



There are over 3300 known hillforts in Britain and Ireland, and they represent one of the dominant forms of later prehistoric settlement both here and on the Continent, appearing in the Late Bronze Age and becoming ubiquitous in the Iron Age. Hillforts can be found across large swathes of the country, with notable concentrations in southern England (Wessex), the Welsh marches, and north-eastern England/south-eastern Scotland between the Rivers Tyne and Forth. The term 'hillfort' is something of a misnomer; though many hillforts are located on elevated terrain, others are on lower-lying ground, with little to distinguish them from the more numerous 'enclosed settlements' with which they are often contemporary. Indeed, although general trends can be observed, hillforts come in a variety of shapes and sizes (often constrained by local topography), with diverse internal configurations.

The survival of hillforts in the landscape (their denuded ramparts and ditches often visible today as grassy banks and hollows), made them early targets for investigation, and their history of study reflects broader developments within archaeology. Despite this, relatively few hillforts (in percentage terms) have been excavated. Furthermore, early excavations tended to focus on narrow trenches through rampart and ditch sequences, with little consideration of hillfort interiors. This was due partly to the need for the recovery of material for site chronologies (initially through artefact typologies and later using scientific dating techniques) from the long stratigraphic sequences which these enclosing works provided, particularly in areas where plough truncation had obliterated internal features. It was, however, also driven by the assumption that hillforts were first and foremost defensive structures for the protection of communities in times of war (either against neighbours or invaders), and were therefore not permanently occupied. Certainly, the scale and complexity of some of the enclosing works, such as those at Maiden Castle in Dorset, and the caches of slingstones at its entrances, together with numerous human skeletons in the ditches

at Fin Cop in Derbyshire, suggests that hillforts were indeed witness to interpersonal violence. It has however become apparent that hillforts also played more complex and varied roles than this.

One of the best-known hillforts in Britain is Danebury in Hampshire, not because it is the biggest or the most impressive, but because it has seen some of the most complete excavation and has contributed much to our understanding of Iron Age societies. Excavated by Professor Barry Cunliffe between 1969 and 1988, investigation focused not only on the enclosing works, but on the hillfort interior too. Like many hillforts in this region, Danebury began life as a 'simple' hillfort, with one bank and ditch (univallate) and opposing east and west entrances; these 'simple' hillforts develop from around 600BC, but the construction of Danebury can be dated to around 470 BC. Then, from 300 BC, hillforts decrease in number, with those that survive becoming 'developed', with multiple ditches and ramparts (multivallate). During this process, one of the opposing entrances (often the west) may be blocked, and the remaining entrance heavily elaborated, as at Danebury.

Though geophysical survey suggests that some hillforts do indeed appear 'empty' (with more recent interpretations favouring a role as communal meeting places rather than as places of refuge), excavations at Danebury revealed a mass of features. After excavation of 57% of the interior, the team had recorded around 2000 grain storage pits (with an estimate of 5000 in total), 70 roundhouses (see Factsheet No. 26) and 158,000 sherds of pottery, together with evidence for cereal processing, weaving, leatherworking, and metalworking. Stone weights and ingots also suggested trade, possibly including the redistribution of large volumes of grain stored in the pits, whilst four rectangular structures in the centre of the settlement (and interpreted as shrines) also suggest that Danebury may have served as a focus for religious practices. The evidence from Danebury thus transformed the view of hillforts from last-stand refuges to central places within the

landscape, housing specialist craft workers and the social elite, who were supported by the agricultural surpluses provided by the satellite settlements within their hinterland. This hierarchical view of Iron Age society drew heavily on classical sources documenting contemporary communities on the continent, and the back-projection of the 'Celtic' folklore of early medieval Ireland and Wales.

More recently, and following broader trends in archaeological thought, interpretations have moved away from considerations of only the defensive and economic role of hillforts, as 'central places' in a hierarchical model of society, towards the more symbolic and communal roles they may have played. Instrumental in this was JD Hill's examination of Danebury and other settlements in the region. Hill used the quantity of different types of artefacts from these various sites (calibrated for the differential amounts of excavation which had taken place at each) to address each of the supposed 'central functions' of hillforts. Hill's analysis of loomweights, quernstones and high status metalwork found, for example, that non-hillfort sites such as Winnall Down produced considerably greater quantities than hillfort sites such as Danebury. Indeed, Gussage All Saints in Dorset yielded 8000 mould fragments for at least 50 sets of bronze horse gear, suggesting manufacture of prestige goods on a far larger scale than at Danebury.

Turning to the supposed military function of hillforts, it was recognised that the elaboration of some enclosing works, such as those at Maiden Castle, were far in excess of what would be practically required for defensive purposes. This, together with the fact that many hillforts, including Maiden Castle and Hambledon Hill, are sited over earlier ritual monuments such as Neolithic long barrows, suggested that at least part of their function may have been symbolic. Drawing on interpretations of henge monuments, it was suggested that the earthworks surrounding hillforts may have been designed as much to keep things (including intangible things, such as the spirits of ancestors) in, rather than to keep people out. Certainly, it is in boundary places (ditches and entrances) that we most frequently find special and deliberately placed deposits, perhaps serving to placate the gods and to protect the space within. One of best demonstrations against a solely defensive function for hillforts is provided by Chesters Drem in East Lothian – a site with a relatively small interior but surrounded by at least three circuits of enclosing works, and yet

located at the bottom of a steep slope, within easy range of offensive missiles.

At Danebury itself, the deposition of human remains (both complete skeletons and disarticulated parts of bodies) in disused grain storage pits suggests complex and protracted funerary rites. Though trauma on some bones suggests a violent death, others point to the post-mortem processing of bodies. This evidence has led to suggestions that at least some of the four-post structures found in hillfort interiors (and traditionally interpreted as above-ground granaries) may actually represent excarnation platforms for laying out of the dead. If hillforts did indeed contain communal ancestors, then a symbolic function for their elaborate enclosing works gains further credence.

No doubt hillforts were important communal monuments in later prehistoric Britain, and their construction and maintenance is likely to have required large numbers of people over many generations. It is perhaps in this cohesive function, binding communities together and serving as monuments to shared identity, that their real power lay.

Further Reading

Armit, I. and McKenzie, J. 2013. *An Inherited Place: Broxmouth and the South-east Scottish Iron Age*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

Atlas of hillforts project database. <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/> (accessed 02/11/2017)

Cunliffe, B. 2011. *Danebury Hillfort (3rd edition)*. Stroud: The History Press

Hill, J. D. 1995. How should we understand Iron Age societies and hillforts? A contextual study from southern Britain. 45–66. In J.D. Hill and C. Cumberpatch (eds), *Different Iron Ages: Studies on the Iron Age in Temperate Europe* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 602). Oxford: Archaeopress



Single bank and ditch with inturned entrance (Burrough on the Hill, Leicestershire)



Multiple ramparts (Barbury Castle, Wiltshire)

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Lindsey Büster (University of Bradford)

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