to join an undifferentiated community of the dead, \(^{67}\) those of the LIA are permitted to remain as distinct individuals in death. This change coincides with other changes in the archaeological record at this time. These include a decline in the importance of communal centres such as hill-forts, a greater rate of deposition and production of material culture, and the adoption of new artefact and structure types, such as coinage and Gallic style temples.

This is not to argue for a complete separation with the past, as evidenced by the continued
use of older settlements, in particular those in the Durotrigian zone as locations for cemeteries. Likewise it is possible to detect cosmological continuities, with a preference for easterly orientations observable in the cemetery layout of Westhampnett and Mill Deal, and in the orientation of Durotrigian burials. Not all members of the community are admitted to the new rites, with sub-adults under-represented in the burial record, while neonates and children continue to be deposited in non-funerary contexts. Furthermore, although grave goods are increasingly common during this period, they are not afforded to every member of the community. The majority of these individuals also appear to conform to a social persona, in that they are provided with a restricted range of items and typologies. This restricted range and, in some cases, lack of grave goods, and adherence to social personae, echoes the MIA lack of observable social stratigraphy. This range is also observed in the weight of cremation deposits, and it may be that this practice relates to the earlier practice of depositing disarticulated bones following excarnation.

Only in the case of two classes of individual, the mirror and weapon burials, does this appear not to have been the case. It is argued that these individuals represent an inter-regional, if not-international class of individuals, a martial-religious identity. The location of the weapon burials in particular demonstrates that these were focal points for veneration, and it may be that these individuals are associated with the British dynasts that emerged during this period. Although the material culture associated with these burials is, in many cases, insular, they appear to belong to wider class of martial elites who existed in Iron Age Europe at this time.

This mention of Europe also brings us back to the point that the changes we observe in southern Britain at this time were not isolated developments. Just as with other aspects of the LIA archaeological record, the mortuary record of this region of Britain shares many parallels with Ireland and continental Europe. These range from the emergence of new, formal burial rites, to the use of founder burials around which to structure cemeteries. This appears to occur at a time when there is an increasing emphasis on portraying the individual in Atlantic Europe, as evidenced by the examples of anthropomorphic artwork from this region. The LIA in the Channel regions of Britain is therefore a time when the individual emerges as part of a broader international phenomenon. Nevertheless, the individual, although permitted to exist in the mortuary record, does so as part of a wider European Iron Age.
Endnotes:

1 Cunliffe 1975, 287; Collis 1977a, 8
2 Le Forestier 2009, 130
3 For example Wainwright 1979; Cunliffe 1984d, 1995a; Nowakowski 1991; Parfitt 1995; Fitzpatrick 1997b; Cunliffe and Poole 2000; Johns 2002-2003; Deeves 2007
4 after Hill 1999; Moore 2006; Haselgrove and Pope 2007
5 Selkirk 1981, 104; Bedwin and Holgate 1985, 241; Mattingly 2006, 91; Hamlin 2007
7 Redfern 2011, 118
8 Sharples 2010, 57
9 Hingley 1984b
10 Cunliffe 2005, 394, fig. 15.33
11 Ellison and Drewett 1971; Whimster 1981, 189; Wait 1985, 116; Roth 2011, 20
12 Cunliffe 1991, 507
14 Cunliffe 2005, 136
15 Whimster 37, 1981; Sharples 2010, 277
16 Parfitt 1995, 18-20; Garrow et al. 2009, table 2
17 Fitzpatrick 1997b
18 Hill 2011, 248
19 Haselgrove 1987; Creighton 2000, 64
20 Child 1995, 21
21 Nowakowski 1991, 225, fig 84
22 Whimster 1981b, 260
23 Whimster 1977, 77
24 Childe 1929
25 Binford 1971; Chapman 2013, 49
26 Ekengren 2013, 176
27 Giles 2012, 170-1
28 Seagar Thomas 2005, 86-7
29 McKinley 1993b
30 Dechezleprêtre and Ginoux 2002; Webley 2015, 130
31 Sharples 2010, 197-201, 235-7
32 Sharples 2010, 236
33 Parker Pearson and Sharples 1999
34 Collis 1968; 1970
35 Haselgrove 1982, 85-6; 1984, Table 1
36 Hamlin 2007
37 Binford 1971, 17
38 Mepham 1997, 134
40 King and Soffe 1998
41 Parfitt 1995
42 Johnson 2002
43 Creighton 2000, 31; Roymans 2004, 20
44 cf Johns 2003, 71; Giles 2012, 156
45 Fernandez Götz 2014, 135, Fig 5.6
46 Webley 2015, 127
47 Brun and Ruby 2008, 116-117
48 Lefort 2015
49 Brittain, forthcoming; Fitzpatrick 1997b, 236
50 McKinley et al. 2013; Webley 2015, 134
51 for example Macleod 2000; Neighbour et al. 2000; Murphy et al. 2004
52 Dawson and Lelong 2005
53 O’Brien 2003; McGarry 2008, 221
54 Cunliffe 2005, 151
55 Lejars 1998, 92, fig.91
56 Roymans 2004, 21
57 Lambot 1998, fig. 74
58 Megaw and Megaw 1989, 69-74
59 Megaw and Megaw 1989, 84-88
60 Megaw and Megaw, fig. 82 and 84
61 Kaenel 2012, 120-22
62 Fossati 1991, 92, fig. 75
63 cf Depeyrot 2013 for a recent overview
64 Cunliffe 2005, 574, fig. 20.21
65 Menez et al. 1999
66 González-Ruibal 2004
67 Sharples 1991, 87
68 Wheeler 1943; Farwell and Molleson 1993
69 Carr 2007, 444
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