Iron Age mortuary rites in southern Britain: Familiar ancestors, foreign ideas

Coming from a family which is Scottish on one side and English on the other, **Andrew Lamb** has been curious about cultural differences between closely related groups from a young age. Combined with a long lasting interest in the European Iron Age (due in no small part to Asterix comics), his current research focuses on the southern counties of England between c.500 BC and AD 70, examining the variation in human remains across this area.

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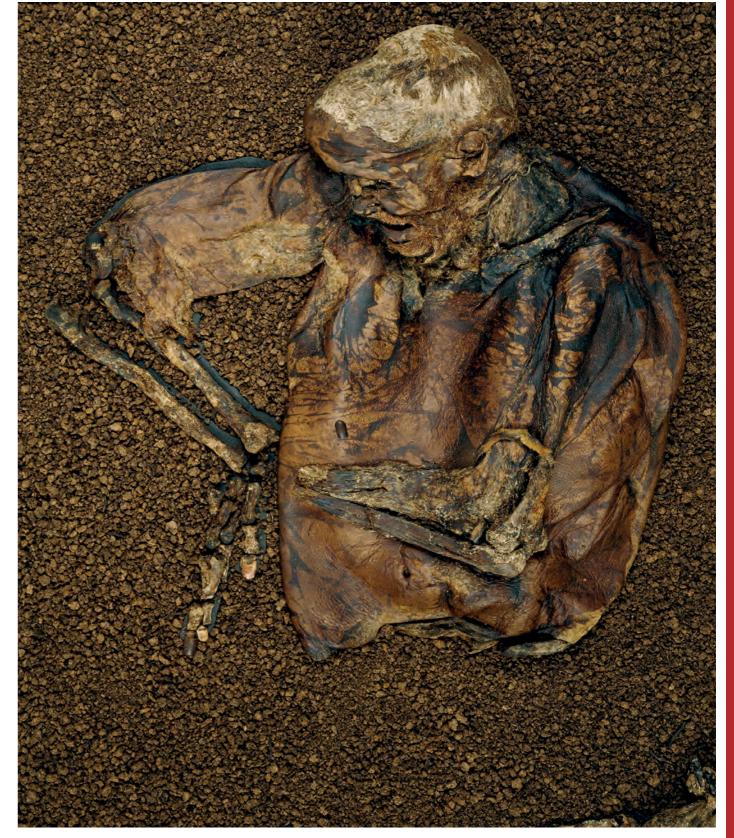
Iron Age Britain can be both ancestrally familiar and disturbingly alien to us. It was during the Iron Age that the inhabitants of these islands first identified themselves, and were identified by outsiders, as Britons. Likewise, place names such as Kent, Dorset, Devon, Colchester and London trace their etymological roots to this period. Whilst these place names conjure familiarity, there were numerous aspects of the Iron Age which would be unfamiliar, if not unintelligible, to modern eyes. Britons of the Iron Age lived in roundhouses, adorned precious objects with swirling, interlaced patterns, and spoke a Celtic dialect. Perhaps the most peculiar feature of this age, and most alien to modern practices, is the way in which Iron Age peoples in Britain dealt with death.

The elusive dead, fractured bodies and murdered folk

The population of Iron Age Britain likely numbered a few million, yet despite this we can account for only a tiny fraction of the population in the archaeological record; when people died they were typically disposed of in a way which left little to no physical trace. For those few we do have evidence for, the evidence is highly varied. In addition to more familiar practices such as inhumation and cremation burials, we also find parts of bodies, ranging from near complete corpses to individual body parts such as limbs or skulls. Finally, there are the famous "Bog Bodies", individuals who ultimately ended up being preserved in peat bogs. Although accidental death may account for some "Bog Bodies", it is clear that many were subjected to high levels of violence, most likely as part of a human sacrifice. Similar levels of violence have also been observed on individual bones and some inhumed persons, particularly those found within ditches which enclosed settlements and grain storage pits.

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My research focuses on human remains dated from the late Iron Age to the first decades of the Roman conquest (c.500BC–AD70), specifically those recovered from the English counties of the south coast extending from the Isles of Scilly to Kent. With the exception of bog bodies, this region has produced all of the forms of human remains noted above. This region is not uniform in terms of the data available, and shows a variety of sub-regional trends. These

Lindow Man, a bog body from Cheshire, c.100 BC–AD100. Lindow Man was killed by a combination of blunt force and strangulation. Many human remains from Iron Age Britain and Ireland and the continent display high levels of violence. Although many injuries observed on human remains were the result of common accidents, in several instances the evidence points to acts of human sacrifice.

include burials in stone-lined cists in the western part of the region, a focus on hill-forts as locations for the disposal of human remains in the centre, and the adoption of cremation burials in the east similar to those found on the continent. My research seeks to better understand the role burial practices played in the construction of society in Iron Age Communities, through an analysis of human remains. Specifically, what meanings were ascribed to them, how these meanings changed, and what relationships existed between British rites associated with death and those of the near continent.

Manipulating the dead to control the living

There has been a tendency to consider changes in burial practices as further social change in society, rather than catalysing it. Such a view fails to acknowledge the power that death can have over individuals who witness it; forcing them to restructure their social relations to account for the death of an individual. Violence, as is attested on many bones from this region, may also have played a part in reinforcing bonds between people, with human sacrifice being a powerful means of doing so. Certainly by the final centuries of the Iron Age we find individuals buried with an assortment of objects ranging from ornate headdresses, decorated weapons and tools which appear to denote a distinct role within their communities. The approaches which Iron Age communities in the British Isles and those of the continent employed towards death show many commonalities, such as the ways of disposing of the dead, comparable choices in burial locations, and similar, if not nearly identical, grave goods. In an age when death was common – famine was only a failed harvest away and child mortality high – the ability to manipulate the cosmological and

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spiritual world which governed life would have provided those who could do so with power. To do so, however, required one to have access to a medium through which to communicate with the otherworld; the dead.

Crown from Grave 112 Mill Hill, Deal, Kent c.250BC. During the final centuries of the British Iron Age a variety of ornate objects, including headdresses, mirrors and so called "divination spoons", were included in graves. In addition to this crown, the individual from Grave 112 was buried with an ornate shield, sword and coral decorated brooches. Based on similarities with later Roman priestly headdresses, it is generally thought that individuals like this belonged to some sort of religious class.

Bronze clad bucket from a cremation burial at Aylesford, Kent, c.75–50BC. The use of cremation in southern England is observable in the archaeological record from the 2nd century BC onward, and appears to have been introduced from northern France, where it was common beginning in the 3rd century BC. The use of buckets in graves is attested in southern Britain, France and western Germany, with the Aylesford bucket showing strong stylistic links with examples from the Ardennes and Lower Rhine.

Andrew Lamb is a 3rd Year PhD student in Archaeology, who has specialised in mortuary archaeology in his undergraduate degree. In terms of broader research impact, he hopes to demonstrate that links between Britain and the continent were closer than is often thought for this period.

To fit or not to fit – that is the question

Wherever they are based, academics have a complex and often solitary work environment. Citing her work in Cyprus, **Dr Irina Lokhtina,** a DSocSci graduate from the **School of Management**, explains why encouraging engagement within academic communities could improve academic careers in Cypriot higher education

Each one of us is involved in professional communities crucial to our learning and development, such as colleagues at conferences and in the workplace. In a similar way, academics need multiple and often overlapping communities to develop their own identities, as well as to form a better mutual understanding of common practices. However, there are cases where academics are restricted from these communities, depriving the academic of feedback and impacting their development.

Higher education has seen big changes in recent times, such as a rapid growth in temporary contracts. This means that budding academics have to learn how to tackle heaps of paperwork, balance their research with teaching responsibilities, cope with the uncertainty in getting funding and progressing their career as well as with externally imposed accountability requirements. Hamlet's famous dilemma, 'borrowed' for this article's title, aptly summarises the torments that academics often experience in their workplaces, such as a lack of support. It is as if many do not properly 'fit' in their academic work environment.

'Learning the ropes' in academia

As an academic myself in a private university in Cyprus with a professional background in social psychology, my personal interest was always about the learning processes embedded in academic workplaces and how they affect academic career development. With this DSocSci project, I aimed to address the issue of academics feeling isolated and unsupported in their jobs, how this affects their learning and career progression, and how policymakers can facilitate the community participation of these academics to improve higher education as a sector. Based on interviews with academics and other sources, my research essentially acts as an intermediary between academics and policymakers, with a strong interest in academics' learning experiences in light of the existing attempts to modernise higher education.

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The role of academics worldwide has undergone significant changes over the last decade and the Cypriot public higher education, where my research is based, is no exception. I chose public higher education in Cyprus as a case study firstly due to my personal interest in the subject, and secondly because it began comparatively recently; the first public university was established just 27 years ago in 1989. This short history means that there is a research gap in understanding the influence of the working environment on academic career development.

The coast of the Mediterranean Sea, Cyprus