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A hill-fort revealed: recent work at Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire

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The defences

The period from 1991 to 1993 saw the final stages in the Crickley Hill excavations followed by the inception of the post-excavation programme. At the start of the excavations in 1969 all our attention had been confined to the entrance and the adjacent rampart, a situation which had continued until work began in earnest in the hillfort interior during the 1972 season. After several subsequent campaigns to investigate specific problems in the ramparts, only one area remained obscure, the nature of the banks to the north of the Iron Age entrance; and so in 1991 the team devoted some of its efforts to examine the comparatively low defences on this side of the fort. After the large scale of some of the rampart cuttings of previous years, the chosen cutting was small, little more than 60 sq m, but the results were of considerable interest. We found that the low banks displayed the same two-phase construction uncovered elsewhere on the site, corresponding to the two major phases of rectangular and round houses within the interior, but that the earlier of the defences had actually for a space of time ended with a vertical joint within the area of the cutting. This had eventually led to a preservation of this temporary terminal in subsequent phases, producing a marked step in the modern topsoil, which had led us to this spot to begin our investigations. It seems that during the building of the first rampart the defences had been brought to a halt on the corner above the steep northern slope of the hill, and remained in this state while the builders' trample formed around the terminal. Only in the final stages of this construction work was the hillfort defence carried further around the hill.

This work left us unsure as to the nature of the defences above the steep slopes, and so during the 1992 season we continued excavations further to the west, where the Iron Age bank as a surface feature disappeared into the edge of post-medieval quarries. Here the results were quite different. Though two phases of rampart were again traceable, neither was constructed in the substantial timber and stone fashion which we had come to expect: instead, both were no more than substantial drystone walls, similar to those around gardens in the Cotswolds. It follows, then, that our investigations had in a fairly economical fashion allowed the reconstruction of the defences on this side of the hill, showing a steady diminution in both height and thickness as the rampart ran around the hill away from the entrance. We had in addition shown that the sloping flank of the hill behind these northern defences was not occupied at any point in the life of the hillfort. Not only were no portholes or other structural features found in this area, but the quarry pits which lay behind the final rampart were almost devoid of finds. A subsequent study, published in volume 1 of the final report (Dixon 1994), shows that the limit of rubbish disposal from the nearest houses was seldom more than 30 metres, and the absence of domestic debris from the quarry pits of the northern sector is clear evidence that the slope of the hill within these defences was left bare.

The Long Mound

The majority of the effort during the excavation seasons of 1991-3 was devoted to the excavation of the Long Mound, an intriguing element of the site which a local authority report on the nature and management of the surrounding country park was to dismiss as a rabbit warren of modern origin. This was an unfortunate conclusion, since in reality the monument has proved to have a long and complex history, from its beginning as a Neolithic shrine, set at the end of a lengthy

narrow trackway, through its rebuilding as a flat-topped cairn whose surface was scored by narrow grooves, to its final rebuilding as a 100-m long mound of earth, whose sides were marked by horizontal slabs, and whose western end was used to perform rituals within a tiny stone circle. The unravelling of these phases has occupied teams of diggers each year since 1977. During the last three years of this work, in the period up to 1993, our excavations concentrated on the zone to the west of the centre of the mound, where we found a series of fascinating problems. The trackway of the Neolithic approach from the east, at the very bottom of the sequence, was here flanked by a line of heavily burnt cooking pits, surrounded by several thousands fragments of animal bone, all set within a small enclosure. In view of the regular use of hearths within the houses of this period, all of which seemed quite sufficiently well served with cooking areas, it seems that these pits were intended for something other than mere everyday food preparation for the occupants of the houses, and we suspect that their purpose was linked to the nearby shrine, perhaps as an area for feasting. To the west of these cooking hollows and nearer to the shrine area, a series of large pits had been cut into the bedrock. These contained large pieces of bone, pottery or flint, placed regularly in the centre of the infilling, and seemed more likely to be pits for ritual deposits than for rubbish. We had some experience of the nature of middens, since in 1991 a rubbish pit of this period had been discovered on the northern flank of the settlement: this was completely different in its fill. Towards the western end of this neolithic area a large patch of upstanding bedrock had apparently been left in position, and the trackway bent around it. This stretch of rock was flanked by pits. During the first phase of its use this area therefore seems to have consisted of a narrow roadway (flanked by wooden fences) with a series of linked elements on its southern side, including a cooking area, a place of pit deposits, and a small platform of scarped bedrock, the latter lying immediately outside the shrine platform excavated in the mid 1980s.

The neolithic shrine and its associated features fell victim to the destruction which ended the first major occupation of the hill. Subsequently, a mass of slabs and smaller stones was brought to the shrine approaches, and laid down to form a flat platform which sloped gently from the east to its western end immediately within the enclosure of the former shrine. We do not yet know whether the shrine itself was still standing during this period, but at least it would have been visible as a collapsed hump (since parts of the structure survived into the next phases of occupation). The new platform, which became known to the diggers on site as 'the cairn', was piled over the ritual pits and the bedrock hump; its eastern end overlay the earlier trackway and was built around a substantial hearth. Its western end, about 30 metres away, lay next to the burning spot outside the shrine. The purpose of all this is very conjectural, but our examination of the top surface of the 'cairn' showed that it had been exposed, and the upper stones had been worn smooth by traffic. The grooves in this surface, which we had originally seen as the bases for small fences, must therefore have lain open, and were very likely to be the remains of a system of drainage from the top of the cairn. The next phase is clearer: the foundation groove for a circle of stones was cut into the end of the cairn, its centre marked by a very large burning slab which overlay the burning spot of the neolithic shrine. Finally, the earthen mound, which was the most visibly obvious element in the monument, was piled up above all the earlier features: the stone circle, rebuilt, remained in use until its deliberate destruction, perhaps by the builders of the hillfort.

The long development of this Long Mound is therefore clear, but the date of its final phase remains a mystery. At its eastern end at least one of the Iron Age buildings had been built across the final phase of the Mound, implying a date for this episode before the middle of the first millennium BC, and the various stages of the Mound began with the end of the shrine, some two millennia earlier. Some bone belonging to a late stage of the Mound is available for C14 dating, which may provide our first real clue to the precise date of the Mound.

Other work

In the final two seasons of work, during 1992 and 1993, some of the team worked on a large natural shelf on the side of the hill to the north of the shrine and circle. Here geophysical survey had

shown the presence of several strong anomalies, and a fine contour survey revealed a low linear feature, set at about 120 degrees to the axis of the Long Mound, and about 50 m to the north of its northern end. On digging here we were startled to find another earthen mound, marked on its margins by a regular series of slabs, and capped with small cobbling. This appeared to be a version of the Long Mound in its final earthen phase, but what distinguished the Small Mound was that beneath it lay a road-surface crammed with late Iron Age and Romano-British pottery. At present we take this Mound to belong to a period not earlier than the fourth century AD. Whether or not this indicates a recrudescence of mound worship at the end of the Roman period we cannot yet say certainly, but we have noted that occasional deposits of metalwork in pits and small intrusions had been made in the Long Mound throughout the Roman period and into the Middle Ages.

Since the last digging season in 1993 the team has worked during the summers of 1994 and 1995 processing finds, and in particular working on the preparation of the 16000 samples taken during the last 25 years. About 60% of these have now been sifted and analysed for microfauna or chemical composition, giving us a remarkably full picture of the changes to the top of the hill over the past five millennia. The first volume of the final report was published in 1994 (Dixon 1994), and work is very nearly complete on the second and third volumes (on the Iron Age villages and the Long and Short Mounds), which are due to be published in 1996 or 1997.

Reference

Dixon, P. W. 1994 *Crickley Hill Volume 1: the hillfort defences*, with contributions by R. C. Alvey, S. Elsdon, M. Gelling, J. W. Haldane, and J. Sturgess (Crickley and Nottingham)