

Re-thinking Hillforts

A review of an interesting archaeological course on hillforts

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For a long time, hillforts have dominated our view of Iron Age Britain. They have been seen simply as large defended enclosures inhabited by people, some of whom may have been elite. Yet, this belief has been challenged in recent decades. In December 2012 Oxford University Department of Continuing Education ran a short course titled “Re-thinking Hillforts”. It was one of many day and weekend events which are designed to present the latest thinking on topics, often archaeological, by leading experts.

The recent geophysical surveying on Little Solsbury Hill by Rick Buettner, John Oswin and other BACAS members, has drawn some attention to hillforts. In addition, there are at least nine more of these monuments, many forgotten, within a 10 mile radius of Bath. So it seemed timely to attempt to summarize some of the key features of the course. This aimed to “highlight ongoing and recent research that is attempting to make sense of the many roles of these key places in the first millennium BC”. The course covered several general reviews and these were followed by presentations, mostly based on recent excavations by academic departments, from nine different areas of England and Wales.

Niall Sharples from Cardiff University started the sessions with an overview of hillforts. His archaeological experience had included directing the 1980s re-investigation of Maiden Castle, Dorset. Hillforts are a type of monument, he said, which are “totally lacking homogeneity”, with military defences extremely rare and often not situated on a hill top. So he had an agnostic view of the usefulness of the term “hillfort”. The huge variation in hillforts and the problem in terminology was a recurring theme of the course. He explained that Maiden Castle went through a number of changes in its function. In the Early Iron Age, it defined a community by distinguishing or differentiating a place in an otherwise undifferentiated area. In the Middle Iron Age, further building and enlargement, often with multiple boundaries, produced a monument which was an expression of the prestige of the community, where people lived together. By the Late Iron Age, it was no longer lived in but was an icon or symbol for the community. He stressed the importance of more precise dating by radiocarbon using Bayesian modelling, rather than relying on pottery stratification. Better dating has revealed that a number of hillforts, including Danebury in Hampshire, had begun to be constructed in the Late Bronze Age (1000BC-800BC) and not the Iron Age. Having given examples of the difficulty interpreting various surveying techniques, he made a passionate plea for more large scale area excavations as the only approach to understand hillforts. Several of the presenters later emphasised the great difficulty which they had had in getting permission from the authorities to carry out excavations.

Professor Colin Haselgrove, an Iron Age expert, also emphasized the very varied nature of hillforts and said that we must get away from the polarized view that such sites as South Cadbury in Somerset and Danebury are typical examples, because they are not. Neither did he feel that hillforts were part of a hierarchical system in the Iron Age. He reminded us that considering all late Bronze Age / early Iron Age settlement sites, hillforts only account for a very small percentage of the population.

Then Professor Ian Ralston from Edinburgh discussed the 4 year project which began in September 2012, funded with a £950,000 grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to produce an “Atlas of Hillforts in Britain and Ireland”. He said that there are around 4,000 hillforts which are hugely variable and because of changing perceptions the term hillfort has meant “different things to different people at different times”. For example, some are very small, some are Pictish and some are medieval in origin, so producing a comprehensive atlas will be a real challenge. (Volunteers have now been invited to submit information about hillforts).

Specific findings were then presented from Ham Hill Somerset, the Cornish coastal promontory forts, Herefordshire, Mid-Cheshire, the Peak district, East Midlands and 3 separate geographical areas in North Wales. Some of the more memorable highlights are described below.

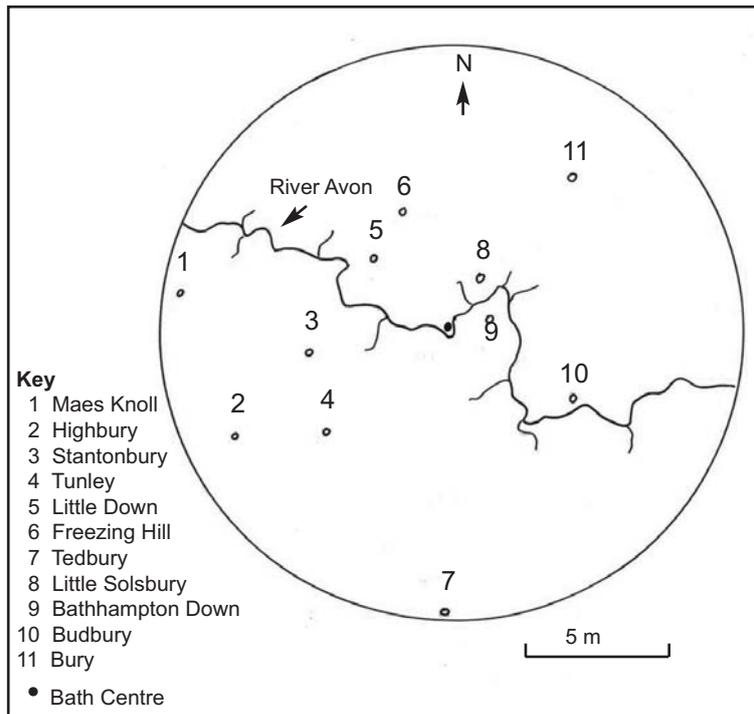


Figure 1
Sketchplan of hillforts within a 10 mile radius of Bath. The river Avon is also shown.

Ham Hill is particularly interesting as it is Britain's largest hillfort at 88ha. The recent excavations are from 2011-2013. This is before there will be further destructive quarrying of the hill, which has taken place since Roman times. English Heritage presumably had a dilemma as they are responsible for protecting the hillfort but need the golden hamstone to restore historic buildings. The site has a long and complex history with a pre-rampart Neolithic phase, a Bronze Age field system and with enclosure of the plateau, creating this huge hillfort, in the early Iron Age. Most of the assemblage found on the site has been dated to the mid to late Iron Age but there are also Romano-British ditches and artefacts.

The East Midlands is an area which appears almost empty on hillfort zone maps. However, it was densely settled in the Iron Age and there were a number of hillforts. Jeremy Taylor from Leicester, also the director of the meeting, stressed "there is no such thing as a hillfort" because there is such variety. He presented evidence from Burrough Hill in Leicestershire, with its monumentalised entrance now dated to 440-150 BC. He suggested that there was a fairly small resident population in the fort with a large agricultural settlement outside. Hillforts seemed to be a point of contact for a dispersed agricultural population, a centre for crafts (including iron smelting and forging, spinning and weaving), and also places for ceremonial and ritual events which were probably seasonal.

This communal role of the hillfort was emphasized by most presenters including Dr Rachel Pope, who presented research from the Clwydian range. She thought there was no evidence for elite architecture and no evidence for permanent settlement in hillforts (a difference in opinion from that of Sharples). Pope thought that the shared practice of the act of construction of the boundaries, and often their reconstruction, solidified the social bond of the dispersed farming units (this feature was also mentioned by Sharples). She compared the events which took place in hillforts to our present day Romany and Irish horse fairs and Glastonbury festival. She also presented evidence of the climate change and little Ice-Age at the end of the Bronze Age which could have driven the marked social changes at this time.

The hilltop enclosures on the Llyn Peninsula, North Wales, and in particular at Meillionydd, differ considerably in size and construction. Dr Kate Waddington said they varied from <1.2 ha to >6ha, beginning with open settlements in the Bronze Age, univallate in the early Iron Age and stone settlements in the middle Iron Age. They were probably not permanently occupied because of the high and extremely exposed position, lack of material culture and the presence of more favourable settlements in the lower valleys. As at other sites, there was evidence of deliberate abandonment and "closure" or "creative destruction" of enclosures and roundhouses.

One of the most extensive series of excavations presented was from the Mid-Cheshire sandstone ridge, carried out 2009-2012, and involving 6 hillforts. The investigations included the surveying of 200 sq km with LIDAR, at a cost of £20,000. The all important scientific dating techniques, often missing in past times, were by calibrated radiocarbon, optically stimulated luminescence and

archaeomagnetic dating. It was clear that at least 4 hillforts were in existence in the late Bronze Age and 1 of these (Helsby) had the inner face of the rampart dated to 1435-1320 BC, the Middle Bronze Age. Only two of the four forts had evidence of occupation continuing in to the Iron Age. The other remaining two forts appear to have been constructed in the Iron Age; Maiden Castle, Cheshire, was built around 470BC, and Eddisbury 730-400BC. The forts were presumably abandoned as activity in the late Iron Age was not found. However two forts were back in use in early Roman times and three in the early medieval period. After an initial communal role for forts, similar to that described above, by the Middle Iron Age (400-150 BC) there was evidence of domestic occupation. People may have moved in to forts for protection at a time of personal wealth, horse riding and conflict.

The most exciting and provocative presentation was the epic investigation of Fin Cop, in the Peak District, by Dr Clive Waddington. This took place from 2009-2012 and volunteers included 450 school children and more than 100 adults. As with most of the excavated sites presented there had been prolonged occupation of the site of Fin Cop before the first rampart was constructed. This included Mesolithic quarrying, Neolithic and Beaker activity, and Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age ceramics. Most of the hillfort rampart construction took place around 400BC. Then the hillfort was destroyed before it had been completed and a large number of women and children were deliberately killed. Dr Waddington thought this was clear evidence of warfare and massacre in the Middle Iron Age, a subject which has usually been neglected. Publication of the findings will include DNA and isotopic analysis of the skeletons which has already suggested that there was famine at the time. There was a lively question and answer session especially by those who prefer their prehistory to be peaceful. Waddington gave evidence why the possibility that this was another example of ritualised deposition of bodies, was very unlikely.

To end, there was a presentation which had the audience enthralled. John Pouncett from Oxford University showed exquisite images of Bodfari hillfort in Denbighshire, using computerised manipulation of the combination of data from a number of techniques including LIDAR, multidepth resistance, magnetometry and electrical resistance tomography. Despite the incredible detail the information was used primarily as a guide to find the best sites for excavation.

Summary

1 The term "hillfort" was generally thought to be a misnomer and inappropriate for most of these enclosures. However no-one came up with a simple generic alternative.

2 Most of the hillforts were located on sites with a long previous prehistory of activity. Many of the first ramparts were built in the Late Bronze Age. They were then reconstructed, remodelled or enlarged, sometimes repeatedly, in the Early and Middle Iron Age. Some hillforts were built in the Middle Iron Age. There was little evidence found for their use in the Late Iron Age.

3 Hillforts had different uses at different times and in different regions. It seems likely that to begin with they served as focal points for a dispersed community for a wide range of activities. Although they were clearly occupied at times, this may have been for short periods only, and especially as a seasonal event.

4 There was evidence of warfare in the Middle Iron Age, around 400BC, with the massacre of women and children and the sacking of a hillfort.

5 Continuing excavations at some of these sites and detailed analysis of all the findings will be available in the next few years, as will the publication of the Hillfort Atlas. Hopefully this will clarify many unanswered questions about these enigmatic and iconic places.

Selected Websites for Reference

Oxford University Continuing Education at www.conted.ox.ac.uk

Ham Hill at www.academia.edu/1782905/Excavations_at_Ham_Hill_Somerset_2011

Hillfort Atlas at www.arch.ox.ac.uk/hillforts-atlas.html

Meillionydd at www.bangor.ac.uk/history/research and go to archaeology.

Fin Cop at www.archaeologicalresearchservices.com/projects/Fin_Cop

Mid Cheshire Ridge at www.habitatsandhillforts.co.uk

