

Iron-age hillfort reveals its secrets

August 31 2012



Excavations underway at Ham Hill.

(Phys.org)—Excavations at Britain's largest prehistoric hillfort have given archaeologists from Cardiff and Cambridge universities a glimpse of what life was like inside the fort more than 2000 years ago.

Niall Sharples of Cardiff's School of History, Archaeology and Religion and Chris Evans of Cambridge's Archaeological Unit are jointly leading a team excavating Ham Hill in Somerset.

Stretching across more than 80 hectares, Ham Hill is one of Britain's nationally significant sites, yet little is known about its meaning or purpose. In a three-year project, Cardiff and Cambridge [archaeologists](#) are undertaking the most intensive [excavation](#) of the site to date, aiming to transform our understanding of the fort.

The 2012 excavations targeted the ramparts that surround and define the hillfort - one on the southern side, and two on the northern edge.

Speaking about the investigation of the ramparts, Niall Sharples of Cardiff University said: "Our excavations have revealed particularly well preserved occupation deposits in the area immediately behind the ramparts. In the south an [Iron Age](#) house was built in the back of the rampart. Unlike the houses in the interior of the fort, this house has a stone wall built from slabs of the local Ham stone and a well preserved floor deposit which includes what appears to be the remains of a burnt timber partition. None of the houses previously excavated have shown any evidence for stone walls and it was thought that Ham stone was not used as a resource until the Romans arrived in the area. We think that we may have found the first Ham Stone house in Britain.



A second season of excavations at Britain's biggest Iron Age hill-fort has

uncovered remains of Roman weaponry, and the site of the first “ham stone” house.

"In the north, dumps of rubbish were found deposited against the rampart containing large quantities of broken pots and [animal bones](#) and lying on top of the rampart was an iron ballista bolt. These indicate a Roman military occupation of the hillfort in the period after the conquest."

Work on an area adjacent to the ramparts revealed a large rectangular enclosure surrounded by evidence of Iron Age activity including roundhouses and grain storage pits. The team have dated this activity to the second to first centuries BC, the period when the hillfort was densely occupied.

Investigations of this enclosure revealed some unexpected discoveries. "We found very little evidence for settlement activity the interior of the enclosure," said Chris Evans of Cambridge University. "Another unusual feature is the deliberate destruction of this boundary; the bank around the enclosure was systematically demolished and an elaborate stone facade that marked the entrance was deliberately dismantled and placed in the ditch. Both the absence of settlement evidence and the deliberate dismantling suggest the enclosure was a special place within the interior, perhaps used for meetings and communal activities which had to be separated from day to day domestic activities."

The team also found a series of field boundaries underlying the hillfort's enclosure which date back to the Bronze Age occupation of the area.

"It is clear from a recent geophysical survey carried out by English Heritage on the site that the whole of the hilltop was systematically

divided into fields in the middle of the second millennium BC," added Chris. "The construction of the hillfort must therefore represent the abandonment of a considerable area of farmland and represents a major transformation of the landscape."

The third and final season of excavations at Ham Hill will take place in 2013. The 2012 excavations are still underway and the archaeologists hope to make more exciting discoveries in the remaining weeks. A public open day is planned for Saturday 1st September 2012 when visitors can find out more about the excavation and see some of the artefacts from the dig.

Provided by Cardiff University

Citation: Iron-age hillfort reveals its secrets (2012, August 31) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-iron-age-hillfort-reveals-secrets.html>

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