

SHORTER PAPERS

EXCAVATIONS AT HAM HILL, STOKE-SUB-HAMDON

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Archaeological excavations were conducted at Ham Hill during the summers of 2011 and 2012 as part of a three-year programme undertaken in partnership by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit and the Department of Archaeology of Cardiff University. A 1.28ha area situated in the southwest corner of Ham Hill was opened up as a condition of planning consent for the expansion of the Harvey Stone Quarry. Geophysical survey (GSB 2001) revealed a large rectilinear enclosure within the development area, and evaluation trenching showed this to date to the Middle to Late Iron Age (Slater 2009). The 1.28ha was divided into four areas, three of which have now been fully excavated (fig. 1), with investigation of the final area forthcoming in 2013. In addition to these investigations, trenches were opened in 2012 at three locations over the hillfort's ramparts in order to characterise their condition, age and construction sequence. One of these trenches, on the northern spur of the hillfort, is a re-opening of a trench excavated in 1929, and yet never published, by Harold St. George Gray. The following statement is a brief overview of interim results that have been presented in full in Slater *et al.* (2012) and Brittain *et al.* (2013).

Mesolithic to Early Bronze Age

Considerable quantities of prehistoric artefacts have been recovered by systematic surface finds collection and test-pitting of a buried land surface

that covers much of the main excavation area, and from later archaeological features. There is an even distribution of Mesolithic to Early Bronze Age lithics across the excavated area, along with more concentrated areas of pottery that indicate Ham Hill was densely occupied throughout early prehistory. Features of this date have proven to be elusive in the main excavation area but the terminal of a ditch, or large pit, was found at the base of Gray's 1929 trench through the rampart. This contained a cow skull and a flint assemblage of blades, which suggests an Early Neolithic date. It is tempting to suggest this feature is the ditch of a causewayed enclosure but further work will be required before such an interpretation can be made. Nevertheless, whatever it is it does represent the first direct modification of the hilltop so far discovered.

Middle Bronze Age

An extensive ditched coaxial field system extends across and beyond the main excavations. Intensive sampling of the system, involving at least 50 percent excavation of the ditches, has identified multiple recuts, construction breaks and entrances, indicating ongoing management, modification and access points between rectangular fields. Finds of lithics, saddle querns and a stone macehead from the ditches suggest a provisional Middle Bronze Age date.



Fig. 1 Ham Hill, site plan

Late Bronze Age

A rectangular six-post structure and a nearby small pit have been dated by pottery to the Late Bronze Age. The six-post structure has the same alignment as a line of posts and that alignment is markedly different to the preceding field system. This tentatively suggests a phase of activity on the hill that precedes the Iron Age occupation and is contemporary with the large collection of Late Bronze Age metalwork that has been recovered from the hill.

Iron Age

Trenches 1 and 3, situated over the south and north ramparts, have produced pottery that indicate a date for construction of the hillfort in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition or Earliest Iron Age. This is a surprising discovery confirming that the primary hillfort was enormous from its outset, enclosing an area of c. 88.1ha. Trench 3 (Gray's 1929 cutting) showed there were up to four phases of enlargement of the rampart, combining formal stone architecture and less structured dumps of rubble and domestic waste with periods of ground stabilisation and soil formation. These phases remain to be individually

dated, but the final phase of construction is sealed by Early Roman material culture. This has been examined in detail in Trench 2 (which will be completed in 2013), where a stone chamber with an adjacent metalled surface may represent a hitherto unknown secondary entrance into the hillfort. By contrast, the sequence in Trench 1, across the southern rampart, was restricted to the primary, Early Iron Age phase of rampart construction. An additional trench will be opened here to ascertain whether this is indicative of a limited construction sequence or of later truncation. A circular stone-walled house was found built into the rear of the rampart in Trench 1.

No interior archaeology contemporary with the Early Iron Age rampart has thus far been identified from the main excavations. Here lies a distribution of Middle to Late Iron Age pit clusters and a ring gully lying to the east and outside of a large rectilinear enclosure. The entrance to the enclosure faces southeast, and the approach may originally have comprised a stone revetted bank with a series of timber posts directing access to the north and leading towards a large ring gully and a penannular gully. The ring gully had an internal diameter of *c.* 20m and enclosed a single posthole with a number of pits containing 'special deposits', including bronze and iron metalwork, quern fragments and pottery, including a fine Glastonbury Ware bowl. Evidence suggests that the structure was for domestic use. Additional pits and postholes in the enclosure are likely to be contemporary, but structures are difficult to discern.

Three human burials have been excavated from the enclosure ditch, and each appeared to have been deposited prior to the partial backfilling of the inner bank. Deposition of fauna over this backfilled layer also displays elements of formality, which is further highlighted by the placement into the ditch terminals of a large quantity of hamstone slabs that probably represent the dismantled revetment. Domestic waste, with significant quantities of black mustard seed (*Brassica nigra*), gradually filled the remaining hollow of the southern arm of the enclosure ditch. This may indicate a longer duration for settlement outside of the enclosure, but further analysis will be undertaken to verify the exact chronological relationship between these.

Romano-British

Limited quantities of Early Roman finds have been recovered from the main excavations and these appear to be associated with a rectilinear field system with a double ditched track way. Early Roman material has been found in greater quantities in the rampart trenches along the northern spur, suggesting that occupation was focused on the spur with agricultural activity covering the southern plateau.

Conclusion

The current excavations at Ham Hill are transforming our understanding of the development and character of the archaeology on the hill. This comprises a potentially unbroken sequence of occupation from the Mesolithic through to the Early Roman period. The long term importance of the hilltop is demonstrated by a possible early Neolithic monument on the northern spur and an extensive Middle Bronze Age field system that covers the plateau and suggest the construction of the hillfort rampart is an acknowledgement of the importance of this location. The hillfort boundary clearly goes through several phases of modification and the internal occupation also clearly has a history that changes during the Iron Age and which culminates in a significant Early Roman occupation.

References

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Endnotes

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