

**BRONZE AGE FACTSHEET 5
LATE BRONZE AGE WEAPONS &
WARFARE**

During the Bronze Age (c. 2200–800 BC), a range of weapons developed. The most archaeologically prolific are the numerous varieties of bronze spears and swords, though it is likely that implements that do not survive well archaeologically were also in use, including bows and arrows, wooden clubs, and slings. Bronze axes were possibly utilised in combat too, though there is presently limited evidence for this. Whereas previous weaponry could be interpreted as multi-functional (e.g. bows and arrows for hunting, as well as combat), objects, such as swords, could have had no real functional intention other than harming other humans. Consequently, traditionally this era has been seen as the ‘first arms race’.

During the Middle Bronze Age (c.1500–1100 BC), daggers from the Early Bronze Age gave way to long slender blades called rapiers, which were likely thrusting and stabbing weapons. These eventually evolved into larger, broader, swords, with typically ‘leaf-shaped’ blades that allowed an effective combination of thrusting and slicing actions. In Britain, these blades are typically undecorated and were hilted with organic handles, made from materials such as bone, antler and wood. The most characteristic sword is the ‘Ewart Park’ type sword, named after a site in northern England. Over 1000 examples of this sword type have been found so far in Britain alone dating to roughly 1000–800 BC.

At the same time we can observe similar developments in spearheads, both in terms of numbers and variety in shapes and sizes, which likely accommodated a combination of hunting and combat purposes. Smaller spears might be thrown, while larger spears could be considered thrusting implements. Spearheads typically possessed a socket for the insertion of a wooden shaft, which could be up to two metres long. Earlier spearheads were secured using loops on the side of the socket and later by inserting a peg or rivet through the socket. The earliest bronze spears were produced around 1700 BC and continued in use throughout the Bronze Age. At Tormarton, Gloucestershire,

there is clear evidence that from at least the Middle Bronze Age spears were used in conflict scenarios. At this site, four, possibly five, individuals were found dumped in a ditch. One skeleton still had two spearheads embedded in his spine and pelvis.

These developments in weaponry necessitated the development of armour and defensive gear. Shields made of leather, wood and bronze have all been recovered from the Later Bronze Age period in Britain and Ireland, while elsewhere in Europe helmets, cuirasses and other armament have been recovered. Currently no armour is known from Britain and it is likely that much would have been made of leather and other organic material that has not survived.

Traditional theories have been concerned with the idea of a Late Bronze Age ‘warrior elite’, who controlled resources and territories. These theories are largely borne out of models for Early Bronze Age societies centred on ‘rich’ burials of individuals with daggers and arrows, as well as by contemporary continental evidence of iconography and the seemingly rapid developments in weaponry. Rock art depicting armed individuals, such as that from Scandinavia, has been taken to represent the importance of warriors in Bronze Age society. In Britain, however, these theories remain largely circumstantial due to the lack of human remains associated with weaponry and iconographic representations. However the fact that during the Middle and Late Bronze Age enclosed and fortified settlements developed alongside the increased production of weapons, seems likely to indicate a more territorialised landscape. Many of the sites, such as Breiddin, Powys (Wales), Rams Hill, Berkshire, and Thwing, East Yorkshire, represent enhancements of earlier settlements, or precursors to Iron Age hillforts. Direct evidence of conflict at these sites is rare though.

Consequently, interpretations of Late Bronze Age warfare in Britain have been focused on the material culture. Past studies have tended to concentrate on establishing developmental

sequences and distribution patterns for weapons, but a growing field is that of use-wear analyses. Such analyses require studying ancient marks on artefacts, such as nicks on blade edges that might represent blade-on-blade actions. These can indicate how objects were used in the past, which is then followed by experimental testing on replicas to reproduce comparable marks. Numerous studies that have so far been conducted on swords and, to a lesser extent, spears and shields, are informing archaeologists about how these implements were probably used.

The importance of these approaches is ultimately to understand how warfare may have emerged in later Bronze Age communities. Spears are increasingly viewed as implements requiring as much skill as swords, and varieties in size and form means they were likely used as both throwing and thrusting implements. Swords, meanwhile, seem to have been thrusting and stabbing weapons, rather than slashing, which would have caused considerable damage to the blade edges. It is now widely accepted that Hollywood-style sword-on-sword combat would not have been how Bronze Age warriors fought. Instead, combatants would have likely tried to limit the damage sustained on their blades.

Fighters probably would have also been equipped with a shield and there are several examples where shields appear to have been penetrated by a bladed implement, perhaps while defending against a sword or spear. Typically metal shields have been seen solely as objects of status and ceremony due to their thin nature, but recent investigations have shown them to have been as effective defensively as leather and wooden versions.

How weapons were treated prior to deposition can provide valuable insights into how society viewed them. They were frequently deliberately damaged or fragmented before burial (individually or in large hoards of mixed material) in significant landscape locations such as rivers or hilltops. As in later periods, swords were probably seen as particularly powerful objects with symbolic properties. Burial and

destruction of swords or other weapons may have acted as a material metaphor for the death of an individual or a group.

Despite these advances in our understanding of the practices involving weaponry, the reasons behind combat and warfare in the Late Bronze Age, its scale and its extent remain causes of speculation. Ethnographic studies have demonstrated that conflict might be influenced by a huge variety of factors: material desire (e.g. obtaining slaves, women, or land), emotions (revenge), or the desire to keep or gain prestige. It is likely that several, if not all, of these were motivations at various times and that Bronze Age 'warfare' typically consisted of raiding areas of occupation. These factors would ultimately influence the scale of combat, which might involve individuals, small warbands of warriors, or even whole communities.

Ever-growing evidence for developments in the production, use and deposition of weaponry and armour, alongside increased fortification and enclosing of settlements, means that by the end of the Late Bronze Age warfare could be considered an integral aspect of society.

Further Reading

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Above: A sword and two spearheads from the Worth hoard, Devon (author's photo courtesy of Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery, Exeter City Council)

Right: A modern replica of a Ewart Park sword

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Matthew Knight (University of Exeter)