

Hillforts: Britain, Ireland and the Nearer Continent

Papers from the *Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland Conference, June 2017*

edited by

Gary Lock and Ian Ralston



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Many of the maps in Chapters 2-4 are the work of Dr Paula Levick, who worked as the IT and GIS specialist on the Atlas project.

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Preface

Hillforts are one of the most immediately apparent archaeological features in the British and Irish landscape. They have always had a significant place in the popular imagination, both in folktales and in the works of many authors, of whom Thomas Hardy is only the most immediate example. According to the OED, the expression ‘hill(-)fort’ itself only goes back to the earlier 19th century, but we know that these structures, from the most magnificent to relatively humble enclosures, have always been recognised as major features in the landscape by those who have encountered them there, as is demonstrated by the very high proportion of known hillforts for which names of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon or Norse origin survive.

In view of their prominence in the landscape, it is hardly surprising that hillforts have always played a large part in the imaginative recreation of the past, and that they formed one of the primary points of attention of the first generations of antiquarian scholars in Britain, amongst whom hillforts, together with the great stone circles, generated most interest and study. Thereafter, the work of the Ordnance Survey provided a major impetus to identification and recording, and at this point the eternal preoccupation with description and classification of this really quite heterogeneous group of monuments began. More recently, excavations have significantly widened the date range of sites we call by this name, as well as demonstrating the complex construction histories and chronology that they offer. Fashions swing, too, between the most fundamental ‘explanations’ of these sites – whether they are for defence or display – while it is only in the last few decades that they have regularly been studied in their wider landscape and archaeological context.

It is true to say that hillforts have varied in their vogue among archaeologists over the last century or so. The foundation of the Hillfort Study Group (HFSG), initiated in the 1960s, reflects one peak of interest in and study of these splendid monuments, and in itself provided a major impetus to work on the subject. One of the objectives of the HFSG was to visit and catalogue all British sites known as hillforts. The visits did, and continue to, take place, but little formal cataloguing was carried out save for the exceptional work of A.H.A. Hogg. The genesis of *The Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland*, initiated 40 years after Hogg’s publication by two long-standing members of the HFSG, perhaps reflects another impetus to the study of hillforts.

The hold that hillforts extend over both the archaeological and popular imagination never really goes away. To some extent there is a very sad reason for this, as they now represent a higher proportion of all the immediately visible and explorable archaeological sites of the British Isles than they did say two hundred years ago. The loss of so many sites, field systems, barrows, lowland earthwork enclosures and the like since the inception of mechanised ploughing and enclosure of common land has meant that these great enclosures have survived in disproportionately greater numbers as visible upstanding entities than many other classes of monument. They now constitute one of the clearest focuses for the public appreciation of archaeology as well as being the most important surviving reservoirs of archaeological data that we have.

For this among many other reasons, the continuing study of hillforts and related enclosures has much to contribute to the health of the archaeological discipline in these islands. Mercifully, the days when only the perimeter earthworks of a hillfort were the subject of statutory protection are now past. In the last twenty years, the widespread capacity for extensive geophysical survey of hillfort interiors has demonstrated that despite much cultivation important archaeological deposits still survive within the defended circuit, while excavations such as those at Danebury and Rathgall reinforce this point. Excavations of the defences themselves consistently show a previously unrecognised complexity to the chronology and construction history of hillforts. Survey and reconnaissance, including geophysical surveys and the interpretation of LiDAR data, in the hinterlands of hillforts demonstrate that they did not exist in isolation but were components of wider patterns of settlement and occupation. The present *Atlas* project, with which many Hillfort Study Group members have been involved, will serve as a stimulus to the greater study of our most impressive field monuments, whose ability to capture the public imagination has been demonstrated yet again by the volunteer engagement in this project. The papers in this volume present the detail we can now bring to that study in Britain, Ireland and further afield.

Perhaps the last word should be with one of the Hillfort Study Group’s illustrious founders, the late A.H.A. Hogg:

'No archaeologist is satisfied with the term 'hill-fort', but all the alternatives which have been suggested are open to even more objections...' (Hogg 1975: xv).

Eileen Wilkes
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February 2019

Reference

Hogg, A.H.A. 1975. *A Guide to the Hill-Forts of Britain*. London: Hart-Davies, MacGibbon Ltd.