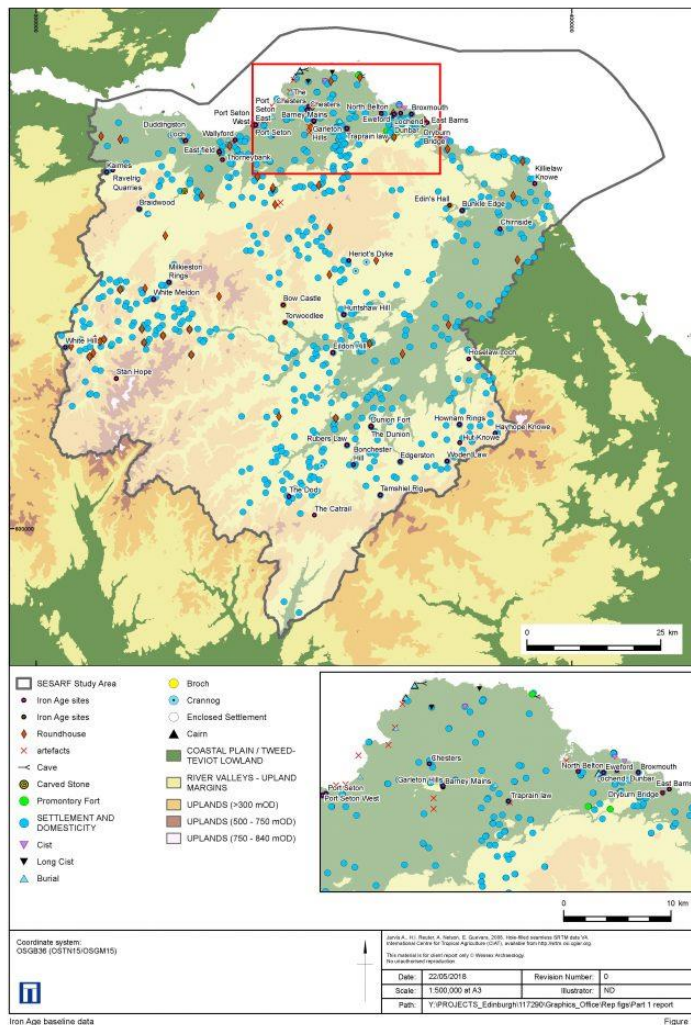


# SESARF IRON AGE RESEARCH QUESTIONS: SOME INITIAL THOUGHTS

## Introduction

The SESARF area (shown on the map below) covers a large geographical area, various landscapes and, in terms of the Iron Age, a range of monuments, burials and artefacts. The Iron Age component of SESARF will cover key themes covered in other existing and emerging Regional ScARF Frameworks such as:

- History of Research in the study area
- Settlement and Domesticity
- Subsistence & Farming
- Environment and Landscape
- Craft/Industry/Trade
- Material Culture
- Religion, Ritual and Funerary
- Transport
- Conflict



As expected, the variety of investigation has differed from region to region. For example, in recent years we have seen a wealth of publications associated with Iron Age East Lothian, for example: Fishers Row (Haselgrove and McCullagh 2000), Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007), A1 (LeLong and MacGregor), TLEP (Haselgrove 2009), Broxmouth (Armit & McKenzie 2013) and White Castle (Connolly, Cook and Kdolska 2021). We also have important work being undertaken on various aspects of Traprain Law, both monument and artefacts (eg Hunter 2013). This work has been complemented by new surveys (eg Whiteadder), the impressive Hillfort Atlas Project (Lock & Ralston 2022) and new approaches to survey and demography (e.g. Halliday, Cowley). This has taken place alongside an undercurrent of important development-led work associated with larger-scale developments (eg housing, quarries and windfarms) and reinvigorated University work, particularly by Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Other regions have seen fewer investigations and publications (intrusive and non-intrusive) but they have taken place.

As numerous commentators have highlighted it would be wrong to use the recent publications and work (particularly in East Lothian) as a full stop. There are many blanks and many key questions to address. Despite significant progress there are still very few well-excavated and published sites across the region. As Armit (2013, 513) states (for East Lothian) '...detailed and extensive excavation on virtually any settlement form...will still be almost guaranteed to yield new insights and new interpretations'. Thus, we should now view ourselves firmly within a 'post-Broxmouth' research

agenda (Haslegrove 2009). To progress we need new agreed research priorities, created via wide consultation.

## Some General points

Before we review some research questions it is important to consider wider aspects that will be critical to our future work, irrespective of research question.

### **What methodologies are we using to answer the emerging Research Questions?**

There is little point having research questions if we don't know the methodologies we need to adopt to try to answer them. Many research questions sound good but how do you actually answer them with a trowel, a corer or a LiDAR survey? This is not a flippant comment. I'm not convinced many research questions in Frameworks can ever be answered. I think we need to write accompanying methodological statements for every research question to ensure they are measurable and answerable.

Our largest advances are made when we combine different methodologies. Over the last few years we have seen large-scale work (eg A1, East Dunbar Quarry) complimented by 'key-hole' excavations at, for example, Eildon Hill and White Castle. Both approaches should be adopted in coming years.

Further, we may need to be brave and accept that if we are ever going to fully understand the variety of monuments then we need to dig far more and probably of sites that are nationally protected. There is a reason why we know so much about Danebury (and its environs) – considerably more than 2% has been excavated. We generally only tickle the surface on most of our Iron Age sites.

### **Embracing new techniques and collaboration**

We clearly need a multi-faceted, collaborative approach. Many new techniques are open to archaeologists with many advances in recent years. For example, LiDAR (eg Whiteadder) has shown the advances in available survey techniques and we should use geophysics more regularly than we do in the region (the benefits shown in the TLEP project and recent work at Newstead). We would do well to heed Cowley's (2009, 223) advice. To paraphrase, it is the challenges in getting differing sources of archaeological information to speak to each other that is the clue to effectively painting the regional pictures of settlement, where the detail and the broad-brush complement and challenge each other.

### **Chronology**

There are well-documented issues with the chronology of the Iron Age, including the transition with the Bronze Age, the interplay with Roman activities in the region and the development/adaption into the Early Medieval. Further refining of the chronology is undoubtedly necessary.

Indeed, a recurrent theme throughout all recent publications is the need for better and more dates. As Haslegrove (2009) says. '...it should now go without saying that comprehensive radiocarbon dating programmes should be routinely undertaken on excavated prehistoric settlements – without radiocarbon dating, the abandonment of Whittinghame would have been put in the second century AD, based on the Samian ware from the latest deposits.

Armit (2013) reiterates the point in the final paragraphs of Broxmouth highlighting that further investment in dating could not only begin to fill in the perceived 'gaps' in the Traprain Law sequence but also the wider sequences and relationships with other settlements and the historically attested chronology of the Roman military interventions in Scotland. Wider use of Bayesian statistics at, for

example, at Broxmouth, Knowes and Standingstone, allowed tremendous insight into the chronology of settlement(s) and occupation phases.

And the use of science should also be broadened to other domains. For example, isotopic and radiocarbon analysis should be undertaken on animal and human bones to identify their source and dates. And what about dating actual artefacts? A rare thing. New techniques should be applied to collections held in museums and not just newly excavated material.

### **Getting Out of East Lothian**

Our agenda needs to extend out with the normal honeypot areas, particularly the rich farmlands of East Lothian. We need to head up the hills. Do more work in southern Scotland. We need to head to the coast and riverways. We need to look across the modern-day national border for advice and parallels. This will help to ensure that new archaeological data collected is adequate to evaluate the similarities, differences and relationships between the constituent peoples at appropriate scales and levels of details.

### **Embracing the Old and the New**

In our future studies we should embrace the old as well as the new, in the sense of existing collections. For example, Erdich et al. (2000, 443) recommended "a full reassessment of the material from Traprain Law and in particular a detailed examination of that not so far published". All of our discussions should embrace the (re)analysis of the fantastic resources currently within our local and national museum collections.

With these methodological comments in mind here are some initial thoughts. These are a started for ten to be expanded, augmented, rejected in the coming months as we head to finalise the Iron Age component of SESARF over the next 6 months.

## **Research Topic 1: The Relationship Between Different Settlements and Types of Sites**

### **RQ1: What are the broad regional sequences of settlement types across the area?**

Building on earlier work numerous scholars (eg Cowley 2009; Armit and Reader 2013) have suggested broad settlement types and their sequences throughout the Iron Age for East Lothian. These serve as sound working models to test in future interventions. We need similar sequences for areas out with the Lothians otherwise we have no models to test.

### **RQ2: What is the dating sequence of the different types of 'enclosures' across the region?**

With the broad sequences and models to hand we need more interventions on a wider variety of site types, particularly within the 'enclosure' nomenclature. Some classes of enclosures can be identified, arguably dated, with some certainty but there is a long way to go. A large proportion of the sites are still based on characteristics such as shape, etc. through survey and aerial photography. In the absence of our own information comparisons have been drawn with sites further south in England but there is no real justification to assume that what is happening in this region is what is happening there.

We can't just rely on a handful of sites. For example, only 5% of the possible 'forts' and 'enclosures' in East Lothian have been subject to modern excavation and produced radiometric dates (Connelly and Cook 2021). Until the recent excavations at White Castle none of the sites in the Lammermuirs had been sampled, let alone dated (ibid).

And we need to start understanding the 'ragbag of oddities' within our current definitions. As in the words of Cowley (2009, 207), '...it is inevitable that certain classes of site are better understood than others, and it is the rag-bag of oddities, comprising small groups or one-offs that will always be difficult to marshal in a coherent framework...Later prehistory has suffered from a tendency to be a dustbin for all sorts of sites, generally enclosures, the contexts of which are not known on the basis of analogy with the few excavated sites'.

The few but invaluable excavated sites of mid to later first millennium BC exhibit a wide range of forms – in morphology, scale and details of occupation. There are vast differences in size, from small enclosures that cannot have accommodated more than a single house, to sites that may have been packed full of households. We would do well to remember that the two main characteristics of the settlement enclosures of the mid and late first millennium BC are variety in form and very individual site histories and we must embrace this variability in our future studies.

### **RQ3: What are the 'smudgy cropmarks' in the survey record?**

And once we consider the 'ragbag of oddities' we need to consider the non-enclosure / fort / hillfort evidence.

Recent survey work and excavations have identified what Cowley (2009) calls 'smudgy cropmarks', that is pits, scooped yards and the like. To date, fieldwork has nearly all been enclosure-focused but there is clearly a wider pool of resources to study. Recent work in East Lothian has suggested that the development of non-roundhouse buildings was underway in the 2nd-1st century BC at the site of Phantassie. This site also serves as a useful reminder of survey bias, as it was unrecorded prior to invasive fieldwork, and the cellular structures had no earthfast foundations. At Phantassie they survived because they used stone – but similar buildings of turf would leave no trace, and such 'invisible' architecture poses a serious challenge. For those who want a more hierarchical Iron Age, the majority of people may have lived in exactly such hypothetical turf or timber houses which we would struggle to recognise.

If we want to truly understand the settlement variety across the area then we need to be brave and target the smudgy unknowns not just head to the best cropmarks or earthworks.

### **RQ4: What is the significance of 'lowland' brochs in the region? In terms of the sites themselves and wider settlement and economy during the Iron Age.**

The Lowland brochs are an oddity within the region. Recent work on stone roundhouses in other regions has shown the value of returning to these sites and undertaking more invasive excavations, particularly on the structures themselves. Given the research output shown at numerous broch sites across Atlantic Scotland (see the Highland Research Framework as an example) it is still peculiar that we haven't returned to said broch sites as much as we have returned to Traprain Law.

### **RQ5: What was the use of caves and other landscapes as settlements or places of activity during the period?**

Although limited in number what were caves used for in the Iron Age?

### **RQ6: What were the various structures actually used for?**

Now that we have dated and excavated a range of settlement types (enclosures, forts, stone roundhouse, turf buildings, caves etc) we must question whether said 'structures' were houses. Classifying them all as houses immediately poses the question – are buildings always dwellings? Many Iron Age structures were probably inhabited in some form (whether short or long term, permanently or seasonally), but there are also examples where there is evidence to suggest a non-domestic function for a building which on the basis of direct structural comparison with other known examples would be classified as a house. With a few obvious exceptions the lack of evidence for activities within such sites,

due to limited work in enclosure interiors, is another severe constraint, as are the difficulties in connecting interior activity to enclosure sequences.

**RQ7: How long were structures actually used (and reused) for?**

In the Iron Age there is often a perception that settlements were long-lived. But some sites, despite having significant investment in the construction of the monuments, appear to have been occupied for short periods (eg Standingstone). This may suggest some sites were short-lived and people moved around the landscape. As Cowley and others (Halliday and Barber) remind us settlements may have been relatively mobile, sites being characterised by intermittent occupation and periodic abandonment. This complexity needs picked apart.

**RQ8: What was the population of the Iron Age?**

Over the last few years Dave Cowley has produced an important PhD study of possible Iron Age demographics in East Lothian. This seminal study (and the methodology used) should be an exemplar model for the study of population across the wider SESARF study region, and indeed Scotland. Careful analysis, centred around meticulous statistical analysis and modelling, will lead to a better demographic model across our region.

## Research Topic 2: Landscape and Environment

**RQ9: What were people doing beyond the settlements and enclosures? How was the Landscape Organised? What can we say of larger landscape divisions and field systems?**

To date, fieldwork has largely been site-based and enclosure-focussed. But recent work has provided glimpses of an inhabited and sub-divided landscape. Thus, we need to look beyond visible enclosure boundaries and examine the larger inhabited zone within which the inhabitants of individual sites played out their everyday lives. Focus on land divisions, field-systems, pit-defined boundaries and the like are key research areas. Geophysics would be a useful start followed by targeted invasive work which could reveal paleoenvironmental evidence that could introduce a critical new dimension into our understanding of the Iron Age landscape.

**RQ10: Do later land divisions and organisation tell us something about the Iron Age?**

The re-use or continuity of use of landscape divisions and occupation into the early medieval and later periods has not been investigated in depth for the whole region. Studies of medieval and later landscape divisions could therefore enhance our understanding of Iron Age landscape divisions. Cowley's recent PhD work on comparing the Iron Age landscape with the 1750s landscape also shows the insight one can get by delving into later land organisation.

**RQ11: Why are some enclosures within a stone's throw of one another?**

Some enclosures, like at The Chesters or Fishers Road, Port Seton are very close to each other. Do such clusters reflect socially meaningful 'neighbourhood groups', focussed on a natural territory, landscape or environment? Or are they simply palimpsests created by regular shifts in site location over centuries?

**RQ12: Were some sites deliberately focussed on the control of resources?**

Many archaeological sites are believed to be situated to control land or water. But can we delve further? Edin's Hall proximity to a copper source is unlikely to be a coincidence. And was the concentration of Iron Age sites around Garleton Hill linked with the control of haematite? And what about the role of timber? In general what is the relationship between varying settlements and local natural resources? How was access negotiated between different groups?



**RQ13: Was there a relationship to the inherited landscape and the deliberate reuse of earlier sites?**  
By the mid-first millennium BC the remains of long derelict settlements may have been common features in the landscape, in some cases inviting re-use in later periods. Were some sites deliberately chosen as sacred places or inherited landscapes?

### **Research Topic 3: Subsistence & Farming**

**RQ14: How was the mixed economy of arable farming and pastoralism structured and organised? Was the economy non-specialist and essentially self-sufficient?**

The main concern of any Iron Age community was their existence via food production. This production, presumably, would have been a mixed of arable farming and pastoralism. Was this activity non-specialist and essentially self-sufficient? Recent work has shown that some animals (eg pigs) may have been traded between communities – is this a sign of something more complex, perhaps symmetrical trade or gifts and tribute?

**RQ15: How was the landscape used and organised for arable farming and animal husbandry?**

We have seen how future research should include a further investigation of land divisions out with settlements. How does this align with the organisation of agriculture and animal husbandry etc. outside of structures? There is a degree of survival of cord rig in the uplands of the Borders, while field systems, drove roads and possible stock enclosures all potentially related to the Iron Age, have been observed within aerial photography and cropmarks within the region. As at the recent work at Glenrath ground-truthing of examples of these would help to identify chronological characteristics for this period. And were upland areas like the Lammermuirs used for seasonal practices and how was this organised and maintained?

**RQ16: Could the identification of Iron Age coastal and maritime interactions enhance our understanding of everyday life in the Iron Age?**

The sea formed a constant presence, visible and audible across the regions. It was a source of fish, shellfish etc and various raw materials for tools and ornaments. Accidental strandings of whales and seals provided various raw materials for various uses. Shells could have been used for ornament and even limewash for housing. But did the Iron Age inhabitants utilise such a rich resource? And if not, why not?

**RQ17: To what extent did changes in the settlement record correspond to episodes of arable expansion and woodland clearance?**

While palaeoenvironmental researchers have understandably focussed their efforts on upland, wetland and other marginal environments to answer these questions opportunities also exist in more lowland areas, in the form of relict lakes and mires and dry valley sediment sequences. New projects (supported by significant numbers of radiocarbon dates and Bayesian analyses) will be critical in providing the chronological definition required.

**RQ18: How can palaeoecology help to understand the drivers of intensifying land-use?**

The drivers of increased agricultural intensification for the pre-Roman Iron Age have been debated, with demographic expansion considered overly simplistic (Tipping 2010). Alternative hypotheses suggest a link within increasing status and wealth, settlement reorganisation, an increased focus on the production of agricultural surpluses, and the development of extensive cattle ranching (Hunter 1997; Dockrill 2002; Mercer 2018). There is clearly a need to understand how the archaeological settlement evidence relates to the palynological evidence for intensifying land-use before the Roman period.

Similarly, the picture from south-east Scotland supports the argument advanced by Hanson (1996) that significant deforestation occurred before the arrival of the Romans. Many of these clearings persist throughout the Roman Period; major changes in land-use and landscape are not inferred from the available evidence (Higham 1986). Changes in crop types at Roman sites are known, with bread- or club-wheat present, but it remains unclear to what extent these new crops were grown (Boyd 1988). Van der Veen (1992) has painted a picture from plant macrofossil remains from archaeological sites suggesting a comparative level of agricultural techniques to that north of the Tyne basin.

## Research Topic 4: Material Culture

### **RQ19: Are their patterns in the 'poverty-stricken and undiagnostic' assemblages?**

The assemblages of the region are often viewed as poor relations of the settlement record with discussions usually focus on the decorative metalwork, hoards or Roman finds. Hunter (2009, 144-156) expertly created a 'basic pattern' of material types and objects across the region and allows one to move beyond the single site and consider the wider picture. Hunter's model provides an essential step towards broadening our understanding of Iron Age 'poverty-stricken' assemblages in the area and further work will doubtless tease out wider diachronic patterns from his base-model. Teasing out regional artefact characteristics and/or typologies is a key research area.

### **RQ20: What were the prosaic tools, particularly those of stone, actually used for?**

We need to ask ourselves do we actually understand all of the material culture we dig up and their function? Yes, the majority of finds from excavations are associated with everyday tasks such as preparing, storing and consuming food or preparing hides. And we know that individuals carried out textile working or modified stones into tools. But we still don't know enough about these 'prosaic' tools, particularly those of stone. These are unfamiliar materials and as Hunter (2009, 142) reminds us '...one of the great, untapped resources of the period'. In particular, stone tools merit more attention than they often receive.

### **RQ21: What can the material culture tell us about indicators of status between sites, particularly in the pre-Roman period?**

Indicators of status are generally discussed around the presence and absence of Roman finds. But this is obviously only one data source that covers the later part of our Iron Age. Hunter (2009, 145) stresses that there are some potential indicators of status differentiation, but there are relatively subtle, and still restricted to the Later Iron Age. Can we tease out wider patterns from more assemblages, particularly from pre-Roman sites? And what about the 'hidden' evidence – where stone whetstones are proxy indicators for iron tools?

### **RQ22: Why did ornamentation become more prolific as we move through the first millennium BC?**

The Earlier Iron Age is largely dominated by prosaic material until the last couple of centuries BC, when a broader range of ornamental and personal equipment comes into use. This is commonly explained as being connected with individuals becoming increasingly concerned with issues of status and social identity. But where did they get the objects from and/or the raw materials? What was the impetus for such a change as we move through the millennium?

### **RQ23: What was the role of Roman imports?**

Conventional wisdom is that a hierarchical system of access to Roman finds and imports was in place with material coming from a central point (eg Traprain Law for East Lothian) and being redistributed from there. But recent work suggests that perhaps such patterns arise from material being brought



to said central places from surrounding settlements. More detailed study is required to provide further insight.

**RQ24: What can site distributions / typologies and material culture tell us about how the indigenous populations and Roman populations interacted?**

Following on from the above can we get further insight into the interaction and influence of the Romans? We know that they affected change in decoration and design, and Roman metal was melted down but are there other patterns to tease out?

## Research Topic 5: Craft and Trade

**RQ25: What were the principal crafts during the Iron Age, and where were they located?**

Most of the manufacturing evidence from our area is associated with everyday life (eg textile-working, skinworking and bone and antlerworking). Other craft activities appear to have been less abundant.

We need far greater understanding of the other crafts (shale, glass, ironworking, and non-ferrous working). Current interpretations suggest that such crafts may have been restricted to fewer sites but is this pattern real? And what are the nuances within the sub-categories – smelting is entirely different from smithing and bronze, gold and silver presumably carried different social status across the region at different times. And what about the seldom studied topics such as wood-woodworking, woodland management and presumable boatbuilding? And did these activities all take place within enclosures and the like?

**RQ26: How do we recover trade and exchange?**

There is a lack of evidence for trade and exchange in the Iron Age (particularly in the pre-Roman Iron Age). Can we even recognise such things through material culture? If not do we need to conceive of new ways to understand movement of objects etc?

## Research Topic 6: Religion, Ritual and Funerary

**RQ27: What is the nature of the burial record through the Iron Age? What does it tell us about society and systems of belief in the region?**

Work across the region shows a range of burial traditions: cemeteries, cremations, multiple inhumations, single inhumations, and a chariot burial. It also appears that some individuals were used as human trophies and/or votive deposits.

## Research Topic 7: Transport and Routes

**RQ28: Can we better understand existing (and potential) later prehistoric sites within a reconstructed palaeolandscape including lost lochs, inland waterways and coastal change?**

Iron Age people's interaction with coastal, marine and riverine environments and boats, watercraft and maritime activity should be considered in more depth as there remains a tendency to focus on the inland areas of the region.

**RQ29: What were the infrastructure, communication routes and other associated networks linked to droving in the SESARF Region? For example, hillforts and other major structures.**

## Research Topic 8: Conflict

**RQ30: What and where is the evidence of violence or warfare?**

We have a limited number of weapons and potential human heads as trophies. And presumably hillforts have some defensive output. And of course we have incursions. But what and where is the actual evidence of violence, warfare and conflict in the Iron Age?

## Research Topic 9: Social Organisation

**RQ31: Can we detect social systems through the settlements and other evidence?**

Certain sites have always dominated discussions due to their scale and material culture (e.g., Traprain Law). But recent excavations have demonstrated the variety in the settlements and artefacts from a wider range of sites. *What factors lay behind differing settlement size, and what it signified to live in a homestead, hamlet, village or hillfort requires further exploration?* Can we now begin to unpick social systems/hierarchies in the artefactual record? Is there a hierarchy?

**RQ32: What were the cultural influences from outside the area and how can they be seen in the archaeological record? What effects did they have on language, artefact styles, dress, settlement, etc?**

The work by Hunter in particular has demonstrated the influence of Roman across different parts of Scotland, not just in terms of 'invasion' but in cultural influence and the effect on many aspects of everyday life. Can we detect the influence on external cultural influences across the period?

**RQ33: Were cultural groups (e.g. The Votadini) largely an artificial creation of Roman intervention or did the inhabitants already share a political identity and capacity for common action which allowed them to dominate larger regions?**

**RQ34: What happens in the Late Iron Age? 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD?**

It has long been a research topic for many scholars to understand the 'black hole' of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and there is emerging data (artefacts, radiocarbon dates) but are we looking close enough? For example, radiocarbon dates at Broxmouth dramatically end in the 2nd century AD. Is this change reflected regionally or is it specific to the occupation at Broxmouth?

**RQ35: What is the relationship with the later historically attested tribal and kingdom units of the Late Iron Age/early medieval periods?**

The rise of the British kingdoms towards the end of the Iron Age is a major regional focus and one in which the southeast of Scotland plays a pivotal role. Within this, considerations of not only the rise of these kingdoms but also the impacts of Christianity need to be included.