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IRON AGE MAN & WOMAN PH 30/A

The Iron Age

The term 'Stone Age' is used by archaeologists to designate the vast prehistoric time period during which humans used stone for toolmaking. In 1865 John Lubbock subdivided the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. These three periods were further subdivided. In reality, the succession of phases differs enormously from one area of the world to another. The Neolithic (or New Stone Age) is traditionally the last part of the Stone Age. It is thought of as beginning with the start of farming and ending when metal tools became widespread, depending on geographical region. In Great Britain the Neolithic extends from about 4000 BC to 2000 BC.



The Bronze Age is the next period. In Great Britain, the Bronze Age is considered to have been from around 2000 to 700 BC. During this period the techniques for smelting copper and tin from naturally occurring outcroppings of ore and then making tools from the resulting alloy became common. Finally, the Iron Age began in Britain in about 700 BC. In this period tools made from iron began to supersede tools made from bronze. Iron's hardness, high melting point and the abundance of iron ore sources made iron more desirable than bronze and contributed greatly to its adoption as the most commonly used metal once people learned how to extract it from the rock.



Iron Age Britain was essentially rural. There were no cities, factories, large quarries or major roads. People lived in large communities, with some ruled by chiefs, some not. Coinage was unknown until the very end of the period. Britain was a land full of farms and small villages, although in some areas people lived in larger settlements or hillforts. Nevertheless, a surprisingly large number of people lived in Britain at this time, at least a million, perhaps several. They probably spoke one or more Celtic languages.

Although there were many aspects of life that remained the same, there were also important differences between the peoples living in one part of Britain compared to another.

Above left: The Battersea Shield, which was found in the River Thames. It is thought to date from the first century BC.

Above right : An Iron Age coin of the late first century BC, which was found in Market Place, Reading, in 1927.

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It is possible to find out what people in the Iron Age wore from a number of sources. For example, the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (about 90 to 30 BC) described the Gauls - the people who lived in what is now called France - like this:

Their aspect is terrifying...They are very tall in stature, with rippling muscles under clear white skin. Their hair is blond, but not naturally so: they bleach it, to this day, artificially, washing it in lime and combing it back from their foreheads. They look like wood-demons, their hair thick and shaggy like a horse's mane. Some of them are clean shaven, but others - especially those of high rank, shave their cheeks but leave a moustache that covers the whole mouth and, when they eat and drink, acts like a sieve, trapping particles of food...The way they dress is astonishing: they wear brightly coloured and embroidered shirts, with trousers called bracae and cloaks fastened at the shoulder with a brooch, heavy in winter, light in summer. These cloaks are striped or chequered in design, with the separate checks close together and in various colours.



Other evidence is provided by clothes that have survived in burials from the period . A surprising amount of clothing has survived from both the Bronze and Iron Ages, particularly from Denmark. This happens when either the soil conditions are such that the micro-organisms which normally cause clothes or skin to rot are unable to survive or sometimes when bodies are buried in a bog.



Bodies and clothing have remained undecayed in countries apart from Denmark too, but in smaller numbers. Perhaps the most famous British example is the Lindow Man, who is believed to have died between AD 20 and 90. This individual met a horrific death. He was struck on the top of his head twice with a heavy object, perhaps a narrow bladed axe. He also received a vicious blow in the back perhaps from someone's knee which broke one of his ribs. He had a thin cord tied around his neck which was used to strangle him and break his neck. Finally, he was placed face down in a pond in a bog. Unfortunately, the Lindow man appears to have been naked when he was killed, so he tells us little about British clothing from the period!

Above right: The head of the Tollund man from Denmark, who was strangled to death sometime in the fourth century BC.
Above left: The head of the Lindow man.

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The best examples of north European prehistoric clothing are from Denmark. The illustration on the right shows the clothes recovered from the burial mound of a woman at Borum Eshøj, Jutland. She had been clothed in a woollen bodice with elbow length sleeves, with her lower body covered by a long, roughly sewn woollen skirt. Around her waist she had a belt on which there was a large ornamental plate and a dagger with a horn hilt. Dendrochronology has shown that this burial took place about 1345 BC, well before the Iron Age, but the basic designs do not seem to change much over the two periods.



An Iron Age dress was found at Huldremose, Denmark, dating from the first century AD (left). This armless woollen dress consists of a tubular piece of cloth 1.7m long and 2.6m wide which was held together at the shoulders to create simple sleeves.It is plainly coloured, but other examples from this period confirm that clothes could be very colourful.



For example, another woman's dress excavated at Lonne Hede, Denmark, consisting of a sleeveless blouse and a skirt, had been dyed with woad and madder. Woad and madder are plants - woad provides blues dye and madder provides red.

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Men's clothes have also been found in Denmark and Northern Germany. For example, at Thorsberg ('Thor's hill') near Süderbrarup in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, large numbers of items from the first century BC to the fourth century AD seem to have been put into a bog as offerings to the gods. The Angles who later settled in England came from this area. Some of the clothes that were found can be seen on the right. The trousers are the earliest that are known to have survived and have feet attached. It is perhaps best to think of them as a form of stockings.





The photograph below shows a modern reproduction of some of the clothes found at Thorsberg. The cloak is based on two examples that were found there, both of which were colourfully patterned and had elaborate fringes.

