The Boudica Code: recognising a 'symbolic logic' within Iron Age material culture

John Davies

Introduction

Andrew Rogerson's contribution to the archaeology of Norfolk and beyond has embraced a readiness to engage with all archaeological periods. He has twice been a key contributor to conferences on the Iron Age of northern East Anglia.[1] My own initial work on the Iron Age of Norfolk was through its coinage. I was intrigued that the major study of Icenian coinage at that time, published in 1970, referred to the complex and diverse range of imagery on the coins as merely *space fillers*.[2] In subsequent years, as I have seen more objects belonging to the Iceni, I have become more convinced that the symbols and depictions on coins and other items of the period have significance far beyond just decoration.

Furthermore, as we come to explore Iron Age society, the importance of not just symbols, but also the relevance of structured behaviour and ritual, to these people becomes more apparent. Throughout the 1990s research increasingly showed how such behaviour permeated all aspects of their daily life.[3] One of the better known sites where structured deposition can be evidenced is Ken Hill, at Snettisham in Norfolk, where very carefully ordered hoard deposits of gold and silver objects were discovered, providing a view of complex behaviour within this late pre-historic society.[4]

During the course of my work in Norfolk, in my own 'shorthand', I have come to refer to my observations of such imagery and structured behaviour within the tribal area of the Iceni as 'The Boudica Code'. In this paper I will attempt to draw attention to a range of activities, as interpreted through studies of their artefacts, which together provide a body of evidence with the potential to throw light on this complex late prehistoric society, in the absence of their own writings. In this paper I will explore the use of symbols, representations and behaviours which appear to reflect the presence of hidden meanings in relation to the Iron Age of Norfolk.

The social structure of Britain during the Iron Age was based on tribal groupings that were territorial. The Iceni are the tribe associated with northern East Anglia and the inhabitants of the area will be referred to accordingly.

The Iconography

The material culture of the Iceni carries a wealth of imagery and symbols. It is apparent that a number of these representations were repeatedly chosen and, by implication, that they carried meaning for the Iceni. The deep significance of symbols and imagery in material culture can be observed in relation to other tribal societies, such as the plains Indians of North America, whose objects of everyday use possessed deep symbolic importance to them.[5] Here I will provide some initial observations and thoughts in relation to Icenian objects.

There is an increasing awareness that the imagery represented on Iron Age coins carries significance. This is a fertile area for ongoing and future research.[6] The Iceni produced a prolific coinage, which is well known to us through the studies of Amanda Chadburn and John Talbot.[7] Icenian coins carry a diverse range of stylised designs which include symbols that have been interpreted as animals and astronomical representations. Although few symbols on Iron Age coins can be said to be unique to specific tribal groups, including the Iceni, it is possible to identify examples which were favoured by individual tribes. One motif commonly used by the Iceni is the *back-to-back crescent*, which is found on both gold and silver issues and is particularly prominent on the prolific *Pattern-horse* and later inscribed series (Fig. 1). It is considered that this motif may have served as a tribal emblem.[8] It is not restricted to coins but is also found elsewhere within Icenian material culture. A bronze bowl or bucket fitting designed around the back-to-back crescent motif was found at Fakenham in 1993.[9] Another example from Tattersett (unpublished), in the form of an enamelled disc, appears to have been purely ornamental and was perhaps worn as a form of badge by its owner.

Symbols which emphasise the number three are commonly encountered on Iron Age objects right across Europe. These include Y-shaped symbols, trefoils and pellet triangles (Fig. 2). These symbols are again found on Icenian coins. The 'triplet' is sometimes positioned below a portrait. As such, could it have served as a stamp of authority or power for the issuer? Another bronze item from the county which echoes this triplet motif is a form of button and loop fastener.[10]

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[1] Davies and Williamson 1999; Davies 2011
[2] Allen 1970
[3] Hill 1993, 1995; Fitzpatrick 1992, 1994; Hingley 1993; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994
[4] Stead 1991

[5] Carocci 2011
[6] for example, see Nash Briggs 2012
[7] Chadburn 2006; Talbot 2011
[8] Nash-Briggs 2012, p.32; Davies 2009, pp. 110-12
[9] Davies 2009, fig. 78
[10] Davies 2009, fig. 83

FIG. 1 ICENIAN PATTERN-HORSE TYPE SILVER UNIT (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

FIG. 2 TRIPLET SYMBOL, AS USED ON A PAIR OF LINCH PINS FROM NORFOLK (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

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J. Davies: The Boudica Code: recognising a 'symbolic logic' within Iron Age material culture

We may never be in a position to accurately interpret what such individual symbols meant. However, the fact that they were used repeatedly suggests that they did carry meaning of some kind. Through his studies of Icenian coinage, John Talbot has described the choice and positioning of motifs and designs as 'a sort of *symbolic logic*' (*pers comm*).

An additional importance of some symbols may have been to reinforce tribal identity and their use in this way would have been especially important in the absence of writing. The use of recognised symbols and other imagery, such as an association with particular animals, appears to have distinguished the Iceni from their neighbours. The Iceni are the only tribe to have used a depiction of the wolf on their coinage (see below). Peoples living further to the south also used their own distinctive imagery. It is noticeable that the societies who were more regularly exposed to Roman influences, such as the Trinovantes and Atrebates, frequently used symbols from the classical world on their coins, such as the centaur, Pegasus, sphinx and capricorn.[11] In contrast, the Iceni did not employ such classical devices.

The power of symbols

Having considered the intentional use of symbols within Icenian material culture, it is worth emphasising how such images can carry great power and significance within a society. Symbols potentially represent another language. They can communicate a lot in a relatively simple way. They can be used to *inspire*, as with the example of the swastika and also with the poppy; both of which had powerful associations for people of Europe during the 20th century. Symbols can also *represent* things and also be used to *motivate* people. However, at the same time, we must not ignore the fact that symbols can also be used more simply as decorative devices.

If it is accepted that the Icenian material record does carry a wealth of symbolic meanings, this recognition potentially provides a new way of understanding the people of this time, who have not left us any written records. In this way, it may eventually be possible to understand more about the working of their society.

Structure within Icenian society

It is becoming clear just how far the daily regime of people who lived during the Iron Age was highly structured. Archaeology is continuing to identify their ritual behaviour. Much material deposited on Iron Age settlements can now be considered as 'structured deposition' and resulted not from daily refuse maintenance activities but from periodic rituals.[12] The surviving archaeological record contains relatively few casually discarded or lost items of this period. It must be recognised at this point that there were relatively few of the types of object in circulation

that were casually lost in subsequent historical periods, such as the prolific brooches and base metal coins of the Roman period. However, it is the case that much of what has survived from the Iron Age was clearly intentionally deposited in what appear to be formal ways.[13] These conclusions from the national picture can broadly be observed in the archaeological record of Norfolk.[14]

People of the Iron Age had a very different concept of religion from that familiar to people living in Britain today.[15] Everyday life was imbued with actions and activities that made reference to spiritual belief and to the gods. They attached significance to sacred places, which could sometimes be natural places in the landscape or even locations within their homes and settlements.[16] Archaeology continues to reveal how selected objects were carefully placed in pits, holes, ditches and watery places, which had a sacred association.[17] Others could be buried in high places in the landscape, such as on the tops of hills; a practice which continued into the Romano-British period.

We may view these special deposits as votive offerings. Objects selected for such purposes were not always finely made. They could also be parts of people or animals, or even quantities of carefully selected pottery. Representations of human heads are also encountered in such contexts.

Places of significance in the landscape

It is possible to identify some of the places of special significance in the landscape of Iron Age Norfolk. Some of these were natural, while sometimes special places were constructed. For example, people at this time would dig wells and shafts at selected locations, which penetrated deep into the ground, perhaps to serve as an interface with the underworld.

Ritual locations which have been identified in Norfolk include the enclosures at Fison Way, Thetford.[18] The final phase of this settlement was a focus of specialist activities and a grand ceremonial centre. Between the 40s and mid-60s AD the enclosure was surrounded by parallel rows of close timber fencing, which may have formed an artificial oak grove, representing a place of religious importance for the region.

The location of the hoard site at Snettisham,[19] which is a huge carrstone projection, dominates the surrounding landscape of north-west Norfolk. Ken Hill is located 2km inland, on the northern end of the prominent hilltop.

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[11] Van Arsdell 1989, 443-1; 2089-1; 2099-1; 2057-1
[12] Hill 1993, 1995; Hingley 1990, 1993

[13] Hill 1995
[14] Davies 2009, pp. 112-114
[15] for example, see Fitzpatrick 1992
[16] Bradley 2000
[17] see, for example, Cunliffe 2013, p. 267
[18] Gregory 1991
[19] Stead 1991

This was the highest point in the whole area and provides views right across the Wash, into Lincolnshire, as well as far inland. It was also visible from many miles inland and from the sea. This was clearly selected as a special place.

The ritual shafts were often constructed adjacent to *oppida* sites right across Europe. Such a shaft was discovered at Ashill in Norfolk.[20] Lined with oak timbers, it had been filled with separate layers of pottery vessels, each of which had been placed within a bedding of twigs and leaves.

Other objects of significance

The 'rear-hook' brooch

In addition to the type of symbols and behaviour recognised above, it may be possible to interpret significance in relation to specific types of object. One form of brooch special to the Iceni is known as the 'rear-hook' type. It was introduced in c.AD 40 and continued in production through to c.AD 60-65. This brooch form, which employs a rear-facing hook to hold the spring chord, is commonly found across Norfolk and also spreads into north Suffolk.[21] The rear-hook thus can be associated with the territory of the Iceni during the critical period of the Client Kingdom.[22] The question may be posed as to whether this form of brooch was a local overt expression of Icenian identity, an emblem of the tribe, or whether this was merely a local way of doing things. However the observation is interpreted, this artefact form conforms very tightly to the tribal area of the Iceni and indicates that there was a strong tribal unity and lack of integration with other tribal peoples at that time.

Animal representations on objects

Animals were venerated and sacrificed in rituals across Iron Age Europe. Bulls, boars and other animals played a prominent part in Celtic iconography. Until recently, there has been little recognition of the representation of animals in Iron Age Norfolk. However, there is now growing evidence for Norfolk's own iconographic menagerie, which also includes the duck, swan, wolf, horse and possibly dragon.[23] Animals were considered to have divine powers and attributes.[24] The association of animal representations to objects may be associated with the conferring of symbolic meaning to them.

Chopped-up and re-worked objects

The Snettisham Treasure comprises a series of intentionally buried deposits from the site at Ken Hill, which were recovered between 1948 and 1990.[25] Thirteen individual hoards have been discovered at the site, with

spectacular contents of items which are mainly associated with personal adornment, made from gold, silver, electrum and bronze. To date, the literature describing these magnificent discoveries focuses on the beautiful and complete examples of torcs (neck rings), bracelets and coins. Little mention is ever made of the so-called 'scrap', which comprises the majority of pieces from the site. This large body of incomplete and broken objects used to be considered as pieces left over from the process of metal-working. Coupled with the fact that they were considered less important in aesthetic terms, this component has been largely ignored. Only now is the potential significance of this material being recognised.

Between 2003 and 2009 a campaign of metal-detection was undertaken at Ken Hill and a large body of additional scrap material has added substantially to the collection.[26] This included a wide range of material from the hoard site: fragments of torc, beaded and flat bracelet, wires and other metal fragments. They are accompanied by coins from across the Mediterranean, including Gaul, Carthage and the Greek world.[27]

The religious association of the Snettisham deposits can no longer be doubted. The formal and structured nature of the torc deposits has been recognised.[28] It is in this context that the large quantity of incomplete objects, once termed 'scrap', should be considered. This material was intentionally chopped up into smaller pieces in antiquity. There is evidence to show that some of these pieces were originally re-arranged for structured deposition. For example, there are examples of unusual 'composite' rings known from the site. In these cases, fragments of larger torcs and bracelets have been twisted together prior to deposition. One such 'composite' piece from Hoard B is illustrated in R.R. Clarke's original Snettisham publication, showing an intricate group of conjoined ring-shaped fragments. In that example, seven smaller rings, made from torc and bracelet fragments, are depicted as having been carefully linked around a larger ring.[29] A second, similar, piece was discovered during excavations at the site in 1990, in Hoard F. That example is made from a torc, a bracelet and two torc terminals which had all been intentionally linked around a central ring.[30] Recent research has identified additional composite pieces within the more recently discovered scrap material.[31]

The ritual of breaking objects before deposition is, of course, a well-known practice throughout British prehistory. However, the intentional deposition of re-arranged composite rings made from previously broken pieces poses more of a mystery. Examples of conjoined composite rings are also known from Bronze Age contexts, including regionally local examples from Stretham in

20 Gregory 1977
21 Martin 1999, pp. 86-87
22 Davies and Robinson 2009
23 Davies 2011a
24 Green 1992
25 Stead 1991

26 Davies and Seaman forthcoming
27 Marsden 2011
28 Stead 1991
29 Clarke 1954, plate xii
30 Stead 1991, plate I
31 Davies and Seaman forthcoming

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J. Davies: The Boudica Code: recognising a 'symbolic logic' within Iron Age material culture

Cambridgeshire and Gresham in Norfolk.[32] The examples from Snettisham are another puzzle to be answered. Just what was their significance?

Decorated objects

It is becoming clear that only some Iron Age objects were ever chosen for decoration and the reasons for this have been the subject of ongoing studies. Niall Sharples has drawn attention to the significance of decoration on Iron Age objects in relation to individual expression and identity.[33] Jody Joy has looked at decoration across different media and considered how markings applied to chosen objects could subsequently transform their social function.[34] Bradley has argued that once decorated, they possessed a sacred character and the decorated objects became different from those used in daily life.[35] It has also been recognised that such decorated objects tend not to be found on settlements but rather in graves, rivers and sites with specialist functions such as sanctuaries.[36]

A restricted proportion of Iron Age objects from Norfolk carry integral decoration. Among the 400 non-numismatic Iron Age objects held at Norwich Castle Museum, just 17% are decorated. Just why were these specific items selected for decoration and others not? Among the non-Snettisham objects, just 15% were selected for decoration with enamel. Most of these are horse-related objects, such as terret rings and linch pins. These objects are all very small and in order to be aware of the decoration, a person would need to be very close to them. The implication might be that the importance was more symbolic and not necessary for everybody to see it.

Developing a recognition of the 'code'

We can point to specific forms of object that can be associated with the Icenian tribal area and which would have had a significance to the local population.

Horse associated items

A high proportion of Iron Age artefacts found in Norfolk are horse-related, implying that horses were very important to the Iceni. Around one quarter of the county Iron Age collection at Norwich Castle represents horse-related objects, which is higher than that recorded in other parts of Britain. This appears to have been an important horse breeding area.

Rear-hook brooches

The rear-hook form of brooch has been referred to above. It was made within the area and served to identify those who lived in and came from Icenian territory. It may possibly be viewed as a tribal symbol or badge.

Symbols

The use and predominance of the back-to-back crescent and triplet motifs on objects has already been mentioned above. These appear to have had significance to the Iceni.

Animal depictions used on coins

A restricted range of animals were depicted on the coinage of the Iceni. The boar was known as a symbol of strength in Celtic society and they were used to decorate weaponry and armour. The prominence of the boar on the coinage in this part of Britain may signify that the creature had a particular significance in northern East Anglia. It is depicted both in the coinage of the Iceni and that of their western neighbours, the Corieltauvi. The Icenian issue is commonly known as the *boar-horse* (Fig. 3).[37] The creature is stylised, with a body which widens towards the shoulder and with no neck.

Another creature represented within the iconography of the Iceni is the wolf. It appears on their coinage, on an early uninscribed type known as the *Norfolk wolf* (Fig. 4).[38] Use of the wolf on coinage is unique to the Iceni.

It has been stated that the horse was important to the Iceni but it was not represented in the form of figurines like other creatures, such as the boar. Its image was restricted to coins. Horses were present on all but one of their issues; in which the *Norfolk wolf* was used to replace it.

Representations of the natural world

These people were farmers and lived a rural life. Their iconography unsurprisingly also reflected aspects of the natural world around them. Many images can be recognised as astronomical symbols. Representations of the sun, moon and stars can be seen on the majority of Icenian coin types. The back-to-back crescent itself reflects the crescent moon.

Animals depicted on the coinage include boars, wolves and horses, as cited elsewhere in this paper. However, other creatures are less prominent and obvious. They include birds, such as the lapwing, bittern and avocet.[39]

Elsewhere, enigmatic patterns may in fact also be depictions. The latticed square on the Irstead gold quarter stater appears to depict a sheaf of corn.[40]

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[32] Davies, forthcoming b
[33] Sharples 2010, pp. 301-2
[34] Joy 2011
[35] Bradley 2012, p. 61
[36] Brunaux *et. al.* 1985; Wells 2007

[37] Van Arsdell 1989, 655-1 to 663-1
[38] British JA and JB; Van Arsdell 1989, types 610-1 to 610-5
[39] Cottam *et. al.* p. 78
[40] Van Arsdell 1989, 628

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LANDSCAPES AND ARTEFACTS

FIG. 3 ICENIAN BOAR-HORSE TYPE SILVER UNIT (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

FIG. 4 ICENIAN NORFOLK WOLF TYPE GOLD QUARTER STATER (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

FIG. 5 MARK ON THE RIGHT SHOULDER OF THE BOAR FIGURINE FROM ASHMANHAUGH (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

FIG. 6 NOTCH ON THE RIGHT EAR OF THE BOAR FIGURINE FROM ASHMANHAUGH (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

FIG. 7 THE ICENIAN BOAR-HORSE SILVER UNIT, WITH A PELLET ON THE RIGHT SHOULDER (COPYRIGHT NORFOLK MUSEUMS SERVICE)

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J. Davies: The Boudica Code: recognising a 'symbolic logic' within Iron Age material culture

The significance of the boar

In 1997 a beautiful boar figurine was discovered by metal-detection at Ashmanhaugh, 20km north-east of Norwich. It is a three-dimensional representation, made from copper alloy. It is a stylised representation, with a perforated crest running the length of the back. The shape and angle of the feet suggest that this was once attached to a curved surface, which may have been a warrior's helmet. This figurine has previously been more fully described.[41] However, it is relevant to mention two features observed on the figurine here.

The first of two deliberate markings in the casting is located on the right shoulder. This is a symbol in the shape of a 'tick' (Fig. 5). This has no possible function and must have carried a significance that was strong enough to warrant deliberate inclusion on the figurine.

The right ear carries the second unexplained casting feature. There is a clear semi-circular notch which again can have no possible function and must be symbolic (Fig. 6). More intriguingly, this feature is echoed in another boar figurine from beyond Britain. It was discovered in France, at Soulac-sur-Mer, Dep. Gironde, just under 100km north of Bordeaux.[42] That example has a deliberately-placed patch of silver on its ear, which echoes the mark on the Norfolk example.

It has been mentioned above that the boar motif was used on the coinage of the Iceni. A sub-type of this issue[43] depicts a pellet prominently featured on the right shoulder; a feature to which no significance has previously been attributed (Fig. 7). This feature can be seen to refer back to the shoulder mark on the figurine. There is yet more evidence to point to significance in relation to boar shoulders.

At Llanmaes in south Wales, an abundance of pig bones were found in association with an Early Iron Age context.[44] Only the right fore-quarters of the pigs had been incorporated into the site's midden, indicating a specific selection and separation of this portion. Elsewhere, at Hallaton (Leicestershire) excavations at an Iron Age ritual site recovered a large animal bone assemblage. Of these, 97% were pig bones and there was a clear *absence* of right fore-limbs represented.

We are not yet in a position to explain the significance of the right shoulders of boars but the increasing and diverse body of evidence shows that there was such significance and that it was widely recognised at that time. These observations together serve to enrich the growing body of evidence for hidden meaning.

Conclusions

This paper must be viewed very much as the start of a work in progress. A whole range of observations have been outlined, which reflect cultural tradition, collective choices, accepted and agreed forms of decoration and reverence of natural places. Together they show that there was an extensive and structured set of behaviours that would have been familiar to the Iron Age population of Norfolk and beyond. In the absence of written records, archaeology is beginning to show that such meanings were present. So we have an increasing range of clues to the way that they behaved and thought.

Will we ever know the true meaning of these clues? The answer is probably not. It is likely that the people of the Iron Age interpreted images and behaviour very differently from the way we see them today. Wells has referred to a 'visual code' and has considered how recognisable shapes, such as human and animal forms, could be transformed into derivative shapes by different societies.[45] So will it ever be possible for us to determine how they saw and interpreted things? Further consideration is beyond the scope of this short paper and must be pursued elsewhere.

The most important aspect at this stage is to recognise that there is a large body of visual information of potential importance and that this is significant beyond merely the decorative. Although we may not understand the meanings implicit in the decoration and methods of deposition, we are able to recognise the expression of significance and also identity among these people. The way they looked and behaved can be seen to have differed from their neighbours.

In the mean-time, metal-detected objects continue to come through Norfolk's thriving Identification and Recording Service. These new discoveries will continue to provide additional clues which will improve our understanding of this late prehistoric society.

Acknowledgements

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[41] Davies 2011a
[42] Moreau, Boudet and Schaaf 1990
[43] Van Arsdell 1989, type 655-1, 657-3, 659-3
[44] *Current Archaeology* 233, p. 32

[45] Wells 2008

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