

The 'Age of warriors'? Beaker to Wessex Culture warfare and violence
Nick Thorpe (University of Winchester)

Traditionally, the Earlier Bronze Age in Wessex has been held to be a time of warriors. Partly this was because of burials with daggers, partly because the preceding Beaker period was assumed to be the result of a military invasion. What evidence, if any, supports this traditional understanding?

The efficacy of daggers as weapons has been questioned and the absence of other weapons and defensive sites has been noted. There is also little evidence of traumatic injuries. Dagger burials are not always of plausible warriors. The possible massacre at Tormarton in Gloucestershire comes from the end of the Earlier Bronze Age, but seems to be a harbinger of events in the Later Bronze Age. So is there a decline in warfare from the Beaker period? Here too there are doubts about the value of metal weapons and a lack of defensive sites. While there are skeletons with traumatic injuries, these sometimes seem unlikely warriors.

What is the situation elsewhere? In eastern Europe we can certainly see a clear 'warrior' identity expressed through material culture and many examples of traumatic injuries. In western Europe, however, although there are massacre sites in Norway and Holland, there is little sign that warfare was a constant social factor. So why weapon burials?