

Bronze Age

c. 2500 – c. 800 BC

The emergence of copper-working appears around 2500 BC, with the development of copper-alloying techniques around 2200 BC. These technologies had developed centuries earlier in the Near East, but had moved very slowly across Europe before eventually arriving in Britain.

However, this technological advance in metal use is only one of many changes that characterise this period. Archaeologically we can see that there are changes in the houses people live in, the objects that are made, the way people are buried and the monuments that they build. This suggests a significant change in society. The nature of this change has been much debated, but recent studies into the genetics of individuals buried during the Early Bronze Age suggest that significant migration took place from central Europe to Britain.

Evidence for settlement becomes relatively plentiful for the first time. Roundhouses constructed of stone, turf and timber are used throughout Scotland. They are usually between 5m and 12m across with an entrance facing south or east. In the Highlands many of these houses are found in upland sites, often with associated field enclosures and piles of stones cleared to make it easier to sow crops. They survive well because these areas are not used for agriculture today.

There are many artefacts which characterise the Bronze Age. Items of jewellery made of gold, bronze and jet or similar substances suggest that personal ornamentation became important in this period. This may also have been linked to expressions of individual power. Many bronze tools and weapons have been found, due largely to the fact that many had been deliberately buried, often in hoards. This may have sometimes been for safe-keeping, but archaeologists believe many of them were offerings, as they often occur in significant places like burial monuments or wetlands.

Archery equipment continues to have significance, with some men being buried with finely made wrist-guards. Flint arrowheads, now with a distinctive barb and tang, continue to be made and valued, even though other flint objects like axes are superseded by bronze versions. Pottery production continues to develop with finely made bowls, urns and beakers.

In this period people are buried or cremated as individuals, often with grave goods (including beakers) and with their own burial monuments. This is sometimes in a 'cist' or stone-lined grave, which may then have had a large, elaborate cairn constructed around it. Detailed studies of these remains can give us information about the individuals in life, as well as the rituals surrounding their death.

Although the Bronze Age is treated as one era, many changes occurred over the long period. The artefacts and burial monuments in particular change drastically as the period progresses, and it is thought that this may go along with significant changes in society and possibly belief.

What might jewellery and weaponry tell us about the individuals who carry them?

See also:

Box 1 object sheets: Barbed and Tanged Arrowheads, Bronze Halberd, Bronze Flat Axes, Beaker Pots, Prehistoric Pottery

Box 2 object sheets: Bronze Sickles, Bronze Sunflower Pin, Bronze Socketed Axe, Bronze Gouges, Bronze Swords

CT Bronze Casting, CT Making Prehistoric Pottery, CT Flint Knapping

Additional Images: Culduthel Cist Burial Gravegoods, Highland Bronze Age Beakers, Late Bronze Age Gold Hoard from the Heights of Brae near Dingwall, Bronze Age Metalwork from the Highlands, Late Bronze Age Hoard from Point of Sleat, Skye



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Necklace of jet or jet-like beads found in a cist burial at Torrish in Sutherland. Now in Dunrobin Castle Museum

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