Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age ornaments and regalia

The early stages of metal use in Britain (*c.* 2500–1500 BC) are marked not only by the appearance of ostensibly functional axes and daggers but by artefacts of rare materials and/or specialised craftsmanship. These are crafted mainly from gold, copper, tin, bronze, jet, amber, faience and stone. Object types include body ornaments, dress fittings, ornamental fittings for other objects and non-functional regalia, all of which usually denote some status in the wearer or bearer. Although hoard contexts and single finds are important for some categories of artefact, the great majority are found as grave goods. Past stereotypical assumptions about their gender associations are now being clarified by securely sexed burials from more recent excavations. While fittings associated with weaponry are found with men and beads and pendants mostly with women, other types, such as 'buttons', are not gender-specific.

Past studies have almost invariably considered the materials or artefact types independently of one another, but collectively they illustrate major diversification in technologies, craft skills and artefact styles over the course of this period. The limited occurrences of many of the materials gave rise to growing interregional interdependence and created a new and complex web of connections across Europe.

The first gold ornaments were introduced to Britain alongside the first copper artefacts by pioneering Beaker communities arriving from the Continent in the 25th century BC. Some of the gold was probably brought in, but sources of alluvial gold in the south-west peninsula appear to have been quickly discovered. An early simple 'flat-sheet' technology including limited punched decoration was used to make small ornaments – 'sun-discs', 'basket ornaments' and rolled beads. From these simple beginnings gold crafting developed to produce a variety of more elaborate sheet-gold forms. Complex decorative schemes were developed on lunulae (crescentic neck ornaments) and some developed gold covers; gold was combined with other exotic materials in some intricate 'Wessex' goldwork; and eye-catching three-dimensional morphologies were created by the skilful covering of core objects such as pommels and belt-hooks, or by the embossing of free-standing forms such as armlets, cups and capes.
Stream-panning for gold may have led to the discovery of the south-west peninsula's rich alluvial tin resources. Tin came to be recovered in sufficient quantities by the 22nd century BC to support the first systematic bronze alloying in Europe; in addition to its value for alloying, it was also appreciated for its ornamental potential as an inlay or coating, and even occasionally for making pure tin beads.

After some early occurrences in simple disc-bead necklaces, jet and related blackish materials (lignite, cannel coal, shale) came into prominence from about 2200 BC but may have declined in popularity again later in the Early Bronze Age. The jet itself was almost certainly extracted from the cliffs at Whitby on the east coast. It was distributed widely in Britain, but with a markedly northern emphasis. Conical buttons and belt-rings were amongst the first regular types, but specialised bead types – complex-bored spacer-plate and fusiform beads – were soon used in combination in the cleverly designed and technologically sophisticated spacer-plate necklaces.

South of the Humber, amber was favoured over jet. This attractive deep orange glass-like fossil resin was occasionally used early in the period (and indeed in the Neolithic), perhaps exploiting material washed up on Britain's eastern coast. However, finds from graves show a significant increase after 2000 BC, probably due to the establishment of a maritime network crossing the North Sea to the rich Baltic source zone. The primary uses of amber followed those of jet – beads, buttons, belt-rings and pendants – but there are also examples of pommels and two spectacular cups carved from large blocks of the raw material.

A little later, during the 19th century BC, faience technology was introduced to Britain from the Continent and was rapidly put into indigenous production. A glass-like material manufactured by raising silica and copper-mineral colorants to high temperatures, faience was used to make beads and pendants. The most frequent type, the segmented bead, imitated Continental (and ultimately Near-eastern) prototypes, but other shapes are insular inventions.

Stone artefacts are often thought of as quintessentially functional. However, as metal artefacts gradually took on the more functional roles, stone use shifted more towards the ceremonial; in neither case were functional and ceremonial necessarily exclusive of one another. Carefully chosen stone was important in the earliest phase for archer's 'wristguards' – actually ornamental versions of probable organic prototypes. Subsequently, from *c.* 2200 BC, shaft-hole 'axes' were adopted from northern Europe. Large-scale production based on various insular rocks produced two main forms, battle-axes, which are generally smaller and better finished, and axe-hammers, which are large and sometimes unwieldy. In neither case is the axe-like edge sharp as on Neolithic flint and stone axes. Percussive functions cannot be ruled out, but these objects were probably primarily regalia. New forms of macehead, derived from the indigenous later Neolithic series, were added to the stone regalia repertoire.

Bone and antler may also seem to be more mundane materials, but they were sometimes beautifully crafted into pins, toggles and pommels. And even here there is an element of the exotic, for examples have been shown to be made of sea-mammal ivory which would not be easily acquired. Connotations of prowess in hunting might extend to the boars' tusks that evidently adorned some individuals. Relatively few ornaments were made of copper or bronze, including rings, beads, pins, bracelets and quite unique pieces such as the double-pronged instrument from Wilsford G58.

Long-established dogmas have been overturned by recent research. Traditionally been assumed to have come from Ireland, analysis now shows a Cornish origin to be more likely for early gold. The fabulous jet spacer-plate necklaces of northern Britain, once seen as emulations of the Wessex amber examples, are now believed to have chronological primacy. Similarly, the Wessex gold can no longer be seen as the inspiration for all other finely crafted goldwork. In particular, the Scottish under-pommel mounts and the embossed goldwork represent discrete traditions developed indigenously in other regions. Wessex gold must be understood to be a specialised regional phenomenon which was able to use tiny amounts of gold to excellent effect using exquisite craftsmanship.

Although Britain was a powerhouse of invention and adaptation with regard to this ornament-cum-regalia repertoire and was well connected to the Continent, it is noteworthy that its products only occasionally had an influence on Continental shores.

Further Reading

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Items from the Bush Barrow burial, Wilts.

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Amber spacer plate necklace from Upton Lovell barrow G2 (e), Wilts. © Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

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