CLAIMED BY THE SEA: SALCOMBE, LANGDON BAY, AND OTHER MARINE FINDS OF THE BRONZE AGE BY STUART NEEDHAM, DAVE PARHAM, AND CATHERINE FRIEMAN


The volume reviewed here has been in the making for some considerable time. It very much represents a collective effort, for alongside the principal authors, significant contributions have been made by Martin Bates, Martin Dean, Peter Northover, Brendan O’Connor, and others.

The reader is presented with the evidence from two sites identified in English in-shore waters following the discovery of Bronze Age metalwork on the sea floor by sports divers in the 1970s: Langdon Bay, Kent, and Salcombe, Devon. Despite a plethora of adverse conditions, including lack of sustained financial support, investigations at both sites continued throughout the 1980s. New discoveries have been made at Salcombe since May 2004, but of these more recent finds only those retrieved until December of that year are included in the present volume. Nonetheless what is discussed here, alongside finds from Salcombe and Langdon Bay discovered up to 2004, is an extremely useful catalogue of other Bronze Age metalwork finds from the English Channel and adjacent sea zones.

None of these other finds, however, remotely approach the sheer numbers of objects recovered from the seabed at Langdon Bay and Salcombe. Hence, the authors face the challenge of having to deal not only with a very sizeable number of metalwork items (approximately 400), most of which have suffered considerable erosion from exposure to the elements, but also of having to interpret what effectively amounts to a new type of site and assemblage for this part of the world. Their uniqueness lies in the concentration of copious Bronze Age metalwork on the sea floor in a dynamic high-energy environment subject to strong tidal currents and longshore drift. In order to facilitate a reasonable understanding of site taphonomy and the extent to which their conditions might have changed since the Bronze Age, the first two chapters provide fairly detailed discussions of local geomorphology and of the principal characteristics of the marine environments at the two sites.

From this, Langdon Bay emerges as much more complex in terms of its recent geomorphological history, with significant changes in local topography. It is quite likely that during the Bronze Age the site would have been situated closer to the shoreline, and at the time of metalwork deposition possibly within a small inlet on the edge of the Dour estuary, perhaps occupied by tidal marshes.

At Salcombe the geology in comparison is much more stable, and apart from some variation in sea levels the site in the outer eastern reaches of the Kingsbridge-Salcombe estuary is unlikely to have seen significant change since the Bronze Age. Here, however, complications affecting interpretation arise from the existence of two distinct concentrations of Penard-period metalwork on the sea floor (referred to as Moor Sand and Salcombe site B respectively). These coincide with different impurity patterns in the metal and potentially indicate two separate depositional episodes, something that is not fully borne out in the subsequent discussion. Another separate
deposition episode is marked by the presence of Ewart Park material. The remains of a 17th century AD shipwreck in the same location (Salcombe site A) do not help when it comes to disentangling the evidence.

Before the authors set out to tackle these obstacles by undertaking detailed typological analyses of the assemblages, they first examine the evidence for Bronze Age settlement and land use in the terrestrial hinterlands of both Salcombe and Langdon Bay. This examination also includes a review of patterns of metalwork deposition. The relevant sections provide enough detail for the reader to form a good idea of the respective regional contexts.

While the subsequent typological analysis is hampered by the loss of detail on many objects from erosion, the authors’ conclusions in terms of the chronological range of individual artefact types and their likely geographical origin are sound and convincing. Both the Langdon Bay assemblage and the bulk of the Salcombe material can confidently be dated to the earlier part of the Penard period, a date that is also supported by metal analysis. Surprisingly, the seminal paper by Jockenhövel (1975) who first argued for a chronological gradient within Penard metalwork and whose propositions continue to inform the debate, is not included in the bibliography. Another relevant study by Milcent (2012) presumably was published too recently to be included, but lends further support to the authors’ conclusions.

Elements of the subsequent Wilburton (in traditional parlance) or Limehouse period (according to Burgess’ 2012 proposal for re-aligning the British and French metalwork sequences) are entirely lacking. Most of the Ewart Park metalwork from Salcombe was retrieved after the cut-off date for this volume, and thus its detailed discussion had to be left for a future occasion.

Many of the pieces from the two sites would seem to have originated from northern France, with some of the items coming from much further afield. Insular types, however, are also present in sufficient numbers to make a reading as lost shipments of imported scrap metal less than straightforward, and this is reflected in the volume’s concluding discussion. Any metalwork specialist will appreciate the painstaking groundwork that has gone into this part of the study. This not only holds true for the text, but also for the accompanying object drawings.

What is missing, however, are distribution maps for individual metalwork types. A generic map (Fig. 5.5) to indicate likely catchment areas is hardly an adequate substitute. In some instances the text provides references to maps published elsewhere, but this reviewer would really liked to have seen a more consistent approach here. A more up-to-date distribution map for tanged-and-collared chisels than that presented in this volume was published by the present reviewer a number of year ago (Brandherm 1998, fig. 2).

Similarly, readers will find themselves searching in vain for site plans which identify the exact find spots of specific objects on the sea floor. Their absence is unfortunate, albeit perfectly understandable for those objects recovered before a proper recording system was put in place. The displacement of objects by currents and tidal forces over the course of the last three millennia would clearly limit the diagnostic value of the information conveyed, but the same could surely be said of the more generic plans provided. For Langdon Bay, at least, there is a site plan with find spots indicated at object-category-level (Fig. 2.10). For Salcombe the site plan does distinguish finds recovered since 2004 from those retrieved on earlier occasions, but otherwise they are not keyed to catalogue entries (Fig. 1.11).

With more than 200 samples analyzed for metal composition and 23 lead-isotope analyses in total, Peter Northover’s study of the metallurgical make-up of both site assemblages constitutes an important contribution not only to this volume, but to our knowledge of recycling practice and
of changing raw-material supply pools around the Middle/Late Bronze Age transition in the Channel area more generally. It is particularly interesting to see how the Salcombe and Langdon Bay assemblages in part drew on different pools of raw material. Copper input from the Western Alpine Urnfield zone and other continental source areas also provides insights into wider circulation patterns.

The catalogue of other marine finds of Bronze Age metalwork from the wider Channel area compiled by Stuart Needham provides another crucial building block for a better understanding of the two assemblages at the centre of this volume. The map that comes with this chapter (Fig. 4.1) shows a clear concentration of finds along the south coast of England, in contrast to a relative dearth of discoveries from the French Channel coast. This uneven distribution raises questions of recovery or reporting bias which would have merited further discussion. If one accepts that many of the respective finds represent accidental losses (as the authors do), without some element of skewing at the retrieval end, a more balanced picture might be expected. This imbalance persists even when taking into account the occasional French discovery omitted from the catalogue, e.g. the Type Huelva carp's-tongue sword recovered from the seabed off Cap de la Hague, on the tip of Normandy’s Cotentin peninsula (Briard et al 1977, 48 No. 93).

Similar finds are also known from further afield, and some of these are mentioned in the text. In their discussion the authors rightly point out that dredge finds from the Loire estuary generally come from further inland, and the same very much holds true for the Gironde estuary (Coffyn 1967, 796). However, this does not apply to a number of Late Bronze Age swords retrieved from river mouths in Galicia (Brandherm 2007, Nos. 22. 23. 36. 179. 182). Individual pieces have also been recovered from the Tejo estuary opposite Lisbon, the in-shore waters of south-western Iberia, and the Loukkos estuary on the Atlantic coast of Morocco (Brandherm 2007, Nos. 35. 57. A2).

Drawing on the various strands of evidence presented in previous chapters, in their final discussion the authors face the difficult task of developing a consistent approach to interpretations of the Langdon Bay and Salcombe assemblages. Carefully weighing their arguments, they come to the conclusion that both are best understood as primarily lost cargoes of scrap metal destined for recycling, with a minority of the objects associated from the foundered vessels’ outfit as well as the crews’ personal belongings. Based on information from the various interim reports, and before engaging with the contents of the present volume, this was also accepted as the most likely scenario by the present reviewer. He is now much less certain.

Of course the authors are clearly right to stress that it would be quite unreasonable to assume that no vessels were lost in the waters of the English Channel during the Bronze Age, or that no metalwork came to be deposited on the sea floor as a consequence of such losses. However, when it comes to more specific arguments to support a reading of the Langdon Bay and Salcombe assemblages as lost cargoes, things are less clear-cut.

The point is made by the authors that the composition of the Langdon Bay, and to some extent the Salcombe assemblage, is quite different from contemporary terrestrial hoards or riverine depositions. That is clearly true, but then this perhaps is also what one should expect to find in a new and different type of depositional milieu. Also, this phenomenon is not entirely unique. A similar contrast has recently been observed between metalwork finds from the intertidal zone in Swansea Bay and terrestrial metalwork depositions from across Wales (Gwilt 2013, 11-12). Clear comparison with contemporaneous terrestrial or riverine depositions at a regional level is hampered by a relative dearth of similar material in the hinterland of both Langdon Bay and Salcombe, which obviously cannot be taken to mean that no metalwork was being used by the coastal communities in the respective areas. Is it inconceivable then that we might be dealing
with a case of hidden circulation, where local communities used ‘foreign’ objects as part of their everyday material culture, but these same objects did not end up being deposited in the usual terrestrial or riverine contexts?

The authors also contrast their two assemblages with that from the Ría de Huelva in south-western Iberia, where approximately 400 bronze objects, mainly weaponry, were dredged from the estuary of the Tinto and Odiel rivers in March and April 1923. Dating to the 10th century BC, the Ría de Huelva assemblage in terms of its chronology sits between the Penard metalwork from Langdon Bay and Salcombe on the one hand, and the Ewart Park-period objects from the latter site on the other. Originally the Spanish assemblage had also been interpreted as lost cargo from a foundered vessel, but this reading has long been abandoned, for a number of fairly good reasons (cf. Brandherm 2007, 75-76).

The authors point out that the Ría de Huelva assemblage differs from both Langdon Bay and Salcombe in that it does not contain a significant proportion of foreign metal. Save for some individual objects of foreign type this is undoubtedly true, but then south-western Iberia did not import any significant part of the metal circulating in that region at any point in the Bronze Age to begin with, and indeed might well have had more limited access to large quantities of foreign metalwork. Differences in the proportion of foreign objects between our two sites and the Ría de Huelva hence to some extent may simply reflect general availability, and if anything, the ‘foreignness’ of sizeable portions of the finds from Langdon Bay and Salcombe should be viewed as an argument for rather than against intentional deposition.

A specific element from the Langdon Bay assemblage that might be seen as casting additional doubt on the authors’ interpretation in favour of accidental loss is a socketed axe with various metalwork fragments wedged into it (No. 119). Hansen (1996-1998, 22-23) has made a convincing case for ascribing a specific symbolic meaning to the practice of stuffing axes with other pieces of metalwork, and in some instances also non-metallic objects. If a non-utilitarian explanation of this practice is accepted, the presence of such an object in the Langdon Bay assemblage at least raises a question or two regarding its reading as a lost cargo of scrap metal. For Salcombe, at least, the exclusion from the present volume of discoveries made after December 2004 hinders any definitive interpretation (see above). The fact that here we are dealing with at least two, more likely three different assemblages is not an argument either for or against any of the proposed readings. Finding two or three separate Bronze Age shipwrecks in these waters cannot necessarily be considered less likely than several separate episodes of intentional deposition, and the presence of copper and tin ingots among the post-2004 finds would seem to be quite in keeping with what little we know about accidentally lost Bronze Age cargoes. On the other hand, from classical Greece we learn that the ritual casting of lumps of raw metal into the sea was practiced to seal treaties (Scheibelreiter 2012), and of course in principle we cannot even be sure that repeated deposition of metalwork on the sea floor off Salcombe means that the same causes were at work on each occasion.

It is hoped that future study of the finds made at Salcombe since 2004 will shed some more light on this question. When expressing the hope that their publication will not take quite as long as it has taken the current volume to see the light of day, this it not to criticize its authors, to whom we owe our gratitude not only for presenting us with new and exciting evidence, but also for a stimulating in-depth discussion of the multiple facets it offers.

Much of the book can also be read as a riveting tale of the birth of Bronze Age maritime archaeology in British waters, and it stands as a lasting tribute to the pioneering work of the late Keith Muckelroy, without whose vision and enthusiasm we likely would have seen very little of this.
References


Burgess, C, 2012. Alignments: Revising the Atlantic Late Bronze Age Sequence. Archaeological Journal 169, 127-158


Gwilt, A, 2013. Reporting finds, sharing treasures: Bronze Age metalwork discoveries from Wales. PAST – The Newsletter of the Prehistoric Society 75, 10-12


Dirk Brandherm
School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology
Queen's University Belfast

Review submitted: January 2014

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor