

The Iron Age and Gallo-Roman Periods in Jersey



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The Iron Age and Gallo-Roman Periods in Jersey

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Preface

The archaeology of islands is concentrated, and Jersey is no exception. A rich variety of archaeological remains survive above and below ground in Jersey, along its shoreline, and within its waters.

As a British Crown Dependency outside the United Kingdom and European Union the Island is beyond the reach of national heritage management frameworks and funding but strives to comply with international best practice. In 2022 the Island's first Heritage Strategy charted a course to develop the infrastructure in which archaeology is managed, including legislation, funding, the development of an historic environment record and expert posts to support it as well as an archaeology research framework.

Commissioned by Jersey Heritage and led by Dr Peter Chowne, the framework has been a partnership project involving local experts and international scholars over several years in seminars, discussions and consultation to produce a shared view of the current state of knowledge and the questions which can be asked of our archaeological resource. It comes at a time of growing pressure on those resources through development but also of new opportunities to improve management of this significant but vulnerable aspect of our heritage and identity.

I am delighted to be able to thank Peter, the Advisory Board and Resource Assessment authors and to welcome the publication of the framework, which will be of use to planners, contractors, Jersey Heritage staff, researchers, local groups and a growing number of university partnerships. For all of us it will be a platform for further research, greater understanding, valuing, conservation and enjoyment of our historic environment.

Jonathan Carter
Chief Executive
Jersey Heritage

Introduction

The Channel Islands have a rich and varied archaeological record for the Iron Age and Gallo-Roman periods, between approximately 800 BC and the fifth century AD. It is not unfair to say that in many respects Jersey has historically been perceived as the poor relation among the islands at this time, with the single important exception of the extraordinary horizon of hoarding of the mid- and late first century BC. This does at first sight appear to be in marked contrast to the paucity of the archaeological record both before and after that brief explosion of activity, but whether this is a genuine reflection of variation between the islands, or rather over-emphasis on negative or partial evidence, is a theme to be examined in more detail below.

To begin, however, some general account of the current state of archaeological knowledge for this period in the Channel Islands is required. Some consideration must also be given to the neighbouring coasts of France, for as in earlier periods of prehistory it is to the east and south that we must first look to place the islands in a wider geographical context, rather than to the north; although one of the key themes of the later Iron Age and the Roman period is the links which develop across the Channel to Britain. We need also to examine the limitations of our chronological understanding.

Chronology

We are a very long way from being able to indulge in fine-tuning of the Iron Age and Gallo- Roman chronology for Jersey – indeed with the single exception of the late first century BC hoarding horizon, about which more below, we have very little detailed chronological information at all. Jersey is not unique in this respect, and with just a few minor exceptions much the same can be said of the other Channel Islands and the neighbouring French coast, particularly towards the east. Although the Cotentin today is not quite the ‘scene of archaeological desolation’ identified by Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1957, 133), following his pre-Second World War fieldwork, it remains the case that ‘*le premier âge du Fer reste... le parent pauvre des recherches protohistoriques en Basse-Normandie*’ (Lepaumier *et al.* 2018, 181). There is simply no established pottery chronology for the early Iron Age in the far west of Normandy, and the situation is little better for the middle and later Iron Age: the map presented by Besnard-Vauterin and Boulogne (2018, 211) conveys this point very well, with just four sites spread across 120km of the western Cotentin.

The picture to the south is on the face of it rather more promising (Cherel *et al.* 2018, 258), although even here the region geographically closest to Jersey – around Alet (Saint-Malo) and its hinterland – is not especially well-represented in terms of pottery assemblages. It remains very unclear in which direction we should search for parallels for Jersey’s Iron Age pottery, however, since there is relatively so little of the latter available to study.

Rather than having a range of sites or finds spanning some 800 years and thus allowing the development of (*e.g.*) a fairly reliable pottery chronology, the typical picture is one of occasional episodes of activity, perhaps hundreds of years apart, for which we may have a radiocarbon date, or perhaps a date furnished by some exotic object with a continental parallel. Each of the islands provides examples of this.

Interpretations of the Iron Age in Guernsey have been dominated for many years by two related aspects of the archaeological record: the warrior burials, mostly excavated in the nineteenth century, and the settlement and cemetery of King’s Road, St Peter Port – including at least three more warrior burials – excavated principally in the early 1980s (Burns *et al.* 1996) and again in 2005–8 (de Jersey 2010). The existence of these burials has been used to construct more or less elaborate models of cross-Channel trade in the late Iron Age, generally identifying Guernsey as the stopping-off point of choice between Brittany and southern Britain, and usually relegating Jersey to the sidelines (see for example Cunliffe and de Jersey 1997, 52; Sebire *et al.* 2018, 2–3). There are problems with this interpretation, not least the realization that some of the putatively ‘late’ Iron Age evidence from King’s Road is actually likely to be very much earlier; one of the shale bracelets from grave context 103 (de Jersey 2010, 297 fig. 6.23) is virtually identical in form and decoration to bracelets from the Limousin dated by Baron (Baron 2012, 29–31) to the seventh century BC, and some of the fine bronze metalwork, such as the *torque à trois nodosités* from grave context 314 (de Jersey 2010, 297 fig. 7) is probably fourth or third century BC in date (*ibid.*, 295). Although the pottery from the most recent excavations at King’s Road has not yet been analysed, there are indications there too of an early Iron Age date for much of it, rather than a date in the second or first century BC. A model which thus interprets King’s Road as primarily indicative of late Iron Age trade passing through Guernsey may be very misleading.

The other main islands of the Bailiwick of Guernsey provide similarly episodic evidence for Iron Age activity. The extraordinary ‘Sark hoard’, found on the island in 1719 (Allen 1971), has been given some welcome context by the recent series of excavations by Barry Cunliffe (Cunliffe and Durham 2019, 91–

206), who suggest that the hoard was deposited in about 30 BC as a votive offering, possibly associated with renewed settlement on the island after a long period of abandonment (*ibid.*, 37–39).

The risks inherent in developing models and theories based on this kind of episodic evidence are illustrated very well by recent discoveries at Longis Bay in Alderney. Models of cross-Channel trade – whether they favour Guernsey (Cunliffe and de Jersey 1997, 52) or Jersey (Patton 1987, 135) as a stopping-off point – have traditionally ignored Alderney altogether, for the simple reason that no significant evidence of late Iron Age occupation of the island had been uncovered. There was evidence for early Iron Age activity in the form of the pottery production site at Les Huguettes (Wilson 1983), and the Nunnery has long been recognised as a fine example of a late Roman shore-fort. For the intervening period, however, an almost total absence of evidence was wholly reversed in June 2017 by the discovery of a series of late Iron Age and early Roman burials in an electricity cable trench dug along the Rue des Mielles, leading down to Longis Bay (Monaghan and de Jersey 2017–18). Five radiocarbon dates were obtained from burials in this trench, four of them between the early second century BC and mid-first century BC, and the fifth from the first or second century AD. In 2018 and 2019 excavation in the field immediately north of the Rue des Mielles revealed substantial evidence for Gallo-Roman settlement of the first to fourth centuries AD, underlain by further Iron Age burials (de Jersey 2018–19, 2019–20). Three of these were radiocarbon-dated, one again to the second or first century BC, and the other two between about 750–400 BC. The site provides convincing evidence for a substantial settlement on Alderney through most of the Iron Age and into the Gallo-Roman period – and hence perhaps an important role in the cross-Channel trade route – but had it not been for the fortuitous discoveries of 2017, we would still be ignorant of Alderney’s possible significance in this route. It is as well to remember that until the excavation of the Gallo-Roman settlement at La Plaiderie, St Peter Port, in the early 1980s, and the discovery at nearly the same time of the Romano-Celtic vessel nicknamed ‘Asterix’ outside St Peter Port harbour (Rule and Monaghan 1993), it was generally assumed that Guernsey had not been significantly occupied in the Gallo-Roman period. It would be unwise to make the same assumption for Jersey.