

# Beeston Crag: An important prehistoric hilltop enclosure

SIX PREHISTORIC HILLTOP ENCLOSURES, or 'hillforts', dominate the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. All have long and complex histories that began in the Neolithic or early Bronze Age with the ritual burial of the dead, perhaps associated with seasonal festivals, fires and feasts.

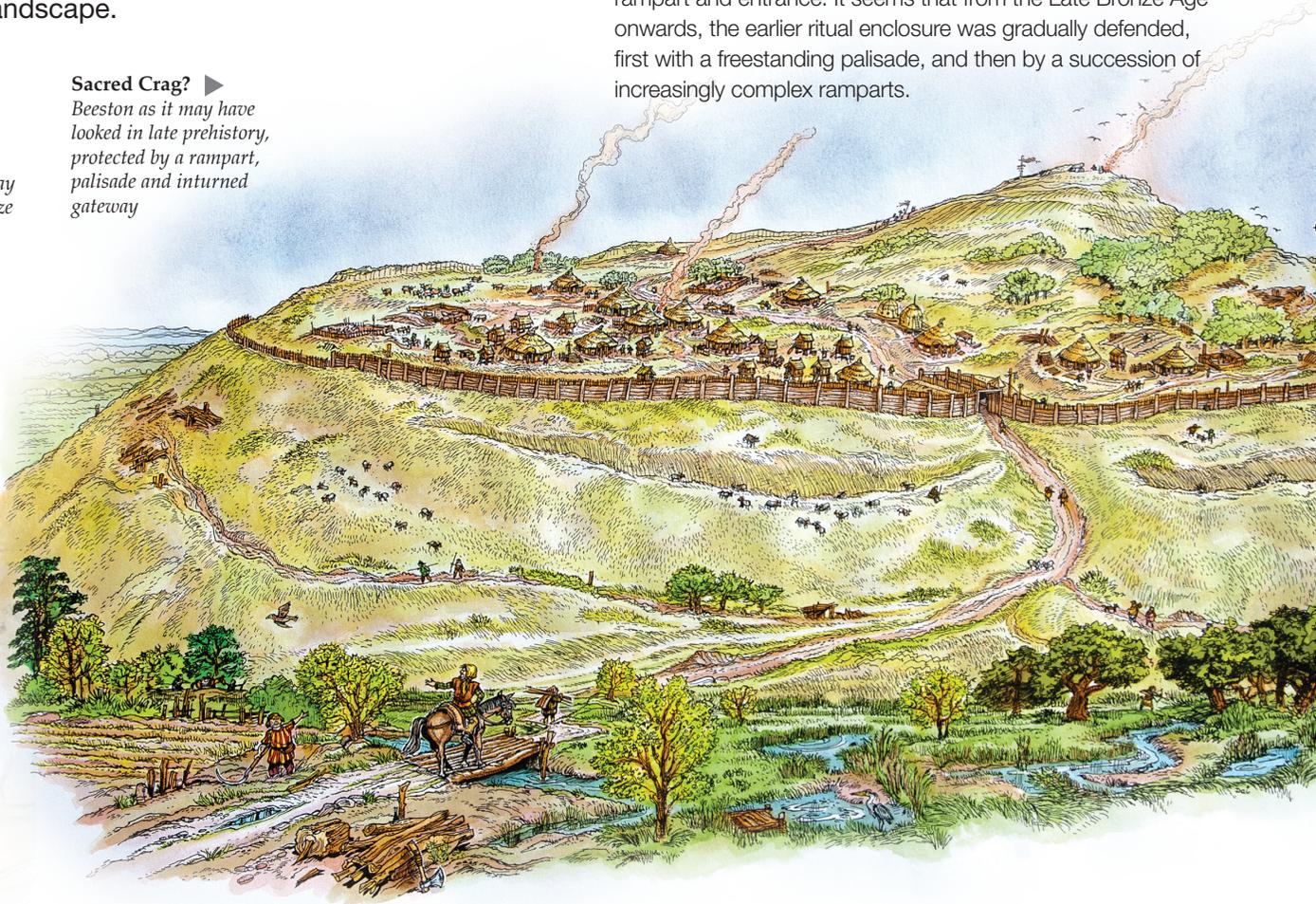
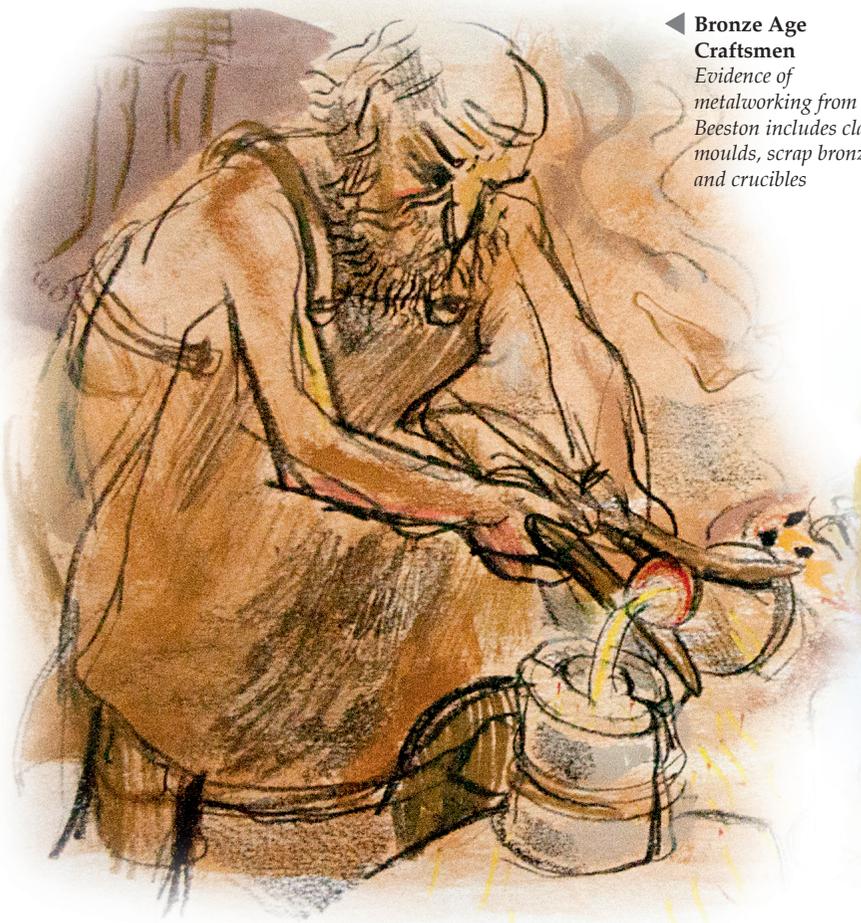
The hilltops were probably first enclosed in the late Bronze Age to mark them out as special places. By the Early Iron Age these enclosures had become increasingly defensive, possibly to protect and regulate important goods such as grain and livestock. Many 'hillforts' were abandoned as society changed in the Middle to Late Iron Age. Yet, even today, they remain an atmospheric and essential part of the British landscape.

## Beeston hilltop enclosure

Beeston Crag is a well-known Cheshire landmark. Although the rock is now dominated by a medieval castle, there is plenty of evidence that its importance stretches back into prehistory. Activity on the crag probably began in the Mesolithic. Neolithic postholes and pottery from the outer bailey gateway suggest the hilltop may have been enclosed as early as 4,000 BC. Early Bronze Age pottery also hints at possible burial mounds on the hill. Excavations in the 1970s and '80s proved that the 13th-century curtain wall and gateway overlie a prehistoric rampart and entrance. It seems that from the Late Bronze Age onwards, the earlier ritual enclosure was gradually defended, first with a freestanding palisade, and then by a succession of increasingly complex ramparts.

◀ **Bronze Age Craftsmen**  
Evidence of metalworking from Beeston includes clay moulds, scrap bronze and crucibles

**Sacred Crag?** ▶  
Beeston as it may have looked in late prehistory, protected by a rampart, palisade and inturned gateway



## ON THE HILL: Theme 5

# Bronze Age metalworking

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE SUGGESTS bronze was being worked at several important English and Welsh hillforts during the Late Bronze Age.

On Beeston Crag, archaeologists have uncovered fragments of clay crucibles for melting and pouring molten bronze, as well as broken clay moulds used for casting bronze weapons such as swords and socketed spearheads.

Both complete and fragmentary Late Bronze Age artefacts have also been found at Beeston. They include: five socketed axe heads, a socketed knife, a leaf-shaped spearhead, and two sword blade fragments.

Metalworking seems to have been regarded as a mystical process in the distant past; and metal workers and smiths may well have enjoyed special status within the community. An intriguing theory suggests that casting swords in a solid clay mould may have been the origin of the Arthurian legend of 'drawing the sword from the stone'.

A key role of prehistoric hillforts may have been to keep such mystical activities away from the general populace, as well as to protect both the raw materials and the finished products from raids by neighbouring communities.

*"The metalworking evidence [at Beeston] strongly suggests the actual site of a Late Bronze Age production centre."*

Peter Ellis, *Beeston Excavation Report*, 1993

*"Smiths were accorded relatively high status in early Celtic society thanks to the importance of their product and the mystery of their art."*

Dr Simon James, University of Leicester

### Prehistoric Sacred Hill?

The huge range of prehistoric artefacts found both on and around the Crag confirms its importance in the distant past. Finds from the hill include Mesolithic flint tools, Neolithic stone axes and food vessels, Bronze Age socketed axes, a spearhead, socketed knife and sword fragment, Iron Age spindle whorls, loom weights, a saddle-quern (for grinding corn) and a leather and copper-alloy drinking cup, as well as Romano-British pottery and brooches. The surrounding landscape has yielded polished stone axe-hammers, bronze axes, a bronze sword, and a rare Celtic gold coin, too. More interesting still, perhaps, are the hearths, crucibles, moulds and scrap bronze found on the hill: evidence that Beeston was connected with the smelting and casting of high status bronze tools and weapons in the distant past.



### Bronze Age Weapons

*A Bronze Age socketed axe, socketed knife and spearhead found on the hilltop at Beeston*

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Concept and text: Tony Bowerman

Illustrations: Kim Atkinson, Dai Owen

Artefacts: Grosvenor Museum, Chester

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Design: William Smuts

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