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EXCAVATIONS AT HAM HILL, STOKE SUB HAMDON, 2013

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The third and final season of excavations at Ham Hill by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit and Cardiff University was carried out over July-September 2013 (Brittain *et al.* 2014; previous years' findings are summarised in SANH 156, 160-63). This saw the completion of a 1.28ha open area within the hillfort's south-west interior in advance of quarry extension (Figure 1), along with the opening of two trenches across the hillfort's inner rampart, one being an extension of Trench 2 first opened on the hill's north 'spur' in 2012, and the other (Trench 4) newly positioned along the hill's south-west aspect.

Early prehistory

The earliest features comprised two clusters of Neolithic pits, one containing early, plain ware pottery with later Peterborough ware pottery in the other. This helps to provide some context for previous seasons' considerable surface collection of finds from this period. The project's overall worked flint assemblage tallies to 3600, one half of which has derived from the rampart trenches, either from within deposits dumped in the rampart construction or from land surfaces and features sealed by the ramparts. Of note here is a polished flint axe from the Iron Age rampart in Trench 2 and a segmented ditch that pre-dates the rampart in Trench 4. This, with similar features in Trenches 1 and 3, may represent a sizeable Neolithic complex. The hill's next major phase of activity is an Early to Middle Bronze Age landscape of ditched enclosures that has now been revealed in the open area as comprising at least nine enclosed rectilinear plots with a minimum of four access points. Nearly half of the enclosing ditches have been hand dug with over 25% sieved and sampled. The results from this intensity of investigation are being processed, but it seems probable that contemporary settlement and related activity zones were situated outside of the investigation area.

Iron Age

Only minimal traces of Early Iron Age activity were present in the open area, however the establishment of a rampart along the hilltop's circuit in the Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age was confirmed in Trench 4. Here, along the south-west of the hilltop, the rampart has been subject to hillslope erosion, quarrying and partial levelling, but these early constructional phases could be seen to conform to those observed at the north of the hillfort: a simple rubble dump against a stone revetment.

Trench 2 revealed a complex multi-phase stone, earth and timber construction, estimated to have been *c.*4m high, with loam deposits behind the rampart showing soil formation and occupation horizons from the early Iron Age to the Roman period. Four main phases of construction were identified but owing to the complexity and density of deposits the earliest rampart construction phase could not be investigated. The second phase was a simple revetted rubble dump with an entrance defined by a stone-lined revetment that was subsequently infilled with rubble and soil as part of the third phase construction. This massive enlargement of the rampart with multiple layers of material was supported by stone revetments erected gradually rather than to any obvious plan. Considerable amounts of occupation debris was found associated with this phase to the rear of the rampart. A thick soil accumulation separated the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth construction phases, indicating a considerable period of time had elapsed between the two events. The fourth phase rampart, broadly dated to the Late

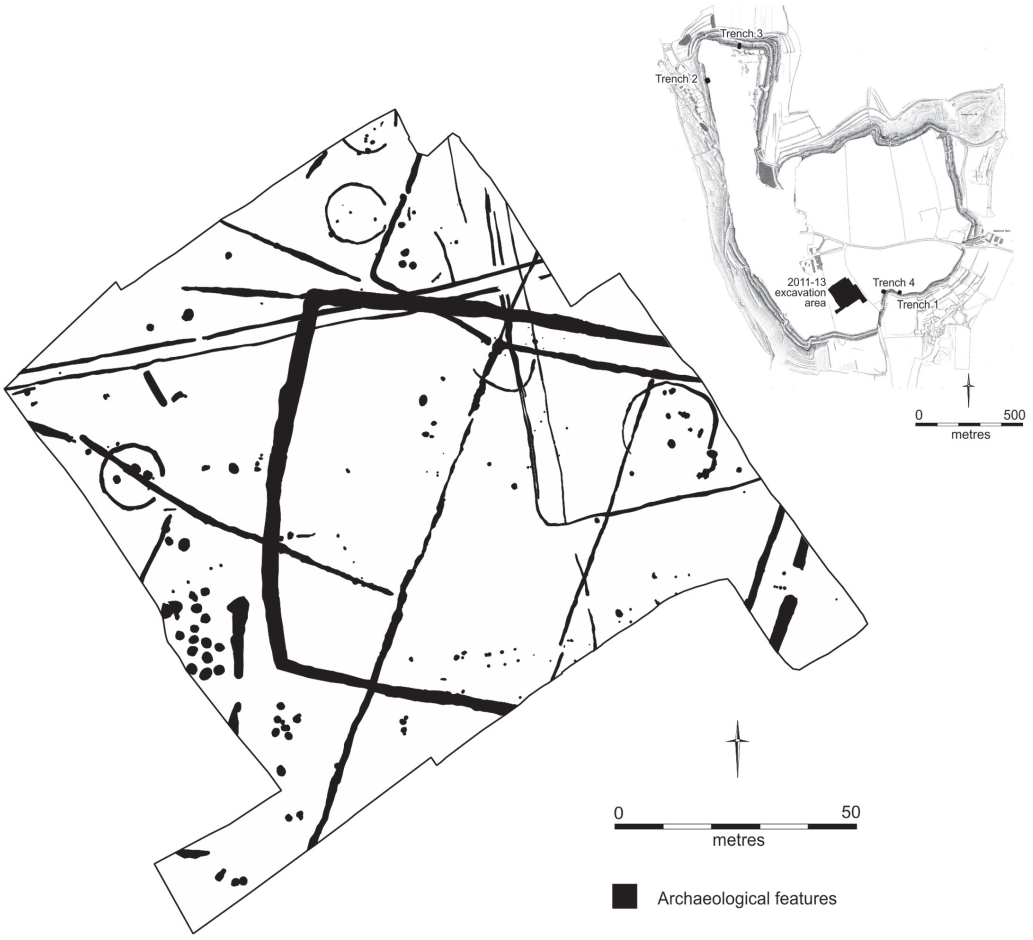

Fig. 1 Ham Hill 2011-13: location of trenches and plan of the features recorded in the open area excavation

Iron Age, was composed of stone-revetted boxes infilled with rubble and soil, with the reinstatement of a narrow western entrance flanked by a guard chamber. Overall, this presents an unusual and complex sequence in which a previously unknown western entrance into the hillfort was blocked and subsequently reopened.

The last two enlargements of the rampart broadly coincide with the core of activity recorded in the open area investigations. In 2013 two ring or eaves-drip gullies were uncovered, in addition to three previously reported. The entrance to these two gullies was oriented to the east or south-east, and although neither contained internal features, one (which also appeared to have been recut) held two postholes positioned within the entrance termini, along with what appeared to be a screen gully positioned about 5m from the entrance. This gully was located in proximity to a cluster of six pits. The cluster is one of six overall that have been identified, but it contrasts with the other five because of its comparatively sparse finds assemblage and the presence of crouched adult inhumations in two of the pits. Pits individually sited towards the north edge of the excavation area were comparatively abundant and diverse in their finds composition, and included formal deposits of metalwork, Glastonbury Ware and triangular clay weights. There are indications that this settlement activity was partitioned by at least three shallow ditches containing Mid to Late

Iron Age pottery; one of these was cut by the ditch of the large rectangular enclosure that has been the core focus of the project's open area investigations.

In 2013 the enclosure's northern corner was fully investigated. Here, as observed in previous seasons' excavations, four main infills were identified. First was a thin layer of basal silt accumulation. This was followed by the ditch's partial infilling, possibly resulting from the deliberate levelling of the inner bank; this, perhaps extended, 'event' included the deposition of human and animal remains, along with Glastonbury Ware pottery. The character of these deposits was significant. Many of the skeletal elements were in a state of partial articulation, which suggests that they were in a fleshed state at deposition. There was a clear focus of deposition at the north corner of the enclosure, although multiple deposits have been recorded at various points along the enclosure's ditch. Counting only human crania and mandibles, and combining previous seasons' findings, at least fourteen individuals are represented; it is possible that owing to the differential preservation of bone along the ditch that only a fraction of the actual total number of human and animal elements deposited in the ditch have survived. The enclosure's empty interior and the foci of deposition along its perimeter highlight its special status. The combination of deposits of partially articulated human and animal bodies with disarticulated elements within mixed rubble and sand backfill from the inner bank suggests that the bodies were deposited into the ditch only following a period of exposure *upon* the bank.

There is clearly a narrative emerging from the project's investigations of the main enclosure that is comparable to other Late Iron Age ceremonial complexes, particularly those invariably classed as sanctuaries. At Ham Hill the enclosure's use may in fact have been short lived, and geophysical survey of the hillfort's interior has revealed several other enclosures (Linford *et al*. 2014), which may have had a similar role to that outlined here. Without further investigation it is not possible to say if these enclosures were in use at the same time or over a much more protracted and perhaps punctuated timespan; however, whilst more refined dating of the excavated material is currently underway, the timing of the erection and use of the enclosure following the major enlargement of the (phase 3) rampart at the north of the hillfort is unlikely to be a coincidence. At least two crania deposited within the enclosure's ditch, and possibly a third, displayed clear signs of blunt force trauma; one of these had also been punctured by a moulded and pointed object. This may be an indication of a violent death, and the possibility of inter-regional conflict is further highlighted in preliminary isotopic analysis of a sample of the bone in which it appears that the majority of these individuals may have originated from regions local to Ham Hill. Disarticulated human bone recovered in 2012 and 2013 from the later phases of the rampart in Trench 2, and found to have markings of fine cuts indicative of either defleshing or dismemberment, may be read in support of a view of heightened conflict. The complexity of social relations in the Late Iron Age of south-west Britain and the potentially varied role that the enclosure facilitated at Ham Hill is again exposed in the bone isotope data. The body of a young adult female, excavated in 2011, was found to have been interred with relative formality within a grave cut into the enclosure's north ditch base; the isotope signature for this individual contrasted with the others from the enclosure in that this was of a likely more distant, perhaps Continental origin.

The enclosure's partially infilled ditch continued to be a focus for deposition, primarily of Glastonbury Ware pottery and charred seeds and tubers all seemingly dumped from outside of the enclosure; its interior appears to have remained unoccupied. Finally, the remaining hollow of the ditch was filled by a gradual build-up of deposits, and amongst the finds in the uppermost fills were occasional sherds of Romano-British pottery.

Roman

Within the open area, the excavation in 2013 of the latest ditched trackways and other ditches finally returned datable material, including 2nd century pottery and metalwork. This indicates that the open area on the hilltop was returned to agriculture during the Roman period. Furthermore, as found in 2012, Trench 2 contained material associated with 1st to 2nd century pottery within the later deposits behind the final (phase 4) rampart. Together, this limited evidence serves to confirm that the focus of activity lay within the east and north of the hill, although more detailed analysis of the Romano-British material will be necessary to elaborate on this.

Conclusion

A greater understanding of the changing nature of the communities that inhabited the hilltop at

Ham Hill from at least the Neolithic and into the first centuries of Roman occupation is clearly developing. The collation of the three main seasons' investigations combined with a programme of analysis is ongoing and will be presented in full in due course.

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