

Late Antique hillfort occupation in southern Britain: Chronology, context, and interpretation

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This presentation derives from a comprehensive assessment of evidence for hillfort use and occupation in Late and post-Roman southern Britain undertaken for a forthcoming monograph. Here, “hillfort” is used as an umbrella term for a range of defended sites, including hilltop sites (contour, partial contour, and promontory forts), hillslope forts, and lower-lying defended enclosures. In British archaeology these sites are synonymous with the Bronze and Iron Age, but the Roman and post-Roman use of hillforts is well evidenced, although less often the subject of focused research.

Romano-British material culture is frequently encountered at hillforts but, in many cases, this consists of small quantities of pottery, deriving from little more than low-level agricultural activity or small rural settlements situated within long-abandoned hillforts. There is very little evidence for the refortification of hillforts before Roman control ended in the early 5th century, and it is likely that there was an imperial prohibition against civil occupation of fortified sites. Thus, whilst we can talk about “life within hillforts” during the Roman period, rarely do we encounter “hillfort life” on the scales seen in prehistory. Nevertheless, there is a strong association between Romano-Celtic temples and hillforts in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, especially in Somerset, Dorset, and Gloucestershire, where temples are found within or close to hillforts such as Lydney, Maiden Castle, and Badbury Rings. Moreover, in the far west – in present-day Cornwall and the north and west of Wales – some hillforts, such as Dinas Emrys and Coygan Camp, have yielded comparatively large assemblages of Late Roman pottery and glass that are indicative of activity of some scale and significance. Contemporary structural evidence is limited, and we are not certain what this material represents in terms of the function and use of hillforts in the Late Roman period. There is no evidence of a Roman military presence at these sites, and feasting and/or ritual activity associated with assembly sites is more likely. It is undoubtedly significant that some of these sites show evidence for continued use in the 5th to 7th centuries. The widespread (re)fortification and use of hillforts is therefore predominantly a post-Roman, i.e. 5th to 7th century, phenomenon in southern Britain. There is very little evidence for the use of hillforts in the eastern, Anglo-Saxon, region where elites did not adopt the hillfort tradition before the construction of civil defences in the Viking Age. By contrast, the (re)occupation of hillforts is frequently encountered in the Brittonic speaking west. By the middle of the 5th century, almost all Roman towns and *villae* in this region had been abandoned and rural settlements became extremely ephemeral in terms of structural features. Hillforts are therefore one of the few site types that can be confidently ascribed to the post-Roman period in western Britain. The (re)occupation of hillforts was however not ubiquitous, and there are large areas, such as the Lake District of Cumbria and the Welsh Marches, where evidence for hillfort use is sparse. These “gaps” must be due, in part at least, to a lack of excavation and the patchy distribution of imported pottery and glass (including Late Roman amphorae and red slip wares), which, in the absence of native pottery traditions, provides our main way of identifying sites. Where imports are absent, sites are much harder to identify, although the increasing use of radiocarbon dating is helping us. Nevertheless, some of the “gaps” do appear to be real, and we need not expect to find hillforts right across the region.

Some hillforts were constructed in the 5th to 7th centuries, but prehistoric sites were frequently reoccupied. Re-use can be seen as functional, but prehistoric sites would have been understood as “ancient” places with deep histories embedded in local tradition, and their re-occupation must have been ideologically and symbolically charged. This may explain why at sites such as Coygan Camp activity took place within dilapidated prehistoric ramparts that offered little in terms of defence.

The major period of reoccupation appears to be the mid to late 5th century, but the dating evidence is weak. Late to post-Roman continuity may be suggested, but not proven, for some sites, particularly in the far west. Apart from a small number of outliers, the dating evidence suggests that activity at most hillforts came to an end before the final quarter of the 7th century, and many sites may have been abandoned no later than AD 600. Nevertheless, there are hints that whilst hillforts were rarely occupied on a substantial scale after the 7th century, they may have retained some local significance and continued to be visited periodically. A mid-/late 7th century phase of hillfort abandonment would broadly coincide with other important changes in western Britain at this time and shortly after. These include the emergence of larger, more powerful kingdoms, the resurgence of the Christian Church, and the growth of monasticism. Thus, it has been suggested that the abandonment of hillforts could be placed within the context of a period of political, economic, and religious resurgence described by historians as the “long eighth century”. However, many sites were abandoned well before this, and evidence for changes in the fabric of rural society in the early 7th century may imply a period of economic and political instability at this time. Thus, factors including plague and climate change should also be considered.

Hillforts were defended by one or more circuits of banks and ditches, but sherds of pottery from contexts sealed by ramparts suggests that hilltop activity often preceded the (re)construction of defences. Ramparts were either drystone or earthen and were usually sited in positions that exploited the natural topography to maximize its defensive capabilities and visual prominence. Some ramparts were of simple “dump” construction, but revetments and evidence for timber lacing has also been identified. In contrast to Scotland, no vitrified forts are known in southern Britain. The construction and refurbishment of defences attests to political instability, but the multivallation of some sites is difficult to explain in functional terms.

References in the 7th-century Irish legal tract, the *Críth Gablach*, state that the construction of ramparts at a king’s fort was a labour-duty expected from royal clients, and it has been suggested that the ability to demand this service formed part of how royal status was defined. This idea can be applied to the interpretation of British hillforts, and the multivallation of Dinas Powys, for example, has been linked with periods of royal succession.

Most post-Roman hillforts are small. The area enclosed by their defences is usually between 0.1 and 2 ha. These are not “community” sites, but a small number of larger hillforts, including Tintagel and Cadbury Castle, enclose up to 7.5 ha. The larger sites are thought to be of higher status and often yield the most impressive artefact assemblages. Comparatively little is known about the use of space within hillforts. Ewan Campbell's detailed analysis of Dinas Powys suggested that different activity zones existed within the inner rampart, but currently there is limited evidence for the hierarchical organization of space seen within the contemporary “nuclear forts” of Scotland. The site that may come closest to this level of complexity is Tintagel in Cornwall, where the upper, lower, and inner wards, and various locations on the headland could represent a structured demarcation of space.

Evidence for houses, both rectangular and round, is encountered at sites such as Dinas Powys and Cadbury Congresbury. These are usually represented by little more than postholes and gullies and the form of these structures and whether they were used for residential or religious purposes is debated. There is much more substantive evidence for houses at Tintagel, where around 150 buildings constructed from slate and clay have been identified, but the dating evidence for these is weak, and many could date to a later phase of the site.

Hillforts are found on open hilltops, coastal and inland promontories, and craggy hillocks. Some are situated at high altitude and exposed locations unsuited to year-round occupation, but many are close to rich agricultural lowlands. There is a strong coastal distribution, and many hillforts are adjacent to natural harbours or navigable rivers. Some of these sites played an important role in the regulation and control of trade. Many of the inland sites were located close to routeways and some, such as Dinas Powys, may have been strategically placed in ways that facilitated surveillance and territorial control. Others, such as Tre'r Ceiri, are more remote from the occupied lowlands, but are visually striking. There is also evidence that hillforts, such as New Pieces, were associated with upland hunting landscapes.

The relationship between hillforts and the wider rural settlement pattern is poorly understood, but it is thought that sites with strong evidence of domestic activity were at the top of the settlement hierarchy; many of these are adjacent to areas of good land that would have been intensely settled. Most research has focused narrowly on individual sites, but it is becoming clear that hillforts could form part of “central zones”, consisting of clusters of high-status sites spread over a kilometre or more that included trading places, cemeteries, and religious centres. At Glastonbury, for example, a group of sites includes the hilltop settlement on the Tor, cemeteries, industrial activity on the site of the later abbey, and a potential riverine landing-place or trading location.

The limited number and extent of modern excavations and the material poverty of post-Roman western Britain, combined with acidic soil conditions, mean that artefact assemblages from hillforts are generally sparse. Moreover, building traditions involved usually ephemeral structural features. Thus, post-Roman activity is often attested by little more than a few sherds of pottery. Around 60 hillforts have a reasonable level of post-Roman evidence, but this is likely to be only a fraction of the total that was (re)occupied. The best evidence comes from major excavations at sites including Dinas Powys, Cadbury Castle, Cadbury Congresbury, and Tintagel. Assemblages of imported pottery and glass are a key feature of these sites. The pottery reflects a desire to emulate Roman-style dining practices and is often associated with drinking equipment. This includes glass vessels of Anglo-Saxon origin, which must have reached the west through networks of elite gift-exchange. Hearths and large animal bone assemblages can also be associated with feasting, whilst the presence of wild species, including deer, suggests that hunting was an important aspect at some sites.

Evidence for metalworking is also common. This included the smithing of domestic tools, but fine non-ferrous metalworking is also well evidenced and appears to have focused on the production of jewellery, including penannular brooches that were distributed by leaders as gifts and functioned as badges of military honour. The scale of the evidence suggests that metalworking was an aspect of the activity at these sites, but not their main function. Evidence for weapons, usually spearheads and ferrules, is rare, but consistently encountered and attests to the martial nature of elite society at this time and the likelihood that hillforts served as mustering points for warbands. Such weapons could also have been used in hunting, whilst an axe-hammer from Cadbury Castle is of a type thought to be associated with the ritual killing of animals. Evidence for literacy, in the form of *styli* and occasionally inscriptions, reminds of us of the Late Roman Latin inheritance and alludes to administration and record keeping at hillfort sites.

The evidence for trade and exchange of exotic goods, feasting, metalworking, hunting, violence, and record-keeping, in congruence with rare documentary references, attests to the high status of hillfort occupation in the 5th to 7th centuries and to the role of these sites as “central places”. Key figures of 20th-century early medieval archaeology, such as Leslie Alcock, emphasized the defensive and domestic functions of hillforts and described them as “strongholds”, “citadels”, and “defended homesteads”. They are usually called “settlements” in the archaeological literature and are associated with elites of greater or lesser status. But these descriptions are perhaps overly simplistic. Post-Roman activity at hillforts cannot always be understood purely in terms of domestic occupation. Glastonbury Tor, for example, is sited on a high and exposed hill on what would have been an island in post-Roman times and the hilltop has no source of water. Here metalworking and feasting were associated with an “altar-like” structure, but evidence for houses was limited. An unusually high quantity of ammonite fossils was also recovered. Tintagel is similarly unsuited to year-round domestic occupation, but has features, such as impressive rock outcrops that could have been the focus of ritual activity, including cremation, which is evidenced here but is otherwise extremely rare in post-Roman contexts. Sites such as Chun Castle and Trevelgue Head have strong associations with prehistoric monuments and have been interpreted as meeting places and assembly sites in the Iron Age and Roman periods. The post-Roman assemblages from these sites would seem to be best understood as deriving from short-term visits rather than sustained occupation.

When considering hillfort use collectively, it may be useful to envisage a spectrum of sites of greater and lesser importance within their localities. Some of the smaller enclosures undoubtedly represent the primarily residential and probably permanently occupied homesteads of local nobles, while a class of “major potentate centres” with wider reaching political influence also existed. These include sites like Dinas Powys and Cadbury Castle, which show evidence of significant and prolonged, occupation associated with households that were part of extra-regional elite networks. They would have been centres for the collection and redistribution of goods and tribute, and much of the “domestic activity” there can be understood within the context of social interactions, including feasting and gift exchange, associated with the negotiation of power between rulers and their clients. Other sites, such as Tintagel and Dinas Emrys, may be better understood as ceremonial centres that were not primarily residential. Activity at these sites may have included political assembly, royal inauguration, seasonal gatherings, and religious festivals. Looking at our major sites from a wider, north-western European perspective, can they be described as “theatres of power”? This term has recently been coined by Gabor Thomas in reference to Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian “central place complexes” such as Yeavinger and Rendlesham, i.e. “stages” through which emergent elites enacted rituals of rulership and political authority.

In summary, in the Late Roman period, hillforts were an important part of the religious landscape and may also have been used as places of local assembly, particularly in the far west where Roman towns and *villae* were rare. Hillforts did not play a significant role in the infrastructure of the Late Roman administration, but their importance grew after the collapse of imperial control in the early 5th century. In the post-Roman period, hillforts formed part of the apparatus of elite power. They should not, however, be considered a single or unified site type or simply described as “settlements”.

References

Alcock 1971; Campbell 2007; Seaman 2016; Seaman/Sucharyna 2020.
