



HISTORY MYSTERIES

Why did Britain's Bronze Age come to an end?

Stone Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Anglo-Saxons	Medieval	Tudors	Stuarts	English Commonwealth	Stuarts (again)	Georgians	Victorians	Edwardians	World War I	Inter-War Period	World War II	Cold War	Modern
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The Bronze Age in Britain began in around 2500BCE, with the arrival of something that **archaeologists** refer to as the 'Beaker Culture'. This was named after bell-shaped pottery that spread across Europe and first appeared in Britain around 2475-2315BCE, alongside the skills needed to **smelt** copper. Around 2150BCE, pre-historic Britons discovered how to smelt bronze (a mixture of copper and tin) and, over the next thousand years, bronze gradually replaced stone as the main material for making tools and weapons.

But when did the Bronze Age end in Britain – and why? Archaeologists agree that the Bronze Age ended around 800BCE, but that iron was not widely used in Britain until around 500BCE. What was happening during those 300 years? What happened to Britain's bronze? And if it wasn't due to the arrival of iron, why did the Bronze Age come to an end?

Source A

What caused Britain's Bronze Age 'recession'?

A large gap in pre-history could signal that Britain underwent an economic downturn over 2,500 years ago.

In history lessons, the three ages of pre-history – Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age – seem to flow together without a gap. But there is a 300-year period in British history between around 800 BC and 500 BC where experts still struggle to explain what happened, where bronze was in **decline** and iron was not widely used. What is known is that around this time, bronze in Britain was beginning to be dumped.

But what caused the value of bronze to lose its value? Could it be the fault of the impending Iron Age?

"There were major changes in society but I don't think it was because of iron," says Sir Barry Cunliffe, professor of archaeology at the University of Oxford. "There were many, many factors that were at work in European society. There is a **globalisation**, if you like, of Europe."

What caused Britain's Bronze Age Recession? (7 April 2011): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12989605>

Source B

Major new study investigates Britain's Bronze Age collapse

Around 800BC Europe had suffered great upheaval as the climate got worse, economies collapsed, and the status of bronze, the key component of long-distance trade, changed.

This study aims to unlock the secrets of the Feasting Age – the poorly understood **transitional** phase between the Bronze and Iron Age in Britain. Like the 21st century economic crisis, this prehistoric boom and bust caused great instability. In southern Britain, society did not immediately shift focus to iron, but rather to an increase in farming and grand-scale feasting.

Major new study investigates Britain's Bronze Age collapse (8 July 2021):

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2532560-major-new-study-investigates-britains-bronze-age-collapse-through-throwaway-picture-of-mobility,-feasting-and-resilience>

Source C

Climate change was not to blame for the collapse of the Bronze Age

Scientists have proven definitively that climate change could not have been responsible for a huge population collapse in Europe at the end of the Bronze Age.

Archaeologists and environmental scientists have shown that the changes in climate that scientists believed to have happened at the same time as the fall in **population** in fact occurred at least two generations later.

Communities producing bronze needed to trade over very large distances to obtain copper and tin. Control of these **trade networks** enabled the growth of complex societies dominated by a warrior elite. As iron production took over, these networks collapsed, leading to widespread conflict and social collapse. It may be these unstable social conditions, rather than climate change, that led to the population collapse at the end of the Bronze Age.

Climate change was not to blame for the collapse of the Bronze Age (17 November 2014):

<https://www.leeds.ac.uk/news-environment/news/article/3627/climate-change-was-not-to-blame-for-the-collapse-of-the-bronze-age>

Source D

A new study of the DNA of nearly 800 ancient people shows a large-scale **migration** into southern Britain around 1300–800 BC.

The combined DNA and archaeological evidence suggests that, rather than a violent invasion or a single migratory event, the population changed through constant contact between mainland Britain and Europe over several centuries, such as the movement of traders, intermarriage, and small-scale movements of family groups.

Ancient DNA study reveals large scale migrations into Bronze Age Britain (22 December 2021):

<https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2021/research/ancient-dna-study-migration-bronze-age/>

Source E

The Importance of Tin

Britain had large reserves of tin in what are now Cornwall and Devon, and with these reserves being easily accessible, tin mining and trade began. The Britons even traded tin with the Greeks and Romans. This trade in tin and other commodities began in the Bronze Age and by around 1600 BC the southwest of Britain was experiencing a trade boom as the British tin was **exported** across Europe.

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/warwickclassicsnetwork/romancoventry/resources/prehistoricbritain/bronzeage/>

Source F

All over Britain and northern and western Europe it was the same. Vast quantities of just about the most sought-after material in the world at the time was being thrown away. Archaeologists have been trying for decades to come up with sensible explanations for all of this.

From around 800BC, there began to emerge in the Mediterranean a trio of **civilisations** that would shortly, and inevitably, change the world – forever. *[The Phoenicians (from Lebanon and Syria), the Greeks, and the Etruscans, who would be mimicked and then taken over by Rome.]*

From 800BC, those emergent states began to generate the equivalent of a gravitational pull that attracted precious metals like bronze (as well as anything and everything else of value) to them. A sudden and worsening shortage of bronze would have been felt first and keenest in northern France, and on islands like Britain and Ireland.

Because the people of Britain could no longer lay their hands on the right sort of bronze, from the right sort of people, more and more of them seemingly decided to try and get along without it altogether.

Neil Oliver, A History of Ancient Britain (2011)



What do YOU think?

Glossary

archaeologist – a person who studies the past by digging up remains

smelt – the process of extracting metal from its natural state (ore) by heating and melting

economy – the system by which a country (or group of countries) makes things and divides up wealth between its people

decline – when something goes downwards or becomes less important

globalisation – the way the world has become more interconnected, through the sharing of ideas, goods and people

transitional – a period of change between one time and the next

population – the number of people living in a place

trade networks – groups of people who like to swap goods with each other

migration – moving from one place to another

exported – selling or trading goods to another country

civilisation – a human society with well-developed laws and government

Further Reading:

Everything Stone Age to Iron Age by National Geographic Kids

Explore! Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages by Sonya Newland