

# Iron Age Teesside

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# I The Iron Age

The Iron Age is the period of British prehistory following the end of the Bronze Age in around 700 B.C. Iron was developed in this period replacing bronze in the manufacture of tools and weapons.



*An Iron Age Family*

At this time Teesside was a well-populated area settled by farmers who planted crops and herded cattle and sheep. The people of the Iron Age are often known as the 'Celts'.

We can learn what life was like in the Iron Age through the study of the remains the 'Celts' left behind. Archaeological sites such as settlements, forts and burials can shed light on a period where very little history survives.

## 2 Who were the Brigantes?



*The location and names of Celtic tribes according to Julius Caesar*

During the Iron Age Great Britain was divided into a series of territories dominated by a local tribe. We know the Roman names of the Celtic tribes. The tribe in this area was known as the Brigantes and occupied a large part of northern England including most of Yorkshire.

There may have been subdivisions within each tribe and it is thought that the Tees Valley was the home of a separately named pre-Roman tribe.

## 3 Finding Iron Age sites

The Iron Age ended almost 2000 years ago with the Roman Invasion of Britain in A.D. 43. Since then most traces of Iron Age life have been swept away by succeeding generations.

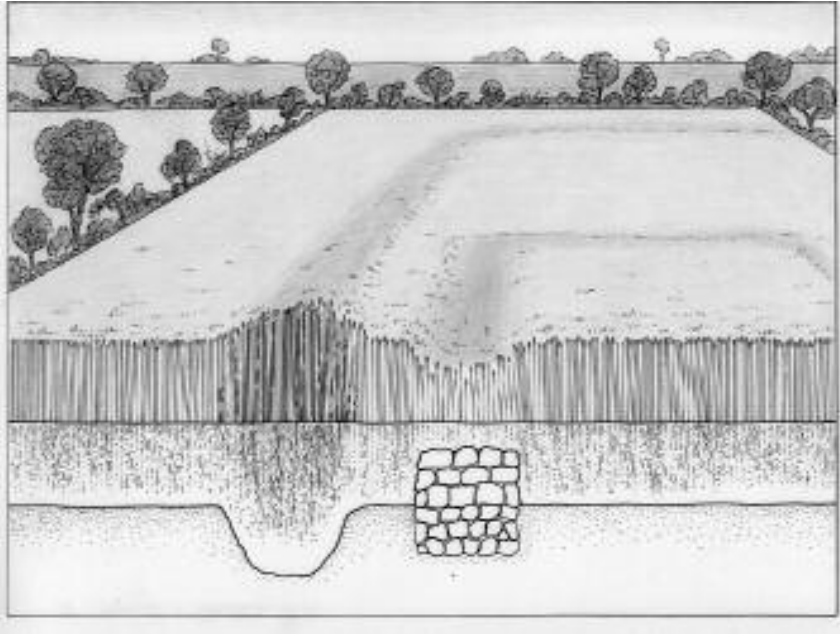
### Earthworks



*The hillfort at Eston Nab*

In exceptional circumstances the physical remains of Iron Age sites can be seen on the ground. These sites tend to be larger earthworks such as defensive ditches and ramparts that have stood the test of time. At Eston Nab, in East Cleveland, the massive defensive ditches of a hillfort are still in evidence today.

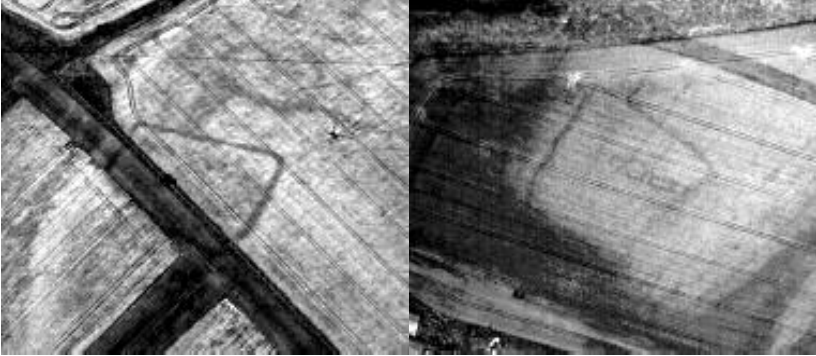
## **Aerial Photography**



*Crop mark formation*

Aerial photography has revealed many Iron Age sites. The technique has been used since the First World War and is based upon traces of former buildings and enclosures surviving as marks in ripening crops.

These crop marks appear when there are buried walls, floors or ditches beneath the growing harvest. Where buried walls occur the crop becomes stunted and ripens earlier. Where buried ditches occur the crops roots penetrate deeper giving greener growth that ripens later.



*D-shaped Iron Age enclosures at Barnaby Side and Marske  
(Note the circular features within the enclosure at Marske  
representing round houses).*

Cropmarks of Iron Age settlements often have distinctive D-shaped enclosures. Although enclosures, such as the one at Barnaby Side near Guisborough, have been known since the 1970's the enclosures near the new housing estates at Marske were identified for the first time in 1999. Other enclosures occur at Foxrush Farm, Dormanstown and Newton Bewley, Hartlepool.

## **Stray Finds and Fieldwalking**

Many of the best archaeological finds are discovered by accident. Often large items such as quernstones, used for milling grain, are reused in later periods as building materials and can often be found built in to walls.

Many further sites have been discovered by the collection of fragments of Iron Age pottery from the surface of ploughed fields. This method of finding a site is known as fieldwalking.

## 4 Settlements

### Enclosed Farmsteads

In the North-East the majority of Iron Age settlements began life as enclosed farmsteads. These farmsteads were given some level of defence by a large ditch and bank constructed around their perimeter. These simple defences would have prevented stock from straying and deterred wild animals from entering the settlement.



*An enclosed farmstead based on the evidence from the excavation of an Iron Age site at Thorpe Thewles*

Ancient writings, particularly from Ireland, suggest that the ‘Celts’ frequently launched cattle raids on their neighbours. The basic enclosure ditch would have made things difficult for casual raiders but would not offer any serious defence in times of greater conflict.

## Round Houses

Every Iron Age settlement contains circular round houses. The houses vary in diameter between 6 and 14 metres. The entrance to the house usually faces east, the direction of the rising sun. The round house was the every day living quarter of the Iron Age family. It was where the cooking, eating, socialising and sleeping took place.



*A reconstructed Iron Age round house*

Round houses were made from local building materials. For the Tees valley this usually means they were built from wood. Where stone was available this would usually be preferred.

The roundhouse walls were made from ‘wattle and daub’ panels fastened between upright posts. ‘Wattle’ consists of upright stakes, cut from the surrounding woodland, interwoven with horizontal withies. These woven wooden panels were then weather proofed with a mixture of clay, vegetable matter

## *Iron Age Teesside*

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and animal hair known as 'daub'. This provided excellent insulation and was easy to repair.



*Internal cut-away of an Iron Age round house*

A further inner ring of posts supported the roundhouse roof as the wattle walls were not load bearing. The roof would have been conical with wooden rafters covered with thatch.

A drainage ditch was cut around the houses to catch water dripping from the roof eaves and preventing the house from becoming waterlogged.

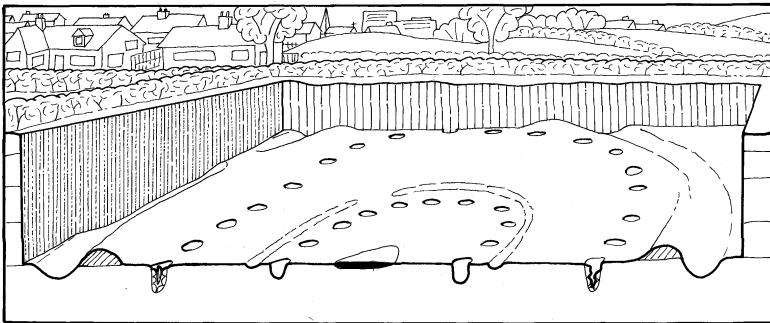
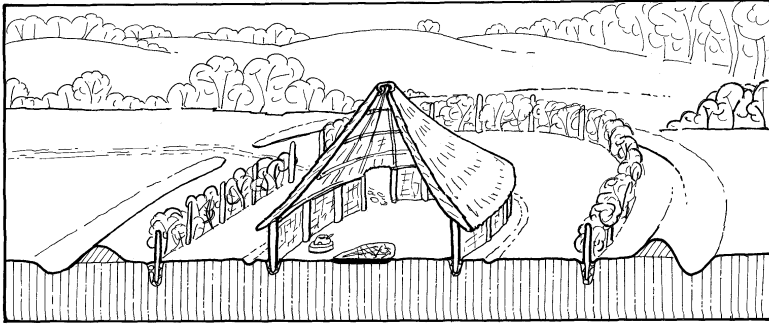
Round houses generally have central hearths for heating and cooking.

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## *Iron Age Teesside*

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When Iron Age sites go out of use they leave very little behind. By carrying out excavations archaeologists can detect former post holes, ditches and hearths by the differences in the colours and textures of soils. Alongside these features finds such as animal bones and pottery help us to build up a picture of daily life in the Iron Age.



*A schematic view of an Iron Age site showing the potential below ground remains*

## *Iron Age Teesside*

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The excavation of an Iron Age settlement at Thorpe Thewles, near Stockton, demonstrated the complexity of Iron Age living. Many round houses developed over several generations and were often rebuilt up to 5 times. This would have given the settlement a life span of several hundred years.



*An excavated building from Thorpe Thewles*

The detailed excavation of the Thorpe Thewles site showed that one round house was divided in to separate areas for cooking, eating and sleeping.

However not all round houses would have been used for living. Some would be used for storage, sheltering animals or for industrial uses such as a blacksmiths workshop.

## Open settlements

Iron Age communities in Teesside seem to have expanded in around 100 B.C. At this period we see settlements abandoning their enclosure ditches as they spread out in to the surrounding countryside. The threat of natural predators such as bears or wolves, from the surrounding woodland, may have decreased as the woods were cleared to provide building materials for new farmsteads.



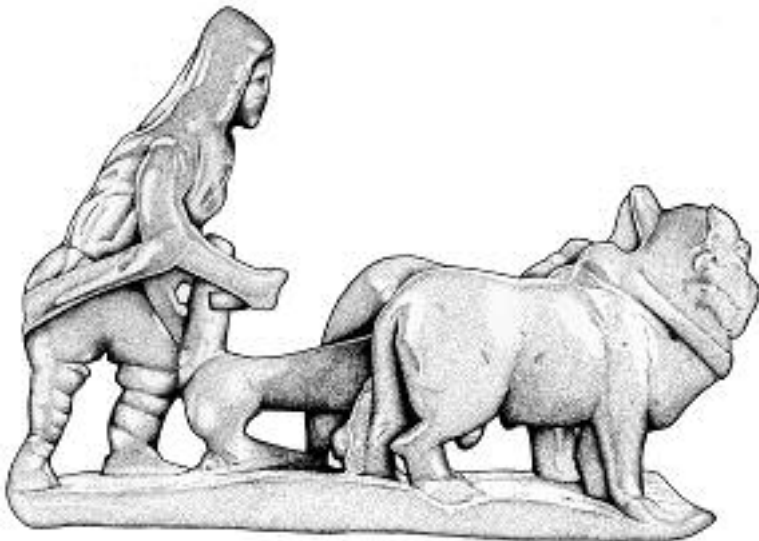
*The open settlement at Thorpe Thewles circa 50 B.C.*

The growth of settlements suggests a successful economy with increased numbers of dwellings, and increased trade with other communities. This has been seen at the excavated settlements at Thorpe Thewles and Kilton Thorpe, near Brotton.

# 5 Farming and Food

## Crops and Cereals

The majority of food in the Iron Age would be home produced. Crops would have been grown in ploughed fields adjacent to settlements and animals kept close to the homestead. The fields were enclosed with hedges and wattle fences. Many of the field patterns of today's landscape may be Iron Age in origin.



*A Celtic ploughman and his team as depicted in a bronze figurine found at Piercebridge*

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In order to grow a crop an Iron Age farmer, as today, must first plough the land. The simple ploughs used in the Iron Age, known as ards, consist of a yoke (used to harness animals), a share beam and share to break the ground

Straw was an important by-product of cereal crops. Bundles of straw would have been collected from fields. The straw would have been used for thatching on roundhouse roofs, for spreading on floors and sleeping on.



*Milling grain using a beehive quern*

Quernstones were used to mill cereal grains in to flour. During the Iron Age the rotary quern was developed. This consisted of a conical top stone with a central hole in to which to feed the grain. The top stone was turned by a means of a wooden handle set in to a socket on its side. The top stone sat on a circular base on to which it was turned to grind the grain.

## **Livestock**

Cattle were kept for their beef, dairy products and leather. In addition they provided valuable manure for fertilizing fields and traction for ploughing the land.



*A soay sheep*

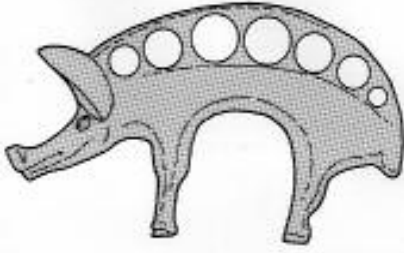
A strain of sheep, called soay, has survived almost unaltered from its Iron Age predecessor on the remote Scottish island of

St. Kilda. The soay is small and rather goat like in appearance. Along with its meat the soay would be of particular use for its wool. Unlike modern sheep Iron Age sheep were not shorn, rather the wool was plucked. If this is not done then the sheep rub against trees or bushes to remove it.



*A bronze 'horse' mask' from Stanwick, N. Yorks  
(1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D).*

Iron Age horses resembled modern Exmoor ponies in appearance. They could have been used for pulling ploughs and were certainly used to pull chariots and carts. Horses are often depicted in Iron Age art and were important in Iron Age society. Three horse skulls were found during the excavations at Thorpe Thewles. Two of the skulls were deliberately buried without any other bones present suggesting they held some importance to the people of the settlement.



*A symbolic boar figurine of the 1st Century BC*

Pigs were kept mainly for their meat. Pigs eat almost anything and would therefore be easy to feed (on household rubbish) keeping the settlement tidy and free from waste. Pigs may have been kept on fields where they dig for scraps thus turning the soil and manuring it. In addition to their value as a domestic animal wild boar were hunted for sport.

Caesar mentions that chickens were kept at Iron Age sites. However their bones are so fragile that they soon decay in acid soils and we have little evidence of them in the archaeological record. As

today poultry would be popular meat. Secondary products such as eggs and feathers may have been used by Iron Age people.



*A miniature bronze dog (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) from Hadrian's Wall*

Dogs were kept and we have evidence from classical writers that hunting dogs were exported to the continent. Dog burials are quite common during the Iron Age, as today they may have been kept as pets as well as working animals.

## 6 Hillforts

The Celts built strongholds on the higher ground. These strongholds were established in places that were easy to defend, such as hill tops, and are usually called hillforts.

The hillforts of the Iron Age form some of the most splendid monuments of the British Isles given their sheer scale. A hillfort usually consists of a series of defensive banks and ditches forming impressive ramparts. These ramparts would have been topped with tall wooden palisades.



*The ditch and bank at Eston Nab during excavation*

In Teesside the only hillfort so far identified occupies the high ground at Eston Nab. The fort overlooks the Tees Valley and river mouth and is a natural vantage point. This site actually started life in the Bronze Age but was substantially enlarged in

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the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Eston Nab consists of a sheer cliff face on one side giving it natural protection. The remainder of the site was encircled by a large semi-circular ditch and bank. The ditch was cut deep in to the natural bedrock and the stone quarried from it was used to build a wall of heavy boulders to support the bank.



*The boulder rampart at Eston Nab after excavation*

The hillforts were constructed early in the Iron Age, hundreds of years prior to the threat of Roman invasion. The forts were probably established in response to pressures within Brigantian society for resources such as land and livestock. The hillforts may have only been inhabited at times of conflict when communities had to come together to defend themselves.

Other uses of the hillforts may be as meeting places or market centres for Brigantian Communities living in the local area.

## 7 Death and burial

Little is known about death and burial in the Iron Age as there are very few recognisable cemeteries in the region and indeed across much of the country. The dead may have been disposed of in natural places such as rivers and marshes. This would leave very little trace as indeed would cremating the remains and scattering the ashes to the wind.

This lack of evidence is in sharp contrast to the preceding Bronze Age where hundreds of burial mounds are known across the North Yorkshire Moors.

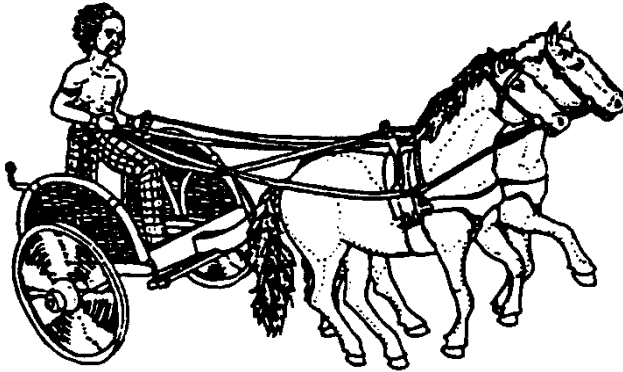


*A skeleton from an Iron Age round house at  
Catcote, Hartlepool*

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The only burials found on an Iron Age site in this area are two skeletons found lying inside a round house at Catcote, Hartlepool. These individuals were buried without any dateable objects placed in the grave and may indeed be later internments of Roman date in a disused or abandoned building.



*A typical Iron Age chariot*

The most famous Iron Age burials from Britain are found in East Yorkshire where the local tribe called the Parisi buried their dead in barrows that were square in shape. These barrows are quite distinctive and even when they have been destroyed by agriculture they can be detected as crop marks. Some of the richer burials included chariots that were dismantled and placed inside the graves.

## 8 Religion



*A romantic depiction of an  
Iron Age druid*

Evidence for religion in the Iron Age is rare. According to Julius Caesar the Britons celebrated their religions in natural places such as woods, beside streams and fresh water springs.

It would seem that the people of the Iron Age built very few religious monuments unlike their predecessors in the Bronze Age who were responsible for world famous sites such as Stonehenge.

Victorian romantic visions of the Celts suggested that the religion of the time was controlled by Druids. These fanciful images were based on interpretations of Roman and Classical texts alongside field monuments such as stone circles where the druids were said to offer sacrifices.

In reality Victorian scholars had confused the ritual aspects of two different periods. Monuments like stone circles were actually abandoned hundreds of years earlier at the close of the Bronze Age. The Druids mentioned in Roman writings were probably the wise people of the Celts with responsibility for medicine, spirituality and learning.



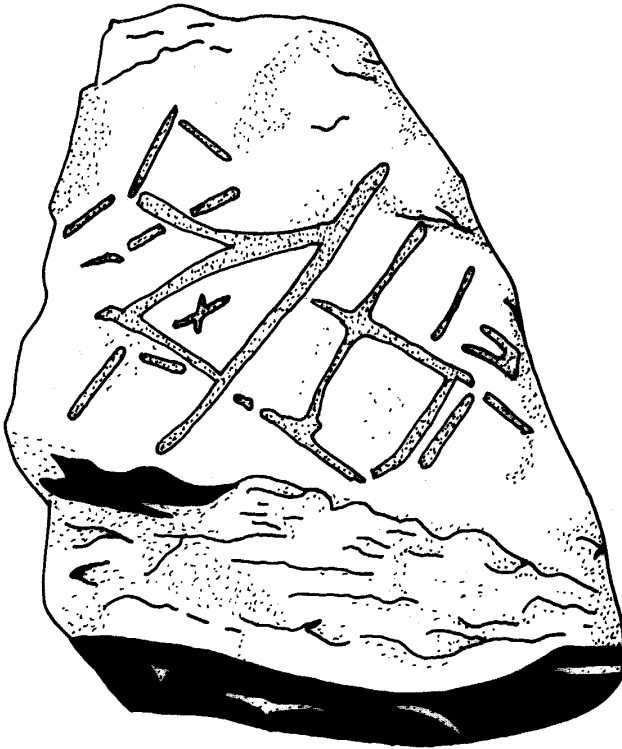
*A Celtic Head from Boulby*

One small group of artefacts, called ‘Celtic

Heads’, may provide a clue to where Iron Age worship was held. The heads share certain characteristics including elongated oval eyes, long triangular noses and featureless mouths. The heads may represent Celtic Gods or have other religious significance.

Three heads are known from this area and were found at Boulby, Lazenby and Saltburn. The heads are all stray finds and the examples at Boulby and Lazenby have actually been built in to more recent buildings for their curiosity value.

It is known from sites in Southern England that Iron Age worship took place at temples, but there are only 20 known sites in the country and none in our area.



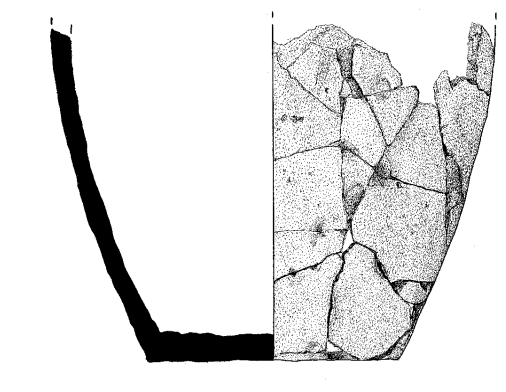
*A carved stone from Kilton Thorpe*

The only other item of sculptured stonework or rock art from this period is a fragment of stone found during excavations at Kilton Thorpe. The stone has a series of deliberately incised criss-cross lines on one surface. The stone was deliberately buried in a posthole in one of the houses at the site with the carved side face down. It is possible that this stone has some religious significance and may have been deliberately hidden.

## 9 Crafts and Technology

### Pottery

There is evidence for a variety of craft skills in Iron Age Society. The pottery that was used for cooking, storage and industrial purposes would have been made locally, probably at each village.



*A reconstructed Iron Age pot from near Elton,  
Stockton-on-Tees.*

The pots were made by hand by building up the sides with a coil of clay and then smoothing them (the Romans introduced the art of wheel thrown potting). The pots would have been left in the sunshine to dry prior to firing, usually in a simple bonfire rather than a kiln. Some pots have broad rims and would have been used for storage. Others have been found with food residues burnt on to their outside suggesting they were used over an open fire.

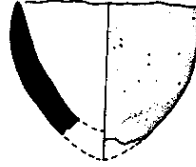
## Iron Work

The iron ores that were the basis for the growth of Teesside in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were first exploited over 2,000 years earlier giving the Iron Age its name. There is evidence for small-scale iron working at many of the sites across Teesside. Most communities will have had the skill or technology to undertake smithing and small-scale repairs to metalwork.



*A smith at work*

At Thorpe Thewles fragments of furnace or hearth lining were found that indicated that smelting or smithing was taking place at the site. Other items discovered at Thorpe Thewles and Catcote included ceramic crucibles, stone moulds and a furnace.



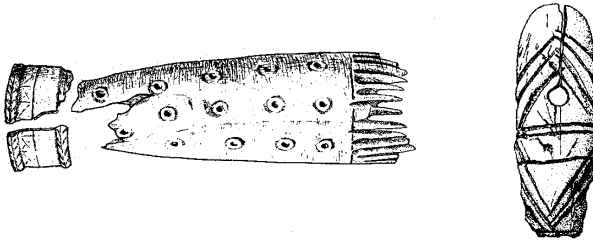
*A ceramic crucible from  
Thorpe Thewles*



*An Iron Age craftsman pours hot metal from a crucible in to a  
stone mould*

## Textiles

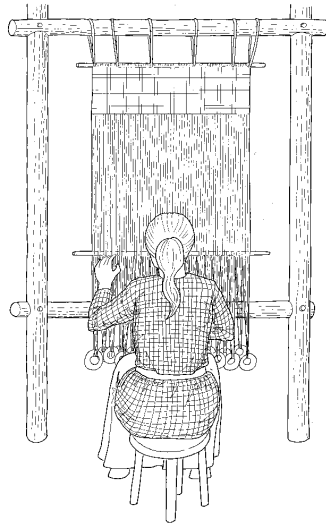
Evidence for domestic crafts such as textile working have been reinforced with the discovery of spindle whorls at many local sites. Examples of bone weaving combs were excavated at Catcote and Thorpe Thewles.



*Bone Weaving combs from Catcote and Thorpe Thewles.*

Cloth would have been woven on a loom. Looms are simple structures consisting of a frame set between two posts. Very few traces of such structures would survive. The discovery of loom weights on archaeological sites is often the only evidence remaining.

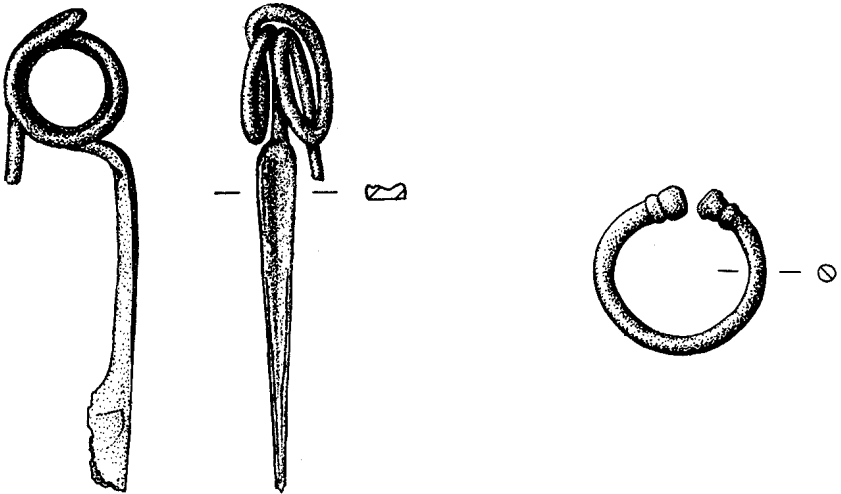
The use of a loom would have allowed quite complicated patterns to be woven including tartans.



*Reconstruction of an Iron Age loom*

## **Jewellery and Dress**

Very few items of Iron Age jewellery and dress have been found in this area. The rarity of jewellery may be because, as today, items such as brooches are treasured and may have been passed from one generation to the next. The labour involved in smelting new metals may have meant that 'old' objects were recycled and smelted down to make new ones.



*1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. Brooches from Thorpe Thewles.*

Brooches were worn in the Iron Age. They were probably used as dress fastenings. Two examples from Thorpe Thewles show the variety. One is a form similar to a modern day safety pin and the other a circular brooch held with a pin.

An elaborate golden earring was found at Thorpe Thewles. This was probably a highly prized object. The earring is now broken and probably originally consisted of three hoops rather than the two that now survive.



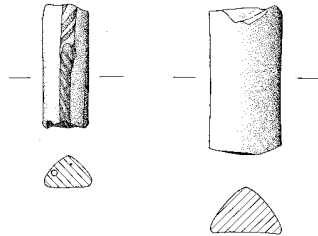
*Golden earring from Thorpe Thewles (left) and reconstruction (right)*

An interesting find was made at Yearby in the 1970's when a bronze ring was handed in to the local museum. The find proved to be a bracelet from the Iron Age and over 2000 years old.



*Bracelet from Yearby*

Jewellery was not just made of metalwork and fragments of glass bangles and bone finger rings and beads have been found at Catcote and Thorpe Thewles.



*Glass bangle fragments from Thorpe Thewles*

# 10 The Coming of Rome

The Romans invaded Britain in A.D. 43. They quickly seized the south of England and pushed northwards, reaching the Humber by A.D. 47. Roman rule brought great changes to many parts of the country. Towns such as York were developed, roads were constructed and goods from overseas were imported.



*The Roman army at work as depicted on Trajan's Column*

The Roman invasion provides us with some of the earliest descriptions of the Brigantes. For the first time we learn the names of the leaders and something of the history of the invasion itself.

The Brigantes were led by Queen Cartimandua at the time of the invasion. Cartimandua had formed allegiances with Rome and in 51 A.D. had even refused sanctuary to Caratacus a Celtic rebel leader fighting the Romans on the Welsh borders.

Within 7 years anti-Roman feeling grew within Brigantia and Cartimandua's own husband Venutius led a rebel movement. Venutius managed to take control of the Brigantian throne and Queen Cartimandua fled with Roman military assistance.

It has been argued that Venutius' last stand took place at the Iron Age fortified site at Stanwick, near Richmond.

Following the rebellions areas such as Teesside were still very much on the frontier of the Roman Empire and most people would have continued with a very similar way of life to that preceding the Invasion.

In this area of the north-east the term Romano-British is used to describe the period of Roman influence between the invasion and the end of their occupation in around A.D. 400.



*A Roman Soldier*

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# Further Reading

## The Iron Age

Good concise chapters on the Iron Age appear in the following books: -

Darvil, T.1987. **Prehistoric Britain**. Batsford Books.

Spratt, D.A. 1993. **Prehistoric and Roman Archaeology of North-East Yorkshire**. CBA Research Report. No. 87.

## Local Iron Age Sites

Reports on locally excavated archaeological sites: -

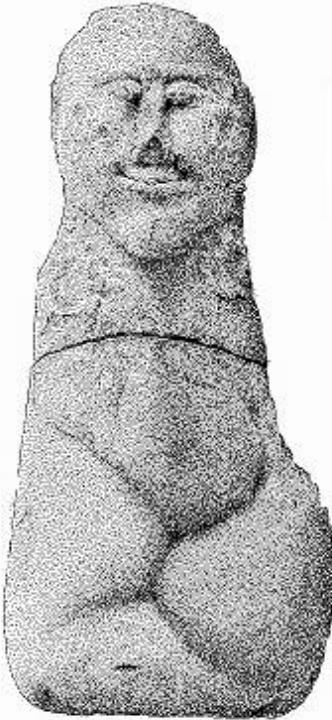
Heslop, D. 1987. The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement at Thorpe Thewles, Cleveland, 1980-1982. **CBA Research Report 65**.

Long, C.D. 1988. The Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Catcote, Hartlepool. **Durham Archaeological Journal**, 4, 13-35.

## Leaflets

A full range of archaeological leaflets is available from local libraries or direct from Tees Archaeology along with Archaeological Booklet No. 1. **Anglo-Saxon Teesside**.

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*Celtic Head from Huntcliffe, Saltburn.*

*Front cover: Milling Grain .*

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Tees Archaeology

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# Iron Age



# Teesside

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Archaeological Booklet No. 2.



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