

A Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales
Southwest Wales – Later Prehistoric
22/12/2003

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of our existing knowledge strengths and weakness in this paper is based upon an Archaeological Research Audit compiled in 2002. During the course of 2002 a Later Bronze Age and Iron Age of Southwest Wales Working Group was convened and met on 30 July to advise on the Research Audit and to discuss research opportunities. Following the meeting, a draft of this paper prepared by K Murphy and circulated among members of the Working Group. Comments from the group were incorporated into a second draft, which was then presented at the Southwest Wales Archaeological Research Assessment Seminar held at Trinity College, Carmarthen on 5 October. Observations made during this open seminar when incorporated into the final version of this paper.

This paper has been divided into a series of topics – settlements, land-use and enclosure and so on. The existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses of each topic is analysed and research opportunities presented. Following this is a short section on research priorities and a means of implementation. Appendices, including a list of key sites, a list of scientific dates and a list of current research projects, support the analysis. Key references are provided at the end of the paper.

SETTLEMENTS

Existing knowledge: strengths

There is an abundance of Iron Age settlement sites in the form of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures, with over 600 such sites listed on the regional Sites and Monuments Record, dominating our knowledge of this period. This compares with 82 hillforts and defended settlements and over 400 open settlements in northwest Wales, 345 hillforts and 234 defended enclosures in northeast Wales, 126 hillforts and defended enclosures and 15 settlements in south Wales.

Several Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures – Caer Cadwgan, Castell Henllys, Coygan Camp, Llawhaden group of small defended enclosures, Penycoed, Porth-y-Rhaw and Walesland Rath – have been the subject of modern, large-scale excavations supported by environmental analyses and radiocarbon dating.

Over 20 other Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures have been partially excavated.

Good publication record of completed major excavations. The Castell Henllys report process is underway.

New discoveries of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures are being made every year through aerial photography. Toby Driver's work in north Ceredigion has increased the number of defended enclosures from c. 40 to over 90. Most show as parch-marks in pasture. A drawback is that the parching is confined to a seven-kilometre strip along the coast.

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Existing knowledge: weaknesses

No Iron Age unenclosed settlements are known, and no middle and late Bronze Age settlements of any form have been identified.

There are gaps in our knowledge of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures, with the main focus of study across south - mid Pembrokeshire and south Carmarthenshire. Eastern Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion are poorly understood.

Particular types of Iron Age hillfort/defended enclosure – enclosures with widely spaced ramparts, small rectangular enclosures, and larger hillforts have received little attention. The excavation emphasis has been on small hillforts and ‘circular’ defended enclosures.

There has been little attempt to excavate outside the main defended areas of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures, in annexes and outer enclosures. The exception to this is Castell Henllys.

Artefacts are not common on Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosure excavations.

Scientific dating methods have not always been used most efficiently on excavations.

Research opportunities

It is important that the research momentum achieved over the past 30 years on Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures is not lost.

Information from Iron Age hillfort/defended enclosure excavations in southwest Wales rivals that from any area of Britain. This enables, amongst others, the formulation of different social and economic models to challenge that based on data from Wessex and southeast Britain, tackle questions such as the defence versus status role of hillfort ramparts, examine the control of people, goods and services within and outside the ramparts.

The whole problem of Iron Age hillfort/defended enclosure chronology requires further research. This should be targeted at hillfort and enclosure forms that are currently poorly known:

The chronology and function of larger hillforts needs to be addressed

The chronology and function of small rectilinear (often now cropmark) enclosures is not understood. Are they Iron Age or do they originate in the Romano-British period, or in a different period entirely?

The function of defended enclosures with widely spaced ramparts and annexes requires investigation.

Coastal promontory forts have received some archaeological attention in recent years, but this class of monument is still little understood. Further investigation is required.

The theme of change and continuity of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures from foundation to abandonment would be a rewarding research project.

Currently, a settlement hierarchy with hillforts at the top and open settlements and huts at the bottom is assumed:

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

Prospecting for settlement sites outside Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures would enable a strategy for the detection this lowest tier of settlement (assuming it exists).

In addition, this might lead to the discovery of settlements of mid and later Bronze Age to early Iron Age date.

Examination of open settlements, hut groups and single huts listed 'prehistoric' on the Sites and Monuments Record is required to establish their date.

Techniques used would include aerial photography, geophysical survey, topographic survey, test pitting and GIS and predictive surveys.

The Castell Henllys project and others have demonstrated the need to work on a large scale to achieve satisfactory answers to research questions. Large-scale excavations in both exteriors and interiors and on defences are vital if we are to advance our knowledge of the period. Certain research questions can only be answered using these techniques.

Resources should be sought to publish unpublished sites, such as Dale Promontory Fort and Strawberry Hill.

The good practice of collecting environmental data including plant macrofossils, charcoal and pollen must continue and develop on Iron Age hillfort/defended enclosure excavations and other settlement excavations.

Detection of Iron Age defended enclosures through aerial photography should continue. Most sites are visible as parch-marks in permanent pasture, which is problem for those areas where parching does not regularly occur. In a dry summer resources should be made available to fly those areas in which parching is not an annual event.

Use of multiple radiocarbon dates, including AMS must become the norm on all settlement excavations.

LAND-USE AND ENCLOSURE

Existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses

Apart from at Stackpole Warren, Garn Fawr and Pembrey Mountain no enclosure patterns/field systems have been identified, although some systems are considered to belong to this period – Skomer Island, St David's Head and Mynydd Llangyndeyrn.

Land-use in this period has not been studied

Research opportunities

Investigation of known prehistoric field systems, including excavation backed up by radiocarbon dating and palaeoenvironmental analyses, would improve our chronological understanding of these landscapes.

Prospecting for field systems, including aerial photography, regressive map studies and field work would assist in placing settlements in their wider landscape setting.

Archaeological curators should be aware of potential useful information regarding the prehistoric landscape that may be gained from the investigation of field

Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

boundaries in linear engineering works - road schemes and pipelines – and be prepared to write briefs including the provision for radiocarbon dating and palaeoenvironmental analyses.

Our knowledge of past land-use would be enhanced by the greater use of off-site palaeoenvironmental analyses, particular pollen studies.

RELIGIOUS AND NON-SETTLEMENT SITES

Existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses

Iron Age burials are rare, with just a handful of sites known – Plas Gogerddan, Castell Buckett, Stackpole Warren, Drim Camp and Castell Henllys - and no burial tradition identified.

Later Bronze Age burials are even more rare than those of the Iron Age. Metalwork finds, often antiquarian, may have accompanied burials, but this is uncertain.

No temples or similar sites are known.

Radiocarbon dates from Early Bronze Age ritual and funerary sites indicate continuing use/reuse and possibly even foundation in the middle Bronze Age.

Research opportunities

Unaccompanied cremations and deposits such as charcoal-filled pits from Early Bronze Age ritual and funerary monuments should be routinely radiocarbon dated for evidence of later Bronze Age and Iron Age use/reuse.

The archaeological investigation of the findspots of newly discovered middle and later Bronze Age metalwork may result in locating burial evidence and/or evidence of ritual activity.

It is not possible to suggest a strategy to located later Bronze Age and Iron Age burial sites and other non-funerary sites. However, archaeological follow up on significant artefactual discoveries, consistent radiocarbon dating of burials and a willingness to study unexpected finds on sites considered to be of earlier or later date would help to maximise the evidence available.

USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses

No studies comparable to the exploitation and use of iron ore in north Wales have been undertaken in southwest Wales.

The use and exploitation of other resources has not been studied for this period, although radiocarbon dates from metal mines in Ceredigion (in particular Cwmystwyth) suggests that mining continued from the Early Bronze Age into the middle Bronze Age

Research opportunities

Strategies for the investigation of the use of natural resources need to be formulated. Investigating the use of stone (querns in particular) and salt might be useful avenues of research.

ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses

The use of environmental analyses – plant macrofossils, pollen and bone studies – on Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosure excavations has advanced our knowledge of the economy of these sites.

However, the wider humanly created landscape and environmental change is poorly understood.

Research opportunities

The level of use of environmental archaeology on settlement site excavations should be maintained.

Off-site pollen analysis needs to be more common in order to place settlements other sites in their environmental background.

Excavation of a settlement on calcareous soils should be encouraged in order to recover bone and other types of environmental evidence not found on acid soils.

ARTEFACTS

Existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses

The lack of artefacts on most settlement excavations is a hindrance to chronological and interpretive studies. Southwest Wales is virtually aceramic and finds of other materials are rare. However significant finds are occasionally made. Coygan Camp excavations revealed a reasonable artefact assemblage, and work at Castell Henllys hints that presence or absence of some types of artefacts may be due soil preservation conditions, rather than a real absence in prehistory. Human and animal bone only survives under exceptional circumstances or on the calcareous soils of south Pembrokeshire and parts of Carmarthenshire.

Eleven mid and later Bronze Age metalwork hoards containing over 100 items are known from southwest Wales. These can be augmented by a similar number of chance finds.

The Portable Antiquities Recording Scheme for Wales is increasing known discoveries year by year.

Research opportunities

Material cultural studies have been neglected in recent decades. This should be rectified:

The study of Romano-British material culture can tell us much about earlier societies. A research project on this theme would be very rewarding.

The findspots of new discoveries of hoards and important single metal objects should be archaeologically investigated as a matter of course. This may lead to the discovery of burial sites, but more data on the context of these objects would advance our knowledge of the period.

Consideration should be given to the excavation of settlement sites on soils that are conducive to the preservation of artefacts.

Sieving and other intensive recovery techniques should be used more frequently as a strategy to increase the number of artefacts from excavations.

Watching briefs on river dredging and work on other 'watery' sites should be undertaken as matter of course.

PROCESSES OF CHANGE

Existing knowledge strengths and weaknesses

The origins of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures, their use and decline is beginning to be understood, but the general regional background against which these events were played out is poorly perceived, and the evidence has rarely been worked into wider syntheses and current interpretations.

Southwest Wales's location on the periphery of the Roman World places it in a good position to study the interaction of Roman and Iron Age cultures and the processes of change that accompanied it.

Research opportunities

The large number of settlement sites and the accumulation of excavation data place southwest Wales in a good position to study social, economic and political change. This study should be encouraged.

The interaction of the Roman World and Iron Age cultures should be targeted as a field of study.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

- Continue the investigation of hillforts/defended enclosures, with an emphasis on those types of site that have received little attention.
- All excavation must be accompanied by environmental and dating programmes.
- Develop strategies for discovering and investigating later Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements other than hillforts/defended enclosures
- Promote the study of material culture.

METHODS OF IMPLEMENTING THE RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The implementation of the Research Opportunities should not be restricted by the financial and planning constraints within developer funding.

It is important that curatorial officers and others involved in producing design briefs are familiar with the research opportunities presented by developer-funded archaeology. However, over the past 15 years only a few small excavations in southwest Wales on Iron Age sites have been undertaken through developer funding.

It is vital for us to investigate new and different sources of funding if we are to study and advance our knowledge of the subject.

Paper prepared by Ken Murphy (Cambria Archaeology)