

# Traditions of the Separate: Creation of Wetland Deposition Knowledge-scapes

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## **Abstract**

Our interpretations of British prehistoric deposition practices have been greatly influenced by classical sources and inherited wisdom. However, with the expansion of artefact databases, reanalysis is required to reconsider what is known about wetland deposition in relation to British Iron Age activity. To do so, we must understand how archived physical evidence has been interpreted, and as a result, created certain biases in modern understandings. This paper proposes the use of amalgamated object records to refine British Iron Age wetland depositional traditions in Wales and Scotland.

## **Introduction**

Knowledge-scapes are the interactions between current and developing knowledge, 'milieu', and transitions from homogeneous to heterogeneous spaces (Matthiesen 2009: 1). Knowledge transforms as it is transferred (Shariq 1999). This transformation often alters or expands core units of information which are then modified for specified analyses. The digital epoch has enabled researchers to form units, link relevant information, and expand on pre-existing records (Cameron and Robinson 2007). With digitally consolidated resources at our fingertips, holistic re-evaluation of cultural practices is now achievable in a way never before possible. Matthiesen (2009: 15–17) states that to develop these relations further, we must define the implicit and explicit dynamics to provide where and how disparities in new knowledge develop out of post-traditional approaches.

New evidence for prehistoric archaeology in Britain is continually expanding due to urban development, drainage operations, and individual reports under the Treasure Act of 1996 and the Treasure Trove Scheme. With this compounding evidence, public databases have been developed to archive Britain's heritage, such as Canmore, Highland Environment Records (HERs), Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), Archwilio, Royal Commission on

the Ancient and Historical Monuments Wales (RCAHMW), and Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments Scotland (RCAHMS). These databases, when paired with archived museum object records, often help to supplement missing information or expand on the archaeological methodology that is not always provided in catalogues. Prehistoric depositional theory, likewise, has benefited from these platforms, creating an environment which has allowed the consolidation of archived material (e.g. Bevan 2012; Brindle 2013; Cooper and Green 2016; Horn 2015). This material can then be configured from a homogeneous space fixed in milieu to a heterogeneous knowledge-scape for prehistoric deposition studies. Using these resources with the two principal parameters of an Iron Age period and wetland environments<sup>1</sup>, patterns and trends can be deduced more holistically.

Iron Age objects found in wetland locations are often attributed as votive offerings and frequently lack quantitative evidence to support ritual interpretations. How ritual is defined is dependent on personal (i.e. milieu) and external interpretations of practice. Obscure use of 'ritual' to define unique occurrences is problematic because similar finds have not been reported in the region or period. Therefore, this project defines ritual as repetitive regional activities that are performed with the intention to form stronger social and cultural cohesion through shared experiences.

However, the same prestigious material is often recycled in literary arguments to support evidence for Iron Age wetland deposition. The received wisdom is sourced from limited case studies and reliance on classical sources for supporting evidence which in its nature is implicit. As a result, re-evaluation of explicit wetland depositional practices has not been attempted for the British Iron Age. This paper will provide a critical discussion of wetland deposition in relation to cultural practices observed in Wales and Scotland through the development of the tradition's archaeological knowledge-scape.

### **Inherited wisdom, advantages and disadvantages**

Past perspectives, literature and foundational research have helped to develop prehistoric wetland depositional studies. In addition, limitations of primary sources from the Iron Age have also been thoroughly reviewed (e.g. Bradley 1990; Gibson et al. 2013; Hutton 1991, 2007; Joy 2011; Maier 2006; Wait 1985)

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<sup>1</sup> Wetlands in this study include rivers and streams, floodplains, lakes, estuaries, and peatlands (fens and bogs). The study covers both surviving and prehistoric wetland environments.

and will only be briefly discussed here. The limitations apply to classical sources, folklore, and the revival of interest during the Victorian period. The dependence on ethnographic accounts to describe cultural narratives of the people who resided in Britain at the time of the Roman invasions is clear (Cunliffe 1991; Hill 1996; Webster 1996). While terrestrial archaeology has long moved past this dependence on classical sources and folklore, a reliance has persisted in wetland depositional studies to interpret unusual finds. Current wetland depositional research no longer accepts vague applications of ritual without new quantitative evidence. Nonetheless, as Bell (1992: 13) states, even efforts to re-legitimize 'ritual' through data and theory do not prevent the abuse of the term.

Records and literature from classic ethnographers and Christian monks which pertain to prehistoric practices are important primary sources which reflect an external perspective for observed Iron Age traditions. While these observations have made valuable contributions to understanding past societies, they also provide a degree of bias. Issues with classical ethnographic accounts are extensive for several reasons. The first, as Hutton (2013) states, is that some classical sources cannot be considered entirely reliable, because they are often written one to two hundred years after the event and transcribed second hand from the original orator. Secondly, personal or cultural propaganda plays a significant role in the portrayals of foreign peoples, and it was often used to justify Roman military presence and methods of submission. For example, Caesar is one of the few ethnographic accounts that mention the Britons (Wait 1985). He claimed to invade Britain because of their involvement with Gaulish resistance against Rome. In passages such as Book 5, Chapter 12 and Book 6, Chapter 17 of *Commentāriū dē Bellō Gallicō*, he details the natural abundance of raw material and 'plunder', which was often advertised as a reward to the soldiers for Roman military compliance. It is possible the observed 'piles' or collection of objects into a particular location may have been the step preceding deposition. As such, permitting looting of these venerated sites no doubt disrupted the cultural practice in Gaul and Britain during the Roman conquest. Third, history is not necessarily written by the victors but by the literate, and as a result, many of the portrayals or observations of prehistoric British traditions may be false, flawed, or hypocritical. The Britons were an oratory culture (Aldhouse-Green 1995) and viewed as marginal peoples (Webster 1996). For example, the Romans and Greeks held an apprehension of bogs as evil locations containing bad humours (Aldhouse-Green 2015: 51), but paradoxically possessed a widespread spring cult (Alcock 1965). Therefore, not

all wetscapes were considered taboo by the Greek and Romans, only selected ones. Likewise, the abundant archaeological evidence for deposition practices in wetland locations demonstrates an intimate relationship with the topography and local Britons (e.g. Bradley 2000, 2017; Cunliffe 2018; Davis and Gwilt 2008; MacDonald 2007; Raffield 2014; Yates and Bradley 2010).

Biased interpretations of sites and objects in prehistoric wetland landscapes have been further exacerbated by alteration or condemnation of local folklore. Folklore is the one remaining component of local oral tradition, but this too unfortunately, has its flaws. Much of the folklore that survives today has been altered to some degree through the recordings of Christian monks during periods of intended conversion of the locals (Hutton 1991: 226; Maier 2006; Wait 1985). Certain aspects of the folklore have been altered to suit a Christian narrative, such as the adoption of particular deities and protagonists to saints (e.g. Saint Brigid) (James 1947; Watkins 2004). Likewise, folkloric tales that have had little alteration either provided no benefit to the church or were used to condemn certain activities or beliefs (e.g. wetland deposition) and served as examples of inappropriate behaviour (James 1947; Watkins 2004). Nevertheless, there is evidence that certain aspects of water cults were incorporated into the church such as saints becoming associated with specific wells, springs, and other water sources (Alcock 1965; Oestigaard 2010).

Victorian revival of interest in ancient archetypes sponsored new revisions for literature pertaining to local prehistoric peoples. However, this interest focused on developing modelled stereotypes which ranged from noble barbarian, to simpleton subservient, to 'Saxon' lineage in Britain—and dependent on where the term was applied gave rise to a positive or negative association (Cislo 2006). This completely ignores the evidence that the people of Britain were part of complex societies which Rome had difficulties conquering and controlling. Munro (1878, 1882, 1892), with a study of crannogs, among others, challenged previous conceptions of local prehistoric peoples and instead opted to show the value of organic remains and wetland archaeological sites. This position was in opposition to the contemporary fascination with metal pieces that contained a high monetary value. The preference for metal objects over organic forms in the Victorian period is still highly contested because of previous interpretations and stipulations of value (e.g. Logan 2001).

Even today, organic material remains found in British wetland contexts are not broadly understood for their social value, and often their potential is only

recognized by archaeologists. Heritage sectors have done a tremendous job of reversing and revising classical and certain Victorian narratives by illustrating the importance of both organic and metal objects for Iron Age culture and social complexities. Projects such as Monuments at Risk England's Wetlands (MAREW) and the Scottish Wetland Archaeology Programme (SWAP) have taken great strides to demonstrate the value of wetland heritage through the evaluation of new and preserved archaeological sites and material remains (Henderson 2004; Van de Noort et al. 2002). No such program exists for Wales but is instead incorporated into MAREW. This has resulted in less concentrated analyses of wetland archaeology in Wales (though the Gwent Levels are an exception to this; see Bell et al. 2000; Britton et al. 2008).

When employing the aforementioned sources, wetland archaeologists must be cautious of the possible projections and attitudes that may not be relevant. Propaganda is a strong influence for such sources, and it is almost impossible to extract an accurate account of events because there are relatively few documents that survive which would allow corresponding comparisons for the British Iron Age. Additionally, we must recognize that at a certain point in history these sources were taken at face value and have in one form or another influenced modern perspectives of prehistoric actions and elements of traditions, especially those pertaining to the wildness of Britain (Goldberg 2015; Joy 2011; Webster 1996). Therefore, it is important in depositional studies to strip away preconceived or projected narratives that provide false pretences of intention. Rather, we should first review what material is present and where else it has been reported before interpreting cross-regional traditions.

### **Digital heritage services and archaeological material records**

The development of open access online databases has made the breadth of archaeological material more readily available. However, using these sources is not without its limitations. For example, Brindle (2013: 74–75), Lewis (2016) and Robbins (2013) warn that variation in collection methodologies, technologies used, individual knowledge of the finder—especially those without any formal training—can cause discrepancies in object reports. Studies such as Bevan (2012) and Robbins (2013) provide various methods to navigate around analysing large-scale inventories of artefacts. Amalgamation of other sources, using the example of PAS supplemented by HERs, allows for better assessment of regional distribution values (Brindle 2013). There is still expected to be a degree of bias, especially for prehistoric metal finds because they are most

easily identifiable, particularly in wetland environments. Lewis (2016) discusses this relationship with metal detectorists along with the advantages and disadvantages of the practice. One consequence is that the oversaturation of metal pieces in the prehistoric archive creates a bias against organic object deposits that have yet to be found or reported<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the use of digital heritage services is beneficial for holistic studies because of the collection of large raw data sets. Even with inherent bias and variation in collection methods, open access digital heritage services help us to broaden understandings of national distribution without creating radical or divergent patterns that would alter our understanding of prehistoric depositional activity (Brindle 2013: 74). As a result, ‘big data’ analyses can be achievable with the additional use of digital heritage services, but there needs to be established temporary measures when dealing with incompatible amalgamated data for “interpretive potential (and limitations)” to be explored (Cooper and Green 2016: 9). Providing parameters defining wetland deposition and traditions is the preliminary step in developing its knowledge-scape before other analyses can or should be performed.

### **Wetland deposition and tradition**

There is considerable evidence for wetland deposition both preceding and succeeding the Iron Age from the Neolithic (e.g. Allen 1990; Coles 1968; O’Sullivan 2007; Wright 1923), Bronze Age (e.g. Bradley 2000, 2017; Needham 1989; Yates and Bradley 2010), Romano-British period (e.g. Alcock 1965; Clauss 2001; Croon 1953; Henig 2003; Hingley 2006), Viking Age and Anglo-Saxon period (e.g. Davidson 1998; Lund 2014; Naylor 2015; Raffield 2014) in Britain and Ireland. The act of deposition is the purposeful placement of material into chosen landscapes. Likewise, the performance of object placement in a chosen wetland denotes a level of cultural collaboration that would allow for the development of a common identity through a shared experience.

Differences in deposition traditions can represent communal or independent contributions through the selection of objects. Application of a holistic review of the development of wetland depositional knowledge-scapes can provide insight into regional preferences. These traditions have been noted in previous research (e.g. Bradley 1990, 2005, 2017; Davis and Gwilt 2008; Fontijn 2002; Garrow and Gosden 2012; Haselgrove and Hingley 2006; Hunter 1997; Hutcheson 2004; MacDonald 2007) in

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<sup>2</sup> Many wetland areas cannot be explored further due to limitations or restrictions—of which there are many.

addition to this study's primary analyses of wetland deposition as multi- or single period hoards, pairs, and multiperiod and single object placements.

Multiperiod hoards are characterized by the placement of three or more pieces into a singular location or associated wetland. For example, the Llyn Cerrig Bach<sup>3</sup> hoard reported from Wales was created through multiple overlapping deposits spanning from 390 BC to AD 100 in the same location (MacDonald 2007). The deposits reported from Llyn Cerrig Bach are exemplary of social memory, whereby the community repeatedly chose this specific place to deposit their pieces into the prehistoric lake.

The collection of finds from Airth, Scotland, are not traditionally considered a hoard because they are reported from the same floodplain and not findspot. Thus, this study considers the reports from the floodplain a 'landscape-dependent multiperiod deposition.' This concept refers to several records of differing depositional traditions (e.g. hoard, pair, and single) all found within the same wetland. Five pieces in total have been reported from the seasonal floodplain of the River Forth and Pow Burn. Three single object placements and one pair represent the spread. The finds include a brooch (AD 75–175), a lynch pin (100 BC–AD 200), a tankard handle (AD 100–200), and a pair of terrets (50 BC–AD 50) (Hunter 2015, 2017, 2019).<sup>4</sup> Multiperiod hoards also differ from single period hoards which are placed in the same location in a single event, like Llyn Fawr, Wales (Lynch et al. 2000; O'Connor 2007)<sup>5</sup> and Middlebie, Scotland (MacGregor 1976).<sup>6</sup>

Paired deposits are two items that contain some form of association to each other, obvious or ambiguous, together or in close proximity, such as the bronze armlets of Bunranoch and the bog butters of Plockton, both in Scotland (Earwood 1993; Hunter 2006; MacGregor 1976; Mowat 1996).<sup>7</sup> Pairs are not formally recognized in Britain, but have been acknowledged in north-western Europe and noted in both prehistoric terrestrial and wetland contexts (e.g. Cassen et al. 2008; Larsson 1998, 2007, 2011; Mount 2013). However, this does not mean that it is not a notable British deposition tradition because paired

3 National Museum of Wales – 44.32.1–138, 44.196.3–4, 44.294/36.1–4, 44.295.1a–b, 46.320.1, 46.320.3, 47.19, 2002.40H/1–4.

4 Brooch (Treasure Trove 51/16), lynch pin (Falkirk Museum - 2016/224), tankard handle (Falkirk Museum 2015-002-001), terrets (Falkirk Museum - 2016-002-001, 2016-016-002).

5 National Museum of Wales – 12.11/1–25.

6 National Museum of Scotland X.FA 45–71.

7 Armlets (National Museum of Scotland X.FA 8, X.FA 75), bog butters (X.SHC 5, lost).

deposits are classified as hoards, and this lack of representation is due to differences in terminology. Nevertheless, this study confirmed a considerable number of paired deposits from Scotland, which verifies the practice in the region.

Single object deposits are one piece placed in complete isolation with no other associated deposits within the immediate vicinity, such as the Strata Florida figurine (Sanden and Turner 2004) and the Trawsfynydd tankard from Wales (Horn 2015; Jope 2000), and the Elvanfoot cauldron from Scotland (Burns 1969; MacGregor 1976; Spratling 1971).<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, there were also occurrences of multiperiod single object deposits. This tradition was identified in the study when two or more single object deposits are placed in the same wetland, but at different periods and with notable distances between them, such as the stone balls of Nutberry (Hunter 1999) and the bog butter in wooden vessels of Gleann Geal, both in Scotland (Earwood 1992, 1993).<sup>9</sup>

Clarification of the different deposit types has not been broadly researched or applied within the scope of British Iron Age wetland studies. Often, case studies are appraised for their find's apparent economic worth as opposed to their societal value, and as a result, their ambiguity is lost. While inherited wisdom overall has been beneficial for providing critical and necessary arguments for the development of depositional theory, we need to continue to incorporate archived material. Development of depositional theory becomes problematic when the same prestigious material is recycled in literary arguments with limited new evidence (e.g. Aldhouse-Green 1989, 1997, 2001, 2011 2015; Cunliffe 1987, 2001, 2003, 2012, 2017, 2018; Ross 1967, 1986, 1999, Ross and Robins 1991). However, highlighting common trends in practice through the development of a knowledge-scape that focuses on wetland deposition can bring forth new understandings of what was considered of value to these prehistoric peoples.

## Analysis

Reanalysis of wetland deposition traditions in Wales and Scotland was achieved through comparison of sub-regional associations. The analysis compared associated Iron Age traditions reported from wetlands through the collection of object records. These object records were first sourced through museum archives, heritage units, and published site reports. Thereafter online databases and

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<sup>8</sup> Figurine (Ceredigion Museum 2012.33.1), tankard (National Museum of Wales 21.264), cauldron (Hunterian Museum B.1951.3224).

<sup>9</sup> Stone balls (DUMFM:1998.27, lost), bog butter (SHC 1, lost).



associated literature were used to supplement missing information. As stated previously, there are limitations to observing statistical trends of object deposition outside of their counties because of collection method bias (e.g. Brindle 2013; Chester-Kadwell 2008; Robbins 2013). In response, the project created a methodological standard for data collection and organization utilizing the predecessors' cataloguing systems to reduce disparities and inconsistencies (i.e. Earwood 1993; Fox 1946; Garrow and Godsen 2012; Horn 2015; MacGregor 1976; Martin 2003; Savory 1976). The following characteristics were recorded from object records and supplemented with associated literature and digital heritage services to maintain a common catalogue standard: object, proposed utility (a & b), id/accession number, period, date, parish/town, county, country, environment, degree of wetland, confidence of wetland context, coordinates, primary and secondary material composition, manufacture process, state of completeness, state of an object, dimensions, weight, decorations, deposition type, description, personal observations, museum curation, how the item was found and acquired, date of discovery, associated literature sources, associated digital sources, and photograph/s. The purpose of this analysis was to review what deposition traditions existed, and to what extent, cross-regionally.

The analysis included 102 findspots from Wales and Scotland, excluding settlement and production sites. This 'isolation' is a modern construct because of the need to partition certain activities to represent a specific performance which defines a long-standing tradition in prehistoric Britain. Within this study, it is recognized that not all wet landscapes have been analysed to their capacity for prehistoric activity, and the finds here are subject to change with future fieldwork and survey analyses. What is presented here are the current understandings of each site with reports up to 2019. Patterns in the data are used to observe regional and sub-regional traditions based on recent find reports to further refine differences in wetland depositional activities. The data used in this study is subject to inherent taphonomic biases arising from differences in landscape accessibility, environment, preservation, drainage, urbanization, funding, survey performance, technology, the skills and formal training of the individual surveyor(s), coordinate precision, the quality of archive records, curation and time spent on further study. Since these biases could not be controlled for, inferential statistics, which require random samples for inferences to be made about the wider population, were deemed unsuitable for analysis.

	Multiperiod Hoards	Single Period Hoards	Pairs	Multiperiod Single	Single	Totals
Scotland_Highlands and Islands	0	3	2	2	8	15
Scotland_North East	0	0	2	1	1	4
Scotland_Central	2	0	1	0	12	15
Scotland_South East	0	4	1	0	14	19
Scotland_South West	3	1	1	2	10	17
Wales_North West	1	0	0	0	3	4
Wales_North East	0	0	0	0	8	8
Wales_South West	0	0	0	0	5	5
Wales_South East	1	2	0	3	9	15
<b>Totals</b>	7	10	7	8	70	102

Table 1 Reported sites organized by sub-regional divides and traditions observed.

Instead, summary statistics were used for most analyses. This allowed for a more cautious exploratory approach whereby the influence of taphonomic biases could be taken into consideration. The use of inferential statistics runs the risk of resulting in type II errors, that is erroneously suggesting significant patterns. In short, due to the nature of the data only exploratory summary statistics could be used for the analysis.

Before exploring other distinguishing characteristics, analysis of wetland deposition traditions must first be identified when creating a new knowledge-scape. This study compared sub-regions to the depositional traditions observed (table 1). These regions were based on Hunter's sub-divide of Scotland (2007) and the Archaeological Trust Authorities for Wales (e.g. archwilio.org.uk).

The summary statistics showed potential sub-regional preferences in depositional traditions. A radar graph was used to demonstrate the relationship certain deposition traditions have with sub-regions (fig. 1). Single object deposits are the common tradition for both Wales and Scotland according to the data (70 reports). The highest concentration of single object deposits reported are from central, southwest, and southeast Scotland. Multiperiod single object deposits occur in both Scotland and Wales (eight

reports). The southeast region in Wales has the highest site concentration reported for multiperiod single object deposits. Pairs are only supported in the data for Scotland (seven reports) and occur in all sub-regions, with the highest site concentrations reported from both the Highlands and Islands and northeast regions (four reports total). There is currently not enough data to support paired deposits in Wales during the British Iron Age.

Single period hoards (10 reports) have been reported from both Wales and Scotland, with the majority of site accounts sourced from Scotland. The largest concentration of hoard reports came from the southeast region in Scotland. Multiperiod hoards, like single period hoards, occur in both Wales and Scotland (seven reports). Multiperiod hoards have the highest concentration reported from the southwest of Scotland. Single-period hoards appear to be slightly more common than multiperiod for both Wales and Scotland. However, if object volume is considered in correlation to the series of activity, multiperiod hoards are the more common deposition tradition for the British Iron Age in these regions.

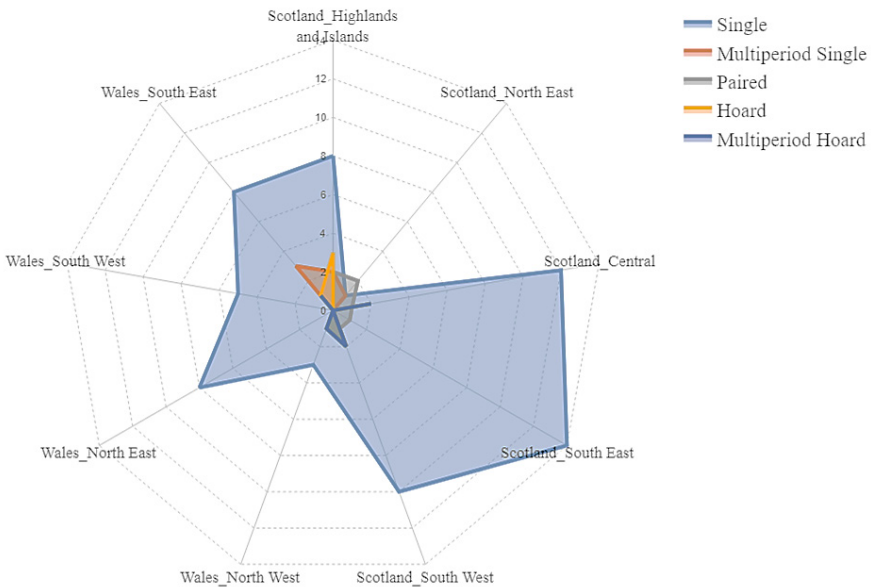


Figure 1 Deposition tradition associations with sub-regions of Wales and Scotland reported from wetland locations and dated to the Iron Age (graph by Tiffany Treadway).

The sub-region with the most reports of depositional activity is south-east Scotland. Thereafter, notable levels of deposition are reported in the central, Highlands and Islands and southwest of Scotland, and the south-east of Wales (17 to 15 sites per region). The activity noted in the southeast of Wales, in comparison to the rest of the country, may be the product of more concentrated archaeological research carried out in the area.

## **Discussion**

To construct a knowledge-scape for wetland depositional study, past and present disparities needed to be understood. Biased influences have unconsciously percolated into modern interpretations of wetland deposition because the aforementioned perspectives have long been embedded into our societal milieu. Recognizing where external perceptions of cultures originated and formed is critical to wetland deposition research for interpreting archaeological evidence relating to certain activities and behaviours. Acknowledgement of inherited wisdom from past research is likewise crucial because these studies have provided the preliminary evidence for essential, foundational arguments. Nevertheless, we cannot depend on prestigious material and sites alone to explain an entire culture in conjunction with a select period. In the same way, the application of 'ritual' or 'votive' to describe unique contexts without significant archaeological evidence has had a debilitating effect on understanding regional traditions. The data here suggest that interactions with wetlands, highlighted through depositional performances, were important to the collective social infrastructure of the British Iron Age.

The current consensus on hoards is that they are two or more pieces deposited together. However, with the study's observation of pairs in Scotland, hoards should instead be defined as three or more pieces. Multiperiod wetland deposits also require more attention. There is considerable evidence to suggest episodic deposits at selected sites or landscapes for hoards, single objects, and mixtures of categorical traditions. The data also provides that hoards and single object deposits are both common traditions for Wales and Scotland based on object quantities and site reports. This contradicts previous arguments that single object finds in wetland contexts are from accidental losses. Wetland depositional research should be recognized for their unique physical parameters in the form of ecotones which provide a transition zone into terrestrial or marine environments.

## Conclusion

A holistic review of archived British Iron Age material creates the foundation for a prehistoric wetland deposition knowledge-scape. Observation of consistencies and variations in the traditions allow for further foundational data to be established, which enable us to piece together socio-cultural activities that transcended from generation to generation and catalogue the evolution of practice.

Studies of wetland deposition need to rely on consolidated archaeological material and can be performed through the development of a knowledge-scape. Amassing the material allows for holistic analyses of cultural practices and defining regional traditions. Significant case studies constitute an important element of Iron Age studies, but they should not be the cornerstone of supporting evidence and influence. Focusing on the sheer volume of material evidence for deposition allows for disparities to be identified during the formation of new knowledge as we move away from post-traditional approaches in wetland archaeology.

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