

Later Prehistoric Finds Group



Issue 7

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Welcome to a short but special edition of the Later Prehistoric Finds Group newsletter. In this issue, Peter Reavill (Finds Liaison Officer for Herefordshire and Shropshire) reviews *The Bronze Age Metalwork of South Western Britain*, a recent update of Susan Pearce's 1983 original, and goes on to consider the place of specialist finds catalogues in the digital age. Do technological advances leave print catalogues behind, or might the benefits of digital technology revitalise the traditional format?

This is a subject of practical interest to many working in archaeology today, and as such, responses to the article are warmly invited. Please e-mail any comments to the newsletter editor; a selection may be published in the next edition.



Detail from the Tarrant Valley lunula, Dorset, which features in Knight, Pearce and Ormrod's (2015) new catalogue of Bronze Age metalwork from South West England. (c) Trustees of the British Museum / Portable Antiquities Scheme

Welcome

Planning is currently underway for the next LPFG occasion: our 2016 conference, which will take place over Saturday 19th and Sunday 20th November. It is expected to be held in Bristol, possibly with some events in Cardiff. Members should already have received a brief e-mail notifying them of this, and more detailed information will be circulated in due course. Please save the date!

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The Later Prehistoric Finds Group was established in 2013, and welcomes anyone with an interest in prehistoric artefacts, especially small finds from the Bronze and Iron Ages. We hold an annual conference and produce two newsletters a year. Membership is currently free; if you would like to join the group, please e-mail LaterPrehistoricFindsGroup@gmail.com.

We are a new group, and we are hoping that more researchers interested in prehistoric artefacts will want to join us. The group has opted for a loose committee structure that is not binding, and a list of those on the steering committee, along with contact details, can be found on our website: <https://sites.google.com/site/laterprehistoricfindsgroup/home>. Anna Booth is the current Chair, and Sophia Adams is Deputy. Elizabeth Foulds is Treasurer.

If you would be interested in helping to run the group, we would love to have you on the steering committee. It is open to anyone who would like to be involved. If you are interested, please e-mail us at the address given above.

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The LPFG newsletter is published twice a year. To submit articles, notes or announcements for inclusion, please e-mail Anna Lewis at lpfgnews@outlook.com.

What Direction Next? The Future of Specialist Catalogues

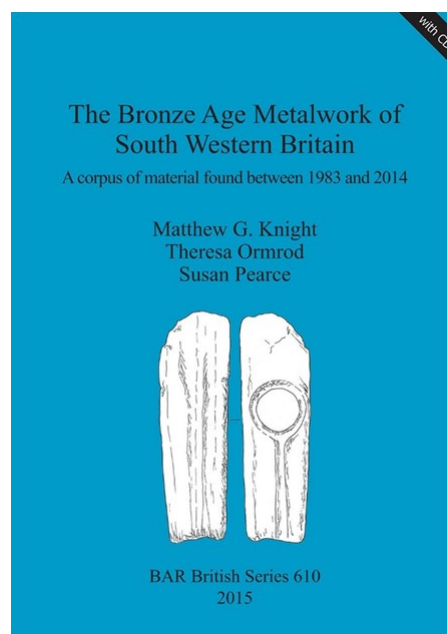
A review of *The Bronze Age Metalwork of South Western Britain* by Matthew G. Knight, Theresa Ormrod and Susan Pearce (2015). Archaeopress, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 610

Peter Reavill

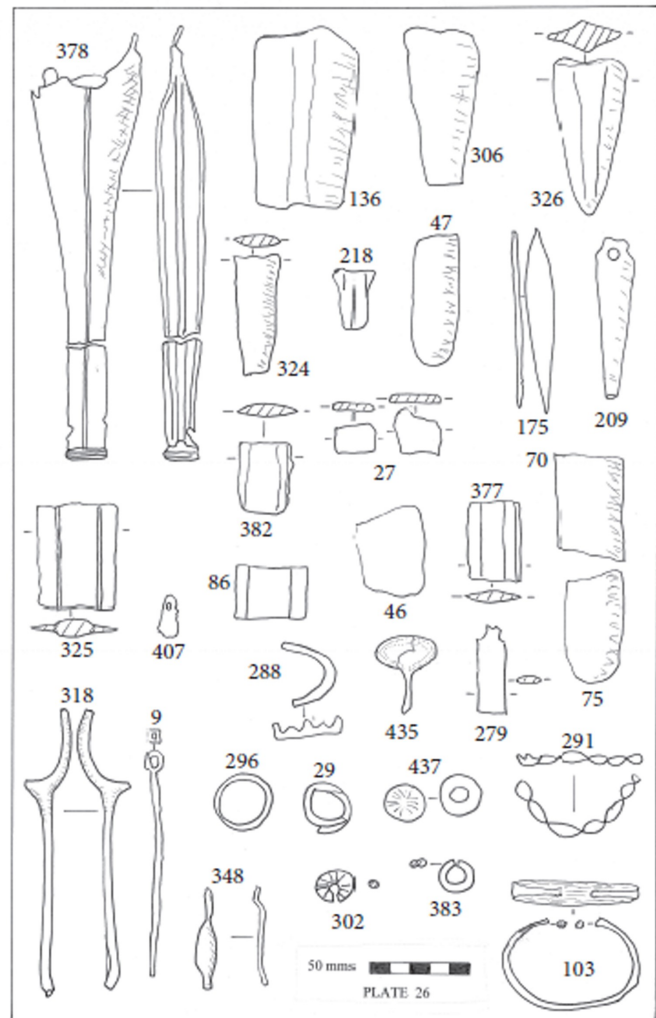
Collecting and collating information for a catalogue such as this one is never an easy task. It is especially true in the current academic and political environment where the study of things for their own sake is often seen as out of touch and not directly relevant to the 'real' world. This is why this second volume – the follow-up to Susan Pearce's original published in 1983 – is such a rare and delightful prospect.

The catalogue is similar in many ways to the original. The core lays out the Bronze Age metal finds discovered from the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset (as well as the Isles of Scilly) between 1983 and 2014. This is achieved in a systematic and easily approachable fashion. The text of the catalogue is arranged alphabetically by county and parish, with each entry / object type given a unique catalogue number. Where multiple objects are recovered within a parish they are treated chronologically, and where there are closed groups / hoards a letter is appended to denote individual pieces. Particular attention is given to direct and indirect context with links to surrounding landscape features (such as barrows or hillforts) noted. Where the artefact is housed – its current location – is also noted, which is essential for future research. Equally useful are the references to principal publications which address the find / findspot, and notes to illustrations within the plates. An assessment of dating using the traditional methodology is also given although understandably this causes some issue. This is especially true (and the authors acknowledge) given the potential for retention of certain objects by communities for generations. Further, as the majority of finds within the catalogue are derived from non-excavation sources the finds have been removed from their primary context. Therefore, where 'ritual sites' or locales with complex use and depositional patterns occur, simplistic dating schemes become difficult to apply.

The first major disappointment with the catalogue is the quality of line drawings within the plates. Although copiously illustrated the drawings are often simplistic and lacking detail; it is probably better to consider them as thumbnail sketches and aids to understanding the general form of each object rather than the technical schematic illustrations seen, for example, in Savory's (1980) catalogue of Welsh Bronze Age finds in the National Museum, Cardiff. This is a great shame as the majority of the objects illustrated within the catalogue would have been handled and studied by the authors. Illustration though is a skill which is fast becoming rare in the archaeological and



museum worlds (it is a skill I myself lack and wish I could develop). Part of the reason for this decline in draftsmanship is due to the rise in good quality (and relatively cheap) digital photography. As such I am surprised that the authors didn't consider the use of scaled photographs (or manipulated digital images / hybrid images) for this project. The authors describe how they have converted digital images (for example from treasure reports or PAS (Portable Antiquities Scheme) records) into scaled sketches: this fact is somewhat unfortunate. However, it is noted that although photography is cheap – publication of images within books is not! With this in mind the inclusion of some colour plates at the end of the book to illustrate some of the artefacts is most welcome. However, the majority of these images are working shots rather than carefully curated and constructed images to show the objects in the very best light – a good case in point is the stunning lunula from the Tarrant Valley, Dorset which is poorly lit with much of the decorative detail lost, or the gold bracelets from the Colaton Raleigh Hoard, Devon photographed at a jaunty angle on square graph paper.



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Figure 1: A plate from the catalogue (c) Knight, Ormrod and Pearce 2015

The quality of a catalogue often relies on how easy it is to find the relevant information within. This catalogue is aided by a very useful index which lists sites by object type allowing for the majority of finds to be swiftly identified. However, the other lists – especially the list of sites by OS grid reference – are not especially useful. What is lacking is a list of the content of each plate, or at least the assemblages represented on each plate. It would also be exceptionally useful to have a general index – but I often think that whilst using BAR reports.

Another major disappointment is a lack of maps – even very basic ones. This matters especially as I am not overly familiar with the landscape and region the catalogue covers. Therefore, without the aid of an Ordnance Survey (or Google) map I have struggled to place the objects back into the landscape. This oversight is frustrating given the wealth of information available to those using GIS systems to analyse data such as this. The landscape position of a find can tell us as much about the people who put it there as the object does and this level of analysis has been missed. Likewise, given the coastal location of much of the area covered and the links which

could be made for transportation and trade of metalwork, it would have been extremely useful to see their landscape positions plotted.

Lastly I turn my attention to the beginning – which I know is a backward way to approach things – but it is the way that I work best. Often I want to know what is in the catalogue (and how to find it) before I read what the authors think. The introduction or discursive text in this case is relatively short – just 11 pages. But the introduction is well formed and tightly delivered. It initially addresses changes that have occurred in collecting and discovery, especially in the past 30 years. In the initial catalogue Susan Pearce collated all known finds from antiquarian times to 1983: in total 896 findspots were identified. Since then an additional 471 have been added. Such an explosion in discoveries and recovery is partially due to the rise in metal detector use and the success of the PAS / Treasure Act, although other factors such as excavation work funded through PPG16 have also had an impact. Following this is a broad-brush review of how theoretical archaeological thought has changed in the same period with specific relation to our understanding of Bronze Age metalwork and objects as a whole. However, these discussions are not brought back to how the regional and local archaeology can be understood in the Bronze Age. It is through the application of all these ideas that a more detailed and rich understanding could have been achieved. Instead a series of questions which form a regional period specific research agenda are identified and discussed. These include uses of landscape, contexts of deposition and regional variation, to name but a few. These points and reasons for addressing them are well made and directly relevant to all who study prehistoric metalwork. However, it would have been helpful to see the authors pose these questions and then give their opinions using the material within the catalogue: this would have allowed some local and regional examples to be applied to the broad concepts.

Whilst I have identified areas where this volume fails to live up to expectations, all credit should be given to the authors for their dedication and diligence – as a piece of work it brings the regional understanding of Bronze Age metalwork up to date with a useful summary of all the primary material available for further study. An exceptionally generous bonus is the inclusion on DVD of the illustrative catalogue of the second part (corpus) of Pearce's 1983 BAR publication, which is now difficult to find outside specialist academic libraries. This therefore gives complete access to the entire corpus known to date for the region. I can think of no other area within Britain where this is currently available and so easily accessible – so sincere thanks are due to all the authors.

Postscript

During the writing and cogitating of this review (overall several months) I have been thinking about the future of volumes such as this. Is the written printed catalogue about to become less useful? I hope not – as I have shelves full of them – but am I being nostalgic?

Writing this review has highlighted a number of issues that we all (as specialists or prehistorians interested in objects) will need to think about in the future, especially given the prevalence of digital media in our everyday lives and the relative cheapness of using it compared to more traditional publishing:

- ◆ The most important factor is that a digital platform / catalogue allows the authors to use as many illustrations and images as they would like. It also allows for the digital images to be more fully integrated within the text. The days of the structure of volumes such as that reviewed here must be limited: with new media, the presentation of catalogues where plates / illustrations and text are separate elements will be over.
- ◆ The rise in digital photography also allows more detailed and informative images to be produced with high levels of accuracy and detail. We are also now able to manipulate these to form detailed composite images (adding drawn cross sections) akin to more traditional line drawings. Further, we are also on the brink of using photogrammetry to produce 3D images which can be viewed online – or reproduced and different scales on 3D printers. For those not familiar with this, have a look at the recent Micropasts project*.
- ◆ The ability for computers to index and reference work is remarkable although indexing is only as good as the information which is included within the catalogue.
- ◆ The use of GIS and computerised mapping to place objects within the landscape is extremely important, and the creation or linking of findspot information into interactive maps where viewsheds and slope analysis can be examined empirically needs to be embraced. The publication of such maps in traditional form (as can be seen in screen shots embedded within recent PhDs) is much trickier and the fluidity of the GIS is often lost.
- ◆ The ability to add data without the need to republish is also amazingly useful – especially when it takes considerable time to gather enough to make it worthy of publishing.

However, even with all the potentials for alternative publishing, what a computer will not be able to replicate is the “flickability” of a book. By which I mean the way in which you stumble across the thing you didn’t know you were looking for until you found it. That glorious happenstance is as valuable as many other things.

References

Pearce, S.M. 1983. *The Bronze Age Metalwork of South Western Britain*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, British Series 120

Savory H. N. 1980. *Guide Catalogue of the Bronze Age Collections*. Cardiff: National Museum of Wales

* <http://micropasts.org/> The project is a collaboration between the British Museum and the Institute of Archaeology, University College London.

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Editor's response

Technological advances within archaeology can sometimes be painful: the discipline is concerned fundamentally with material culture, and when confronted with digital images and records, we can feel as though we are being carried further and further away from what really matters: the archaeological matter itself. In this context, we do not experience the object as a find in the field, nor as an artefact in the museum, nor even as a drawing on the page, but as pixels on the screen. We barely inhabit the same world.

However, Peter's article reminds us of the tremendous advantages technology can bring to archaeological research. A publicly accessible, free-to-use database such as that maintained by the Portable Antiquities Scheme allows researchers to reach a vast amount of information: over a million objects are now recorded on the PAS database alone. The ease with which new finds can be recorded and shared on the PAS database means that the quantity of small finds known from England and Wales is increasing rapidly, to the extent that printed catalogues of certain categories of artefact may cease to be viable – the volumes would be too huge – unless they focus ever more closely on bounded zones or periods. Digital technology is both a cause of and a solution to these changes in archaeological practice.

Finds catalogues are more than mere banks of data, though. Whether dealing with particular regions, sites or artefact-types, the most useful will also include discussion and interpretation of the material as a body. Peter suggests that volumes with separated text and illustrations may soon disappear; alternatively, as printed books continue to be prized and enjoyed, we might see more publications split across two formats: a printed volume containing mainly text, and an online version presenting the catalogue and illustrations, photographs and GIS data.

GIS tools, as Peter points out, allow the researcher to view the artefact in its landscape context, while high quality digital images allow us to zoom in closely however many miles away we are in practice. In this sense, technology has allowed the distance between researcher and material to shrink. Ultimately, whether presented through traditional or digital media, specialist catalogues exist to allow the researcher a path to the original material; it may be that different paths suit different kinds of terrain.

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Readers are warmly invited to respond to the article. If you would like to make any comments or contribute to the debate, please e-mail Anna Lewis at lpfgnews@outlook.com.

Announcements

MeTools metalworking conference, Queens University Belfast: *The metalworker and his tools: symbolism, functions and technology in the Bronze and Iron Ages.*

The conference will be held on 24-25th June 2016, and registration will remain open until the event itself. A full conference programme, including abstracts, can be found at <http://metools2016.sciencesconf.org/>, and the conference organisers can be contacted at metools@sciencesconf.org.

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LPFG conference 2016: This year's LPFG conference will take place on Saturday 19th and Sunday 20th November, in Bristol and possibly in Cardiff. More details and a call for papers will be sent out in due course.

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