

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the First Millennium BC in Nottinghamshire.

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Currently, there are some 222 records in the Nottinghamshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) which are relevant to the First Millennium B.C. These records include 19 finds of Late Bronze Age metalwork, 5 examples of Iron Age metalwork, 9 find-spots of Iron Age coins, 57 find-spots of pottery ascribed to the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, 21 finds of other objects ascribed to these two periods, 10 “hill forts” identified from earthworks or documentary sources, with two square ditched barrow cemeteries and over 105 settlements identified from cropmarks on aerial photographs.

These statistics present a somewhat minimal picture of the archaeological resource surviving from this period. Lack of field work in areas which do not generally produce cropmarks, on the claylands of the Mercia Mudstones and the Coal Measures, and on the Magnesian Limestone, limits both knowledge and interpretation. The incidence of Iron Age coins is under-represented in the SMR, in large part due to a lack of reporting by both finders and researchers. Even the cropmark evidence presents difficulties, for there has been little detailed analysis of this which will permit the description and enumeration of types of settlements and discussion of their distributions and relationships to each other and to other landscape features. The exception to this has been the predominantly Roman “brickwork plan” systems on the Sherwood Sandstones of North Nottinghamshire, where more questions than answers about pre-Roman components have resulted¹. In the Trent Valley the valuable start by Whimster has been confined to the sector north of Newark², but despite the National Mapping Programme³ much remains to be done to make a coherent detailed description of both Iron Age and Roman settlement and landscapes possible.

This lack of analysis, and the very richness of our cropmark evidence, in particular in the Trent Valley, brings the student of this period up hard against the difficulties of defining “sites” within palimpsests of settlement and land-use features which are technically undated but can be shown to belong not only to Late Prehistory but also to the Roman period. Consequently, even the figure of over 105 settlements given above must be treated with extreme caution. This is based on a rapid identification of presumed settlement “foci” observable amongst the cropmarks in the Trent Valley. Demonstrably, many of these “foci” involve remains of Roman date. However, differences between the morphologies of Roman settlements and those of earlier date have not been distinguished yet and when such sites are examined Late Bronze Age and Iron Age features or finds are not infrequent. It is therefore reasonable to assume that many of these “foci” may have pre-Roman origins, albeit that the bulk of their features and material culture may be Roman. Nevertheless, even if such a premise is accepted for the purposes of discussion, the numbers counted are based on the presence of particular features, such as ditched enclosures or “hut-circles”, and the density of these in particular locations. They take no account of the less dense, less striking and more nugatory features which might make up unenclosed or smaller scale settlements.

Past work on this resource has been comparatively limited. Sites with defensive earthworks were an obvious early target, with ditch sections being cut at Burton Lodge, Burton Joyce, in the early 1950s⁴ and Combs Farm, Farnsfield in the early 1960s⁵. At Scratta Wood excavations over a long period during the 1960s revealed a settlement enclosed by a wall and ditch with occupation during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age and in the Roman period⁶, but this has not been fully published. Excavations at Red Hill, Ratcliffe on Trent, resulting from finds made before the 2nd World War and in advance of development in 1963, uncovered pre-Roman features and Late Bronze Age and Early Iron

Age pottery ⁷. From 1973 to 1991, in excavations of an apparent Roman fortification at Dorket Head, Arnold, the Sherwood Archaeological Society uncovered ditches also producing Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery, together with Late Iron Age pottery ⁸. Of the cropmark sites, settlements of predominantly Iron Age date were excavated in advance of gravel extraction at Holme Pierrepont (Sites I to IV) in the 1970s ⁹. Salvage excavation in the 1960s also retrieved 2 log boats of presumed Iron Age date at Holme Pierrepont ¹⁰. More recently, in 1988, excavations of rectangular enclosures on the gravel terrace above Holme Pierrepont, at Gamston ¹¹, uncovered a sequence of Iron Age settlement and Roman landscape features, from which came a large and important body of Iron Age pottery.

Gamston was the first site in the County to be substantially developer funded, in advance of housing development. Surprisingly, perhaps, development lead work over the last 10 years has resulted in numerically modest additions to knowledge about sites of the 1st Millennium in Nottinghamshire. However, the quality of information from a number of these has been high. Included amongst these is the identification of a probable Iron Age defended site in Crow Wood, Styrrup ¹², a large area study in an extension of Hoveringham Quarry ¹³, currently in progress, which is revealing a history of land-use and settlement from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age and well into the Roman period, a section cut through cropmark features producing quantities of pottery and other artefacts at Aslockton ¹⁴, and a C14 dated Iron Age pottery group from Harby ¹⁵. Palaeoenvironmental studies in alluvial sites affected by development have also added to our knowledge of the environment of the period.

Otherwise, work has been largely confined to studies of individual finds of metalwork, such as the “bird brooch” from Red Hill ¹⁶ or the decorated shield boss from the Trent near the same site ¹⁷, and to coins. Ceramics have been the subject of increasing attention by a number of researchers particularly Sheila Elsdon and David Knight, shortly to culminate in the publication of an East Midlands regional sequence for the 1st Millennium.

From this review of the basic data and previous work, it will be obvious that any description of Nottinghamshire in the 1st Millennium B.C. must be limited. We do have a general model, however. This period appears to be one of expansion of human settlement and agriculture in which much of the considerable lowland woods surviving from earlier times were cleared. Consequently, by the time that the Romans arrived the landscape of what is now Nottinghamshire had been transformed into one of farms with arable and grasslands and comparatively little woodland. This view is based largely upon the Trent Valley, where cropmarks suggest the development of a landscape of numerous dispersed settlements and farms with enclosed field-systems. The palaeoenvironmental record appears to support this interpretation of intensifying settlement and land-use ¹⁸, with alluviation continuing on the Trent flood plain, which is attributed to woodland clearance and soil erosion along with increases in surface water run-off from the later Iron Age, and with cultivated grains, field weeds and grasses appearing regularly in pollen diagrams.

Judging from the ceramic evidence this expansion appears to have been a cumulative process over the millennium. Sites producing Late Bronze Age Post-Deverel-Rimbury plainwares and Late Bronze Age/Earlier Iron Age wares are comparatively few, notably Red Hill, Gamston, Epperstone ¹⁹, and Dorket Head, while scored ware and La Tene style decorated types of pottery appear more frequently, notably at Gamston, Harby, Holme Pierrepont and in perhaps another dozen or so locations. Late Iron Age pottery, amongst which wheel made wares appear, by contrast appears to occur yet more frequently. The more notable occurrences include Dorket Head, Gamston, Holme Pierrepont, Scratta Wood, Dunstan’s Clump ²⁰ and Rampton ²¹, but overall a Late Iron Age ceramic element appears to be present on many cropmark settlements. Thus there appears to be a rise in the incidence of sites producing ceramic material from the beginning to the end of the millennium. Further the volume of pottery present on any one site appears to rise also. Iron Age pottery cannot be said to be common in Nottinghamshire at any date. Finds of more than a few sherds of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age material are infrequent. By contrast, scored ware and other pottery assignable to the later centuries before the Roman Conquest is more frequently present in ‘reasonable’ amounts. There are many factors which must induce caution in the interpretation of these observations, ranging from the lack of field walking, the lack of survival of early pottery, or the difficulties in recognising and attributing date to undecorated body sherds through to the longevity of the many pottery types involved. Nevertheless, at face value the evidence may suggest that both settlements and their populations (as represented by the volumes of pottery used) increased with time.

Turning to the settlements, it is clear that a variety of types are present in Nottinghamshire. I include the earthwork enclosure sites, the so called hillforts, in this for I doubt that these represent an individual class of site. Indeed except for Combs Farm, Farnsfield, which appears to be an acceptable promontory fort and Crow Wood, Styrrup, which appears to belong with other earthwork enclosed sites on higher ground in low lying areas which have been described by Parker Pearson as ‘Marsh Forts’, I have difficulty in accepting most of these as hillforts, or indeed as Iron Age at all. The two best preserved sites are at Fox Wood, Woodborough²² and Old Ox Camp, Oxtun²³. Fox Wood has produced Roman pottery but nothing which has been described as prehistoric. Fieldwalking on the ridge on which Fox Wood is sited and where there are cropmarks has produced a similar story. In terms of size and plan form, if the earthworks were levelled and the site transferred to the Trent Valley, the resulting cropmark would be difficult to distinguish amongst the others. Old Ox Camp certainly looks good on plan, until it is realised that it is not on the hill top, but rather is nestled into a hollow between hills and is utterly indefensible. It is an interesting and problematic site, but not a hillfort and probably not Iron Age. The remaining hillfort sites are known either from fragmentary earthworks or documentary sources. Although Iron Age pottery has been found in excavation at Burton Lodge and Dorket Head, the nature of and/ or date of these sites remains an issue. Overall the only thing that these so-called hillfort sites have in common is a location on or within elevated locations on the Mercia Mudstones in southern mid-Nottinghamshire. Otherwise they exhibit disparate features and are likely to be of a variety of dates and function.

Amongst the other settlements a number of different types can be observed, although detail is not possible because of the lack of analysis of cropmarks. Amongst the settlement ‘foci’ clothes line enclosures and forms reminiscent of Wootton Hill style enclosures are apparent. Typical of many perhaps, are the four adjacent settlements at Holme Pierrepont (sites I to IV) excavated in the 1970’s. Each comprised a series of subrectangular ditched enclosures, some of which appear to have contained dwellings while others were used for stock or other functions. At Gamston, on the higher ground above Holme Pierrepont, another similar sub rectangular enclosure was present, producing from its ditches quantities of pottery and a few high status objects, including a continental La Tene glass bead. These sites contrast with the cropmark complex at Aslockton. This site, which is at present unique in the Trent Valley, consists of a sub oval enclosure approaching 20 hectares in area. This enclosure is divided into 2 units, each comprising an apparently empty central space with smaller sub rectangular enclosures along their perimeter. Together, these sites illustrate that within the cropmarks of the Trent Valley and South Nottinghamshire there exists a variety of settlement form and densities of settlement forms, some occurring in close neighbourhood, some bunched together in complexes, and others standing in some isolation.

Such settlements are recognisable by their enclosures and other coherent patterns in the cropmarks. Less represented in the account are the unenclosed open sites, which as cropmarks are difficult to recognise or may not appear at all. That such sites exist is demonstrable from the excavations at Holme Pierrepont and Gamston, where they appear early in the sequence of development. At present then, this provides the only hint of chronological depth other than that given by pottery. Early sites appear to be open, later sites appear to be enclosed.

A link may be made, perhaps, between the enclosing of settlements and the development of enclosed field systems. In the Trent Valley and South Nottinghamshire the cropmarks also reveal areas of co-axial field systems, which appear to relate to the settlement foci and which have ready parallels in the ‘brickwork plan’ system on the Sherwood Sandstones of North Nottinghamshire and beyond. How far back into the first millennium the dating of these field systems may be pushed is a particularly contentious matter. At Gamston, rectilinear field boundaries comprised Phase 3, to which a pre-Roman but 1st century AD date was ascribed. In North Nottinghamshire excavations on a set of rectangular enclosures apparently articulating with the field system, at Dunstan’s Clump, produced occupation dated on the basis of pottery to between the mid 1st centuries BC and AD. Whether or not this date can be transferred to the inception of the field system is uncertain but the relevant point is that it falls into the end of 1st millennium BC. If Dunstan’s Clump may be taken as representative of the other small enclosed settlements in the Nottinghamshire brickwork plan system, it may be suggested that they and the field systems are a very late development. So far as the overall relationship between settlement types and field systems is concerned, the evidence suggests that rectilinear patterns of field enclosure are not directly associated with the appearance of enclosures around settlements. Rather perhaps,

settlement enclosure and field enclosure may be earlier and later manifestations of the land pressures and economic changes produced by increasing population and settlement.

It has been argued that the brickwork plan field system of north Nottinghamshire was related to animal husbandry, particularly sheep, rather than agriculture. More generally however, a farming economy is the expectation for the 1st Millennium BC. The presence of arable is indicated by the presence of spelt, 6 row hulled barley, Celtic Bean or Field Pea, a free-threshing wheat and emmer at Gamston. Even at Dunstan's Clump a range of cultivated cereals were present. Equally cattle, sheep, pig and horse were represented by bone both at Gamston and Dunstan's Clump. While details are not available at present, the Aslockton site produced quantities of charred plant remains and animal bones. Such finds amplify the evidence of pollen diagrams and the inferences about grain production and animal products which can be drawn from quernstones and the rare instances of triangular loomweights and weaving combs.

How this agriculture and animal husbandry were organised is unclear but increasingly, led to cleared woodland and occupied much of the land surface²⁴. This process was not necessary unrelenting or total. At Scaftworth the woodland that was cut down for the foundations of the Roman road across the marshes grew up in this period after Bronze Age clearance²⁵. The oak lining of a Roman well at Margidunum comes from forest timber²⁶, indicating that stands of the primeval forest must have survived, even in the area of the Trent Valley²⁷. However, the density of the settlement in the Trent Valley and South Nottinghamshire and the observation that co-axial fields systems such as the brickwork plan imply a cleared landscape, indicate that this clearance must have been achieved in much of Nottinghamshire by the end of the 1st millennium.

Rather than agriculture, animal husbandry must have been crucial to this woodland clearance. This aspect of the economy often receives too little emphasis but stock raising and grazing is the only way in which the apparently small population involved could have achieved and maintained a largely cleared landscape. This is not to deny the cumulative affects of climatic change and generations of effort by a growing population. Nevertheless, if we take the numbers of settlement foci, or individual settlements, which we can estimate in the Trent Valley and apply the conventional multiplier used in estimating populations in later periods, the total population estimate comes out in the low thousands. And this is before consideration such as the contemporaneity of settlements are taken into account. Low populations have also been suggested for the pre-Roman settlement on the Sherwood Sandstones of the brickwork plan system of North Nottinghamshire²⁷. If the enclosure of settlements and fields is to be taken as an indicator of pressures on land and in society is likely that these were induced more by increasing numbers of stock and limitations on grazing than by the expansion of arable and rising population.

Thus the appearance of stock enclosures as part of settlement complexes or the large empty central areas of the two sub units within the Aslockton site may perhaps be associated with a growing needs to protect and manage stock. The appearance of rectilinear field systems could then be seen perhaps as the later manifestation of the need for increasing sophistication in managing stock and arable resources as the space for both became even more constricted. Further, it is possible that these settlement and field enclosures could reflect increasing specialisation in animal husbandry, in some communities and in some locations. Variation in settlement form and in landscape could be a reflection of variations, perhaps on occasion very local, between the farming economies of individual communities.

The importance of animal husbandry may lie behind some of the long distance contacts evident in the material culture from some Nottinghamshire sites. These lie to the east as exhibited by decorated pottery from Lincolnshire, to the south with granodiorite filled pottery from the Charnwood area and to the west with stoney VCP briquetage from Cheshire. These imports are evidence of long distance exchange, which is readily be assumed to be trade. However the need to provide grazing for animals could suggest the likelihood also of transhumance both in and out of Nottinghamshire and therefore the movement of people, and of exchange media to facilitate contact and passage, across the wider region. Indeed, one wonders if transhumance and movement of people may not be another factor in the enclosing of settlement and landscape elements. Perhaps the late appearance of enclosed field systems is a manifestation of the breakdown of transhumance patterns as settlements became more frequent, extensive, and fixed, and as access to land outside their immediate territory became more restricted.

It does not appear that the 1st millennium farming economy in Nottinghamshire brought great material wealth. Indeed, Nottinghamshire sites are marked by the poverty of their material culture. Volumes of pottery are usually relatively low and even in the few instances where this is not the case, other material is virtually absent. Only Gamston and Aslockton can boast the triangular clay loom-weights, and Aslockton the bone weaving combs, which are amongst the standard repertoire of Iron Age sites elsewhere. These two are rich by comparison with most other Nottinghamshire sites but are average if not poor in comparison to elsewhere.

If the volume and range of material culture reflects status also, then again, Nottinghamshire settlements and society appear to have been low in this. True, there are some high status objects from the County. These include the 19 instances of Late Bronze Age metalwork, most of which come from the River Trent as do the La Tene style decorated shield boss from Ratcliffe-on-Trent, near Red Hill, and the decorated sword scabbard from Sutton on Trent²⁸. From sites on land there is little more than the La Tene 1 bird brooch from Red Hill and the continental decorated glass bead from Gamston. Such status objects as we may recognise then, come from inferred ritual deposition in the Trent or, less likely, from settlement and other sites in eroding bank sides. Such ritual deposition could have been part of mortuary practice, and it is therefore interesting that the only known burial sites in Nottinghamshire during this period are the square barrow cemeteries at the Ness, North Muskham and at Hoveringham.

These sites appear to have parallels in the Arras culture of Yorkshire, but their identification is not absolutely certain. Excavation of an apparent square barrow at Aston on Trent, Derbys²⁹, on one of a very few comparable sites elsewhere in the Trent Valley, revealed no burial and thereby casts doubt on the function of these Nottinghamshire sites. However, if they are indeed barrows then they represent high status burials. This view is reinforced by their position in the landscape, particularly in the North Muskham example which occupies an elevated position in the Trent flood plain close to the river from which the barrows would have been dramatically visible. These funerary monuments are the sites which can be associated with ritual or religious activity. It may be tempting to include Red Hill in this category because of the presence of the high status 'bird brooch', the decorated shield boss from the river nearby and its elevated position overlooking the confluence of the rivers Trent and Soar. However, it may be that our interpretation of these is too highly coloured by the undoubted and rare later presence of a Romano-Celtic temple.

Otherwise, there is little in the evidence to suggest differentiation between settlements in either status or function. We may assume that this existed and that we may find it as our descriptions of settlements and landscapes improve and are refined, probably in the sizes and functions of settlements and notwithstanding its poverty in variation amongst the material culture present. For example the difference between sites such as those at Holme Pierrepont and Aslockton may be expected to reflect differences in status as well as form and function. It is also possible that the market, ritual and meeting place functions attributable to the small Roman towns such as Brough and Margidunum may have been fulfilled on much the same site by the earlier settlements which are indicated by cropmarks and finds. How the people in the 1st millennium measured status is another matter- by numbers of cattle perhaps.

Thus the model of Nottinghamshire in the 1st millennium BC can be expanded to include change, development, and variety in settlement types, function and densities. These are matched by changes in the landscape which ultimately was largely used for farming and was increasingly being enclosed. This was effected by a population which, despite being underestimated and having grown over the period, was relatively small. Although impoverished by comparison with some other areas, these people were open to and maintained contacts and exchange networks over considerable distances to the north, east, west and south of the County. Overall, there is little to suggest strong cultural identifiers or politically vibrant groupings. Or is there?

Most of the sites and finds mentioned above come from the Trent Valley and south Nottinghamshire. As we have seen, it is in this area that settlement was dense and has a sequence of development which can be traced from early to late in the millennium. By contrast, early sites and finds are rare in north Nottinghamshire, and when the evidence appears it points to settlement and landscape development which is mainly late in date. The Trent Valley appears to be a watershed in the distribution of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age activity in the County. Most of the metalwork comes from the Trent, early pottery is not found mainly much further north than the Trent Valley, which also appears to represent the northern limit to the currency of Scored Ware, and the imported pottery has a southern distribution.

This contrast can be seen in the Anglo-Saxon period also, and to differing extents in other periods.. There appear to be two economic and social zones. The Trent Valley and south Nottinghamshire was well settled, economically strong and viable, and looked to, indeed was part of, the societies and economy of the regions to the south and east. As one travelled north or west from the Trent Valley however, settlement became more sparse and probably poorer, and land use less intense and different.

The differences between north and south in the late Bronze Age and Iron Age then, appear to be the first manifestation of a constant. This is one of two different countrysides, two different social and economic zones, which. to judge from the distribution of early Roman forts and marching camps in Nottinghamshire, may well have been two different political zones also. In the 1st millennium B.C. we can see that Nottinghamshire lies across the boundary between Highland and Lowland Zones. In the Trent Valley, and to south and east of it, we are securely in the lowlands; north and west of the Trent Valley we enter the border country between northern and southern England, into the poorer and more difficult lands which lie at the base of the highlands. If we are seeking themes for research this is one of the big ones !

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