

The Thames through Time

The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames

The Thames Valley in Late Prehistory: 1500 BC–AD 50

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Preface

In common with other volumes in the *Thames Through Time* series, this account of the Thames Valley in the millennium and a half before the Roman conquest seeks to examine change in human society from a thematic point of view. The geographical and chronological framework for this volume is established in Chapters 1 and 2, but thereafter we have tried to get away from the traditional, somewhat artificial pigeon-holes of 'periods' 'ages' 'eras' and 'phases' to look much harder at how change in human society actually works.

In a period when the 20th century has come to dominate secondary school history and much popular television, the notion that the first foundations of modern society can be traced back more than 3000 years may seem a rather surprising proposition. But some fundamental patterns of settlement and landuse, political boundaries, human impact on the environment, and even the specific use and form of a few places can be traced back to late prehistoric

times despite millennia of subsequent change – even though otherwise we may now have very little in common with those remote ancestors. Exploring these issues on a thematic basis should help us to gain a better understanding of how human society evolves and also of how people have altered their natural environment, providing a better long term perspective on what we are doing to the planet.

Compiling this first major review of late pre-history for the whole of the non-tidal part of the Thames Valley has been both a challenge and a journey of exploration that could have taken much longer than the time available. I do not doubt that there are still errors, misunderstandings and omissions that deserve to be corrected, and some ideas that would have warranted more considered development; but I hope that any shortcomings that remain in these respects are at least partly offset by the relative freshness of much of the material that it has been possible to compile alongside older, more familiar results.

George Lambrick
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George Lambrick

Summary

The Thames Valley has been important for understanding late prehistory for 150 years. The landscape changed from being dominated by monuments and mobile patterns of residence to more organised forms of land use and settlement. The dynamics of change were more subtle than is sometimes portrayed, but by the end of the period the impact of later prehistoric farming on the environment was altering the way that people used the landscape.

Around 800BC, the balance of economic development shifted from the Middle to the Upper Thames perhaps reflecting socio-economic disruption combined with differential population pressure. Agricultural surpluses were exchanged for prized

products, and the region has produced evidence of the earliest specialist iron working in Britain.

Increasingly large defensive enclosures became the main communally built expressions of socio-political cohesion and rivalry. By the end of the period even larger communal works reflect the emergence of a new tribal politics prior to Roman annexation.

Traditions of how and where the dead were disposed of changed over the period but less radically than is often supposed. Deposition of metalwork, other objects and human body parts in the river and placing of burials in and around settlement areas were relatively constant features.

Zusammenfassung

Das Themental ist seit 150 Jahren ein wichtiger Bestandteil des Verständnisses der späten Vorgeschichte. Es vollzog sich ein Wandel von einer durch Monumente und nicht sesshafte Strukturen geprägten Landschaft, hin zu einer weitaus organisierteren Form von Landnutzung und Siedlungen. Der Ablauf dieses Umbruchs war viel feiner als oftmals dargestellt, doch am Ende der Ära erzeugte der Einfluss, welchen der spätvorgeschichtliche Ackerbau auf die Umwelt hatte, einen Wandel in der Art und Weise wie der Mensch die Landschaft nutzte.

Um 800 v.Chr. verlagerte sich die wirtschaftliche Stärke vom mittleren zum oberen Tal der Themse, möglicherweise einhergehend mit sozialökonomischen Störungen und unterschiedlichem Bevölkerungsdruck. Landwirtschaftliche Überschüsse wurden gegen wertvolle Produkte eingetauscht

und in der Region finden sich Hinweise auf die früheste Spezialisierung im Eisenhandwerk in Großbritannien.

Zunehmend größere, gemeinschaftlich angelegte, fortifikatorische Anlagen wurden zum Ausdruck sozialpolitischen Zusammenhalts und gleichsam zum Ausdruck von Rivalität. Gegen Ende dieser Periode reflektieren kommunale Großprojekte das Aufkommen einer neuen Stammespolitik im Vorfeld der römischen Annektierung.

Bestattungssitten, wo und wie die Toten beigesetzt wurden, veränderten sich durch die Generationen, jedoch nicht so drastisch wie oftmals angenommen. Deponierungen von Metallgegenständen und anderen Objekten sowie menschlichen Körperteilen in Flüssen und der Nähe von Siedlungen waren relativ beständige Merkmale.

Résumé

Les 150 dernières années nous ont permis d'arriver à une bien meilleure compréhension des dernières phases de la Préhistoire de la vallée de la Tamise.

Entre l'apparition de monuments et de divers types d'implantations saisonnières et celle d'une exploitation et d'une occupation plus structurées du sol, le paysage s'est modifié. Ce processus s'est opéré de façon bien plus subtile qu'on ne veut bien le croire habituellement. Toutefois, à la fin de la Préhistoire, l'impact de l'agriculture était tel qu'il a entraîné une exploitation de l'environnement différente.

Vers 800 av. J-C, l'équilibre économique se déplace du centre au bassin supérieur de la Tamise. Les surplus stockés étaient manifestement échangés contre les produits de valeur. La région se présente également comme un secteur de production de fer dont les gisements archéologiques sont à ce jour les plus précoces de Grande Bretagne.

Ces changements correspondent très certainement à des bouleversements socio-économiques

supplées par une cohabitation – probablement conflictuelle - entre les différentes populations du territoire. En effet, à la même époque, on assiste à l'implantation progressive de vastes enclos défensifs qui, sans nul doute, traduisent les rapports de rivalité entre différents groupes ainsi qu'une cohésion socio-politique interne.

Juste avant la conquête romaine, de plus vastes édifices encore attestent de façon très nette l'émergence d'une nouvelle forme de politique qui devait alors structurer chaque tribu de la vallée de la Tamise.

Les modalités des rites funéraires ont évolué tout au long de la Préhistoire mais sans doute moins radicalement qu'on ne le suppose. Elles ne présentent pas de variations majeures, qu'il s'agisse du dépôt de mobilier (métallique etc...) et de dépouilles dans les cours d'eau ou de l'implantation des sépultures au sein ou aux environs des secteurs d'habitats.

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