EXCAVATIONS AT DAW'S CASTLE,
WATCHET, 1982

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SUMMARY

The earthworks at Daw's Castle have been considered to have been erected during the Iron Age, although a later date has been suggested, (Burrow 1981). Excavation in 1982, however, revealed two phases of defences, both with mortared stone walls and banks. The first phase, much slighter in nature, is possibly the Alfredian foundation of the burh of Watchet recorded in the Burghal Hidage. The second phase, a large stone wall with bank and ditch, may have been commissioned by Edward the Elder or, possibly, Aethelred II.

LOCATION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Daw’s Castle is located at ST 062433 in the parish of St. Decumans, one kilometer to the west of, and overlooking, the port of Watchet. It lies on the top of a cliff composed of blue lias and marl, with bands of limestone and gravel (Wedlake 1973). The site is 78.67m. O.D. at its highest point, with a commanding inland view towards the Quantocks to the east and the Brendon Hills and Exmoor to the south and west. To the north it overlooks the Severn estuary and the islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm. The name Daw’s Castle originates with Thomas Dawe who held the field, then called ‘le castell’ in c 1537 AD; it has also been called Dart’s Castle and Dane’s Castle (Victoria County History 1911).

The site is an univallate enclosure, of approximately two hectares. There is a low bank on the south and west sides and a ditch running NNE-SSW across the interior (Fig 1). In the nineteenth century, when lime kilns were constructed in the north-east corner ‘a quantity of human bones was discovered and others laid bare by the breaking away of a portion of cliff’ (Page 1890). The field to the east of the site is recorded in 1801 as the Old Minster (Somerset Record Office DD/WY 1801).

Watchet itself is situated at the mouth of the River Washford. It is described as a burh in the Burghal Hidage c 914 AD (Hill 1969) and first recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Whitelock 1965) in 914 AD when Scandinavian raiders ‘. . . stole inland by night . . . east of Watchet . . .’, were beaten back, and fled to either Steep Holm or Flat Holm. In 962 AD King Edgar granted a vineyard at Watchet to Abingdon Abbey (Sawyer 1968).

The Chronicle lists further Scandinavian raids in 988 AD when ‘in this year Watchet was ravaged’ and in 996 AD ‘. . . they landed at Watchet and did much damage there, burning and slaying. . .’. A coin mint was established in the burh
c. 980 AD (Blackburn 1974). In the Domesday Survey (Victoria County History 1906) Watchet was recorded as being part of the de Mohun estates. The survey contains no reference to either the town, mint or fort (Aston, Leech 1977). The town would have served as the port and fortified centre for the royal estate at Williton, first recorded in 904 AD (Birch 1885). The Celtic dedication of St Decuman’s and the Welsh derivation of Watchet (gwro coed, under the wood, Ekwall 1960) point to an earlier occupation in the area.

**METHOD AND ARCHIVE**

As a response to possible cultivation, a small excavation was undertaken in January 1982 by the Central Excavation Unit of the Department of the Environment. This was designed to assess the potential of the site with a view to its future management.

Two cuttings were put through the bank to compare the development of the defences at different points of the circuit. Three small areas were opened up in the interior to try to locate evidence of occupation on the cliff-top. All excavation was carried out by hand with the exception of a machine dug extension to Area 1.
Fig. 2 Daw's Castle, sections through the site and interpretation.
The recording method used by the Central Excavation Unit is designed to be applicable to any type of site and to form the basis of a computer compatible archive. A single series of numbers is used and these are assigned to any archaeological entity about which useful information may be recorded. These numbers are used as identifiers and need not be in sequential order.

In accordance with Central Unit practice this report is a detailed summary of information drawn from the excavation record and from research. The complete excavation record is maintained with the finds in Somerset County Museum, Taunton; and is available in microfiche form from the National Monuments Record (23 Savile Row, London W1X 2HE).

THE DEFENCES

Two cuttings were made through the bank. Area 1 was a trench 2.00m wide and 12.50m long, later extended a further 9.30m downslope using a mechanical excavator. Area 3 was L-shaped, 7.00m wide and 10.00m in length, with a 2.00m wide trench through the bank. It was designed to investigate the defences and the relationship between the bank and the north/south ditch (9).

This report is an account of the development of the defences drawn from a combination of the evidence produced by both cuttings. In Figure 2 the final form of the defences has been suggested together with an interpretation of the section drawings.

Phase 1(a)

A shallow ditch was probably dug to mark out the line of the defences. This feature appears to have been removed during the construction of the later wall

Plate I Daw's Castle; the first wall (40).
Plate 2 Daw's Castle, the second *burh* wall (108).

Plate 3 Daw's Castle, mortar-mixing pit (80) with mortar spread (93).
(108). Its presence and position may, however, be inferred from the existence, in Area 5, of a low bank, approximately 0.30m high, (Fig 2, Section 1, layers 102 and 103). Layer 102 was a pale yellow redeposited marl and lay over layer 103, a brown clay loam. Layer 103 was composed of two layers of buried soil. The lower layer was in situ and the upper layer was redeposited during the excavation of the ditch. They could not be clearly differentiated. The upper part of the layer contained a small bone which produced a radio-carbon date of 730 AD ± 40. Layer 42 is equivalent to layer 103 in Area 1 (Fig 2, Section 3).

Phase 1(b)

The footings for a wall (40) were dug into the bank. They were large, rectangular, limestone blocks, set in a grey-brown clay. The wall was made of roughly shaped limestone blocks laid in yellow-brown lime mortar (Plate 1). In Area 1 (Section 3) the wall was 0.85m wide at the base, and survived to a height of 0.60m. In Area 5 (Section 1) it was completely robbed out (95) immediately prior to the construction of the later wall. The apparent continuity between the fills of the robber trench 96, 97, 98, and the robbing of the later wall, 20, is discussed below.

The narrow width of the wall and the insubstantial nature of its foundations suggest that it never stood much above its surviving height. It probably served as a retaining wall for the bank formed by, in Area 5, layers 99, 100 and 101. These were olive-brown clay loams, similar to layer 103, with patches of yellow clay. They were presumably soil layers, scraped up from the interior, and placed against the wall. Layer 99 contained two abraded sherds, one of Brue Valley Ware, which were dated to the mid-fourth century (Burrow, pers. comm) and when submitted for thermoluminescence dating, produced a date of 390 AD ± 320 (Durham University Thermoluminescence Research laboratory TL5 1AS).
Fig. 3 Daw's Castle, plan of Area 5.
In Area 1 the bank was not immediately raised behind the wall. A layer of dark grey clay loam, 41, developed above the old land surface, 42. Then a layer of olive-brown clay, 35, similar to layers 99 and 100, was dumped behind the wall. After this a layer of brown sandy clay loam, 44, accumulated against the back of the wall.

**Phase II**

This phase is represented by the erection of a much more substantial defensive work. It consisted of a large wall (108 in Area 5), 1.44m in width, with a bank built up behind it and an external ditch (128). The ditch was 1.50 m wide with a berm of 10.70m. It was seen, in plan only, in the machine dug extension to Area 1.

The sequence in Area 5 will be described first. The defences were erected in two stages. Phase IIa is represented by the construction of the lower part of the wall (Plate 2). The wall foundation trench was dug through the front of the earlier bank, apparently removing all traces of the presumed first ditch. Most of the foundation material had been brought up from the beach and consisted of large water-worn cobbles, with some lias blocks, set in a loose brown gravelly sand. The wall core (105) was a mixture of cobbles and lias in a pale brown sandy clay with pale brown mortar, and the external face of the wall was made of well trimmed lias blocks. There was no internal facing to the wall at the level to which it survived, and it appeared to represent a revetment rather than a free-standing structure.

The mortar used in the construction of the wall was mixed in a series of small pits, one of which (80, section projected on to the reconstruction) was situated behind the earlier bank (see above). The pit was almost circular, 0.90m by 0.82m and 0.43m deep with a rounded profile (Plate 3). It had a layer of pale brown mortar (93) on its bottom and adhering to the sides. The pit is exactly paralleled by the mortar mixing pits found at Hereford and associated with the Saxon defences, (Shoemsmith 1982) which were between 0.80 and 0.90m in diameter and 0.30 to 0.40m deep. Mortar was spread downslope towards the wall and occurred in patches over the early bank layers behind the Phase 1 wall. During the construction of the latter wall, the first wall (40) was robbed out (95, Section 1, Plate 4) and presumably used in the core. The space left was filled with a mixture of blue and yellow clay (96), mortar (97) and rubble (98). This infilling will be discussed further under the robbing of the later wall (see below).

When the wall was built to a height of approximately 2.00m the lower part of bank was raised behind it (Phase IIb). The materials used in this stage were redeposited natural clays derived from the excavation of the external ditch. First a thick layer of blue clay (92) was deposited over the infilled robber trench (95). Successive layers of reddish brown clay (87, 89, 91) were then laid down. In Section 1 the blue clay is c 0.30m thick and the red clay 0.44m; but in section on the other side of the trench (not illustrated), the blue clay is 0.75m thick and the red only 0.15m. Section 2 shows the relationship between these deposits. The blue clay (92) appears to be piled up on the east side leaving a depression to be filled by the red clay. With such a small area exposed it is difficult to interpret the significance of their relationship. It may do no more than reflect the sequence in which they were removed during the excavation of the ditch, and were subsequently deposited to make the bank. Within the depression, however, was a stone surface (90, Fig 3) which did not extend under the blue clay. This was rectangular in shape (2.70 x 1.30m), and fairly level, made up of cobbles and lias blocks. This may have been simply a dump of stone discarded during the building process, a layer to help consolidate the bank, or a platform for a temporary structure.

A layer of small pebbles (88) was found at a high level within the red clay.
Fig. 4 Dow's Castle, sections in Area 5.
This, with the stone layer 90, is the basis for sub-dividing the red clay into three layers, although there is no difference in their composition. Whatever the reason for these anomalies the layers described above are part of one activity with no appreciable time interval between them. The mortar mixing pit (80) was immediately backfilled with the red clay as soon as the lower part of the wall was complete.

In Area 1 the sequence appears less complex. The material used for raising the bank was again derived from the external ditch and consisted of layers 30, 33, 34 and 39. These were well compacted, brownish-yellow sandy clays mixed with large amounts of small lias fragments. They lay over the top of the first wall (40) which was only partially robbed in this area.

After the initial raising of the bank, work commenced on the upper part of the wall (Phase IIc). In Area 5, a layer of construction debris (84) with lias chips and mortar was found spread on top of the bank. This layer may have been the natural result of the building process, or it could represent a deliberate spread to alleviate the slippery conditions on the surface of the clay bank. A dump of stone (53, not illustrated) was found at the tail of the bank. After the completion of the upper part of the wall the bank was raised to its final height (Phase IID). The material used consisted of layers 82 and 83, yellow-brown clays mixed with clay loam, probably scraped up from the interior. In Area 1 the second raising of the bank is represented by layer 38, a dark brown clay loam. In Figure 2 it can be seen that the top of the bank has been truncated and would have stood at least 1.00m higher. This is the result of modern levelling (see below).

In Area 5, Trimming off the excess mortar on the external face of the wall resulted in the deposition of mortar layer 109. This lay directly above the old land surface (111) which was cut by the foundation (106) for the later wall. Above the mortar, and against the outer wall face, were two layers, 68 and 69. Layer 68 was a soft sandy clay loam and layer 69 was a soft silt. They show that the wall stood for a considerable, although unquantifiable, length of time, before its destruction. In Area 1 layer 29 is a mixture of the old land surface and soil deposited after the erection of the wall.

In Area 5 a surface of lias chips (85) was laid down to form a path along the tail of the completed bank.

Twenty sherds of undiagnostic form were found lying on top of the upper bank layer, 82. "Two sherds were of a local, late Roman coarse ware. The remainder were all of one fabric, containing large amounts of quartzite and sand. They are not like the standard local medieval cooking pots of the twelfth century onwards, so they may be either an unknown medieval fabric or, just possibly, a late Saxon industry, not previously identified." (Burrow, pers. comm.).

Phase III

All activity subsequent to the construction of the defences has been grouped under this phase. In Area 5 (Fig 3, Fig 4, Sections 4, 5) a layer of olive-brown clay (58) accumulated over the lias path (85) at the tail of the bank, and sealed a shallow gully (56, Fig 3, Fig 4, Section 4). This was 0.20m deep and 0.45m wide with a rounded profile and may have been a drain, contemporary with the lias surface. On top of this was a layer of lias and sandstone blocks and fragments (52), sometimes placed in low mounds. These stones may be evidence of field clearance within the interior or alternatively may be derived from the dismantling and robbing of the wall.

The robbing of the wall took place in two distinct phases. The first phase was total in Area 1 (116, Fig 2, Section 3) and the robber trench was backfilled with
Plate 5 Daw's Castle, the robbing of the later burh wall (108) with, on the left, the robbing (95) of the first wall (40).

compact olive-brown clay (117). In Area 5 it was partial and left a stretch of wall upstanding on the west side of the trench, the robber trench being infilled with soft yellow and pale brown mortar. Plate 5 is a photograph of the east side of the trench in Area 5. The ranging rod is in the centre of the second phase robbing trench, 20. As in Area 1 it has been backfilled with a mixture of small flint fragments, pebbles and mortar (66). It is clearly a separate event from the infilling of the robber trench, 95, of the first wall. In the opposite section (Fig 2, Section 1) the two phases of robbing seemed to merge together with no clear distinction between them. This is presumably a localised phenomenon, caused by the similar character of their fills and the natural mixing and disturbance involved in the robbing process. There is no possibility that the robbing of the first wall is later than the construction of the later wall and the raising of its bank.

The bank material had been cut back during the removal of the wall. Layers 26 (Section 3) and 64 (Section 1) are both brown clay loams and represent the slumping of the upper bank layers after the robbing. Whether layer 67 (Section 1), a mixture of rubble and mortar, represents a natural tumbling and decay of the wall, or is the result of its deliberate destruction, is uncertain.

After a brief period of possible agricultural use represented by the stone clearance (above), the land lay fallow with the undisturbed soil layers 37 and 16 building up against the tail of the bank. There follows a period of post-medieval agricultural activity evidenced by the ploughsoils 15 and 36. At some point Pit 74 was cut into the back of the bank (Area 5, Fig 3). It was circular, with a diameter of 1.70m, at least 1.20m deep, with a flat bottom and steep sides. The pit, in turn, was cut by the southern terminal of the north/south ditch (9). The ditch could be traced northwards for 85m. It was 0.70m deep and at least 2.50m wide with a flattish bottom and gently sloping sides. One layer of its filling (55) contained a clay pipe
stem. Stone features 126 and 127 were set in the bottom of the post-medieval ploughsoil (15) to the west of the ditch and may be contemporary with it. Both features were rectangular and consisted of a single course of lias blocks.

The uppermost layer is the topsoil (14, 24) which had been recently cultivated. In 1981 the upper layers of the bank were mechanically removed and pushed downslope. Layers 25 (Fig 2, Section 3) and 60 (Fig 2, Section 1) are redeposited bank material. This levelling has removed the topsoil and most of the extra-mural demolition layer (22, Section 3) in the drawn section of Area 1. These layers were present, however, in the machine-dug extension further downslope.

THE INTERIOR

Three areas, each a 5 metre square, were opened up to sample the interior. Area 2 was placed on the highest part of the cliff just behind the modern dumping. A post-medieval gully (3), 1.24m wide and 0.24m deep with a flat bottom and sloping sides ran NNW/SSE across the corner of the area (Fig 1). This was the only feature recorded in the interior. Area 3 was placed downslope just west of ditch 9. Area 4 was located in the hollow in the lee of the bank. The same layer sequence was observed in Areas 2, 3 and 4, i.e. topsoil and disturbed clay loam, containing a scatter of post-medieval sherds. Area 4, in the lee of the bank, was deeper, and contained an undisturbed layer of olive-brown clay.

DISCUSSION

The Victoria County History (1911), records that, as well as the extant bank, there was a c 30 metre length of bank running along the edge of the cliff, now lost to erosion, and a 1.20 metre high bank to the north east of the lime kilns (Fig 5). This suggests that the seaward side of the cliff-top had been fortified and that the defences probably ran across the road into the Minster field. The perimeter of the defences, when projected across the cliffs and into the Minster field is a minimum of c 700 metres. This is a close correlation with the figure suggested by the Burghal Hidage. The ten versions of the Burghal Hidage c 914 AD consistently assign 513 hides to the burh at Watchet. The accepted formula (1 man per hide and 4 men to every 5.5 yards of wall) gives a distance of 645 metres (705 yards) for the defences. The field name Old Minister and the report of inhumations being found near the lime kilns points to the existence of a minster church in this area of the site.

There is no evidence, apart from some residual sherds, to suggest a Roman date for the site; whilst the pottery, as well as the form of the defences — mortared stone walls, precludes their origin in the Iron Age. This is supported by the radiocarbon date of 730 AD ± 140 (HAR 5279) from layer 103 which was sealed by the defences. The fact that there is no documentary evidence for a castle at Watchet must further narrow the chronological possibilities and there can be little doubt that the site is that of the Saxon burh.

When the details of the defences are considered, the later wall at Daw's Castle was 1.42 metres in width, probably at least 3.50 metres high, with a 7.90 metre wide bank behind it. In front of the wall was a small ditch, 1.52 metres wide, separated from the wall face by a berm 10.70 metres wide. This form of defensive work is directly comparable to other Wessex burhs.

The pre-Conquest defences of Wessex and Mercian burhs first fortified in the late ninth or early tenth century, share similar characteristics, and in many cases were constructed in two or more phases. The first phase, associated with the foundation of these burhs, was a large earthen bank and ditch. The width of the bank varied between 9.15 metres (Cricklade) and 12.20 metres (Lydford), and stood up to 2.75 metres high (Wareham). Traces of turf and timber revetting have
been recorded but the fronts of these banks have generally been cut back during later refurbishments, making their original form uncertain. The ditch is usually located some distance from the front of the bank, with a berm of 6.00 metres at Cricklade and 6.40 metres at Tamworth (Sheridan, 1973).

The second phase is the addition of a mortared stone wall. At Cricklade (Radford 1963) a 1.20 metre wide wall was inserted into the front of the bank, as was the added wall at Lydford (Addyman, 1964, 1965, 1967). At Wallingford (Durham et al, 1973) and Wareham (R.C.H.M. 1959) the wall was positioned on the crest of the earlier bank. At South Cadbury (Alcock, 1972) the wall, again 1.20 metres wide, and bank were of one build. These walls appear to have been added in the late tenth and early eleventh century, perhaps in a response to increasing Scandinavian incursions. A further example of a contemporaneous wall and bank is at Portchester (Cunliffe, 1963, 1966, 1969), where examination outside the walls of the Roman fort revealed a wall, 1.80 metres wide, fronting a bank which would have been some 3.00 metres high. A late Saxon date is suggested by the excavator for this work.

At Hereford, the replacement of a timber revetment with a stone wall occurred in the early tenth century (Shoesmith, 1982). The wall was almost 2.00
metres wide and fronted a bank 10.00 metres wide with a berm of 5.00 metres. As noted above the mortar mixing pits associated with the construction of the walls at Hereford and Daw’s Castle have the same dimensions, although this, of course, does not imply contemporaneity.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in reference to the Danish raids in the south west, records that in 914 AD ‘the king had arranged that men were stationed against them on the south side of the Severn estuary’. The raiders did land, on two separate occasions, either side of Watchet, but were beaten off. There seems to be a general agreement (Radford, 1978) that the wall at Hereford was built in 914 AD as a response to, or in anticipation of, the Danish raids of that year and it would not be surprising if the erection of the large wall and heightened bank at Daw’s Castle was part of the general strengthening of the defences in the Severn estuary and the Welsh border.

The coin mint associated with Watchet, presumably sited within the burh, commences c 980 AD and coins of Aethelred II predominate in the series. There remains the possibility that the major defensive work (Phase II) may, as in other Wessex burhs, have been commissioned by Aethelred II (978–1016 AD) and could be associated with the Scandinavian raids recorded in 988 and 996 AD.

The earlier wall at Daw’s Castle was 0.85 metres wide at its base and 0.60 metres high with a bank behind it c 7.00 metres wide. This is not the usual form of early defence for the Wessex burhs but a similar example has been found at Lydford (Saunders, 1980), where a slight dry stone revetment wall, c 0.45 metres wide, was found at the front of the Period I bank which was c 11 metres wide. This bank was associated with the foundation of the burh.

It is probable, therefore, that the early defences at Daw’s Castle also represent the foundation of the burh. As Watchet is mentioned in the Burghal Hidage c 914 AD this is likely to have occurred either in the reign of Alfred (871–899), or of his son Edward the Elder (899–925).

No coins appear to have been struck by the Watchet mint during the period 1056 to 1080 AD (Blackburn 1974). It may be, given the absence of any reference to a fortification at Watchet in Domesday, that the site had been abandoned after the Conquest. The break in the coin series is unique amongst the Wessex mints, and might reflect the movement of the mint from the abandoned burh to the present town; bringing to a close the inter-dependence of port and hill-top refuge.

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Postscript

This monument is now owned by the Department of the Environment and is in the care of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission.

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REFERENCES


