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IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY PH 6/B

The term Iron Age refers to the period during which 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. In the Britain the Iron Age is usually thought to extend from about 700 BC until the Roman conquest which began in AD 43. However, Iron Age ways of life carried on in most of northern England, Scotland and Ireland after this date.

Iron Age Britain was essentially rural. There were no towns, factories, large quarries or major roads. Neither were there complex ways of organising society into states or empires. People lived in large communities, some ruled by chiefs, some not. Money 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. For example, some people buried their dead in cemeteries; other people did not bury their dead at all.



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

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Spindle Whorl & Loom Weight



Very few clothes have been preserved from Iron Age Britain, so we know little about the clothes that people wore at this time. Clothes made from wool, linen, skin or leather are preserved only in particular kinds of wet, cold or dry conditions. In Britain, archaeologists do not normally find clothes preserved on the sites of Iron Age farms and villages. All that normally survives are some of the tools needed to make clothes, and the pins, brooches and other ornaments that Iron Age people used to hold their clothes together or for show.



The two cloth-making tools that most commonly survive are spindle whorls and loom weights. A modern example of a spindle can be seen on the left. The hole in the centre of the spindle whorl would have held a wooden rod, as can be seen in the modern example, but this part of the spindle is less likely to survive than the clay or stone whorl. Spindles were used to twist the wool into a thread. The threads were woven into cloth on a loom. Although wooden looms are not usually preserved, the weights that were used to keep the warp (down) threads tight are frequently found. A photograph of a modern reproduction of an Iron Age loom can be seen below.



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Animal Remains

Cow Tooth, Pig Jaw, Sheep Jaw





During the Iron Age, Britain was a land of farms and small villages, with people living in round houses with thatched roofs. Most people would have been farmers, their lives governed by the farming year and the religious festivals that marked it. Most farmers grew wheat and barley. They would have been ground into flour to make bread, using quernstones. Barley and wheat could also be used in porridges and stews.



The most common animals were cattle, sheep and pigs, although which of these animals predominated depended on the nature of the land around the farm. Archaeological evidence shows that beef (cattle), pork (pigs) and mutton or lamb (sheep) were the most common types of meat eaten, but horse and dog were also eaten. The domestic cat and the chicken arrived in Britain in the last centuries of the Iron Age. Not that all animals were there to provide meat. Hens provided eggs. Milk from cows and possibly sheep was available at some times of the year, and was probably used to make cheeses. Cows (oxen) were also used to pull ploughs.



Left. A modren reproduction of an Iron Age plough (or Ard). Unlike modern ploughs, which turn over the soil, ards only broke it up. Double ploughing in opposite directions was therefore necessary, and this criss-cross pattern is visible in aerial photographs of Iron Age settlements.

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Pottery Fragments



The use of pottery was not uniform across the British Isles during the Iron Age. In some areas, such as Ireland and parts of Scotland, very few pots were used in Iron Age times. This must mean that these people rarely used pottery for cooking or storing food - but they may have used cauldrons instead. In the Thames Valley area, however, pottery seems to have been quite widespread during this period.

Direct evidence for how food was cooked comes from the pots, ovens, cauldrons and firedogs (iron supports for cooking meat over a fire). Many day to day meals were probably cooked in pots directly on a fire. Archaeologists sometimes find the burnt remains of stews or porridge on Iron Age cooking pots. Ovens were common and could be used to cook bread and other foods. Large amounts of meat would have been boiled in large cauldrons or roasted over a fire. Not all cooking took place indoors - outdoor hearths and ovens have been found on some Iron Age settlement sites. In the last hundred years of the Iron Age in southern England people began to make wheel-made pottery - previously British pots had been built up from coils of clay.

Two of these Iron Age fragments are from Blewburton Hill on the Berkshire Downs. There was a late Bronze Age settlement there and later, probably between 500 and 300 BC, a hillfort enclosing 10 acres was built with six metre high box ramparts surrounded by a three metre deep ditch. On the western side was a 12 metre wide gate which probably had a bridge over it. After a period of desertion, the hillfort was occupied once more around 100 BC before being abandoned again, possibly after being attacked, in the early Roman period. Interestingly, the remains of 10 horses were found interred in pits on the site. It has been argued that they were killed and buried as part of a ritual act associated with the remodelling and reoccupation of the hillfort in this period.

Three fragments, from more finely made Iron Age pots, were found at Prospect Park, Reading. The two remaining fragments are unsourced.

