

Religion and burial in the Bronze Age (c.2500-700 BC)

Not much is known about Bronze Age beliefs. It is thought that there was a complicated belief system where good and harmful spirits were believed to exist, and were kept happy through food and other offerings and sacrifices. Trees, rocks and other natural features had a spiritual significance (this is known as animism). The natural elements of wind, fire and water may also have had some place in the belief system. Artefacts from the time suggest that big changes occurred throughout the period.

One of the greatest changes was that people gradually stopped building huge monuments, like Stonehenge or, in a lesser way, the stone circles that can be found in Shropshire.

People placed metal objects such as bronze spearheads into springs, lakes, rivers (such as the River Severn) and bogs as offerings to the gods. Near a spring close to Clun, a pit showed a large number of bronze spearheads, rings, bugle-type objects and swords along with many animal bones (mainly oxen and horses), suggesting animal sacrifice, too.

When powerful people died, they were often buried under large mounds, called barrows. Most people would have just been buried in the ground or in large pits. Some graves belonging to leaders and warriors contained things like bronze axes, daggers and gold. This suggests they believed in life after death.

Gradually, a group of people known as the Beaker people spread though England from Europe. They buried their people in a crouched position, with their special belongings placed inside pottery urns which were buried with them. There is some evidence of this in Shropshire, for example in Bromfield or Hodnet.

In the middle Bronze Age, more people began to cremate the dead instead of burying them. They put the ashes into pottery urns and buried them in graveyards known as urnfields, or under pre-existing barrows. Then there is evidence that rich and powerful people began to place more importance on individual burials or cremations. Even children of important families had grave goods buried with them. This suggests that the importance of the family and the tribe was growing.

However, by the late Bronze Age, this practice had all died out and there is very little evidence to tell us what happened to dead bodies. Some people believe they might have been thrown into the water as offerings to the water gods, who had become much more important towards the end of this time, possibly because there was a particularly dry period from 1200-850 BCE.