



## Book Reviews

### **BEACONS IN THE LANDSCAPE: THE HILLFORTS OF ENGLAND, WALES AND THE ISLE OF MAN BY IAN BROWN**

*Windgather Press (Oxbow Books). Oxford. 2021 (second edition); xiv plus 355pp, 77 photographs, 3 maps, 14 line drawings, pb, ISBN 978-1-91118-875-9, £39.95*

This is a much updated and expanded new edition of a book first published in 2009 (and reviewed by Al Oswald in May 2010 <https://www.prehistoricsociety.org/publications/book-reviews/3346>). The author has since then been a key member of the Atlas of Hillforts Project team and his extensive knowledge of the subject is on display here. The book is lavishly illustrated with photographs, both colour and monochrome, and drawings but disappointingly few maps or plans. It will be, as the first edition was, a useful reference point for other researchers. Twelve chapters cover: antiquarian and archaeological approaches to hillforts; hillfort origins; enclosing works and interiors; Iron Age society, environment and economy; superstition, belief and ritual; the influence of Rome; and later re-use; concluding with chapters synthesising new theories, questions and ideas.

The book is aimed at 'professionals, students and those just with an interest in the subject' (p.xvii) but I do wonder whether the latter will gain much from it because the author has been let down by the production of the volume, which appears to be in many places a rough draft that has not been edited. So Ian Brown's erudition is largely lost in a somewhat disorganised text with not a little repetitive and irrelevant matter.

In the introductory chapter Brown plunges straight into the difficulties of defining hillforts without trying initially to help 'those just with an interest'; material which could usefully have been in the introduction has been relegated to later chapters. Hillfort specialists are well aware that the term 'hillfort' is useless for explaining what actually happened in the past but for newcomers to the topic it would be comforting to know that the term is also a useful shorthand for a wide variety of sites found across Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Europe which do have some features in common. English and Welsh hillforts are, almost exclusively, Iron Age in their heyday (though many have earlier origins and later re-use), have relatively large and impressive surrounding banks, ditches or walls, enclose areas which may or may not be extensive, and are usually on hills. In fact the one defining common characteristic of these hillforts is their broadly Early to Middle Iron Age date range, even though more precise dating is usually missing.

As it happens, chronology gives the author his best reason for excluding Ireland from the scope of this book, as Irish hillforts seem to have a radically different date range from those in the rest of Britain. The decision to exclude Scotland is harder to explain but an author is entitled to decide what is in and out of scope for their work, depending on their interests, knowledge and resources. It may be that other members of the Atlas of Hillforts team are planning companion volumes on Scotland and Ireland.

The author's breathless, almost ragged, style demonstrates his enthusiasm for the subject but tempts the reader to say, 'Slow down; stop trying to cram so many facts into each sentence.' The result is sometimes a degree of confusion, ambiguity or occasionally even what appears to be nonsense – he surely doesn't really believe that it was 'common' in the Iron Age for people to be buried alive (p.210). This is one of several passages where I found that I couldn't understand what the author is trying to say. He knows the subject too well and is forgetting that the reader may need to be led gently through the wealth of information. This is as true of the picture captions as it is of the main text; many of them could have been usefully extended to guide those less familiar with the subject as to what exactly they are supposed to be looking at. In Figure 64, for instance, is the subject of the photograph the lump in the foreground or the lump in the background? The latter, presumably, but it isn't entirely clear.

However, there is much of value here. There is a discernible Welsh bias, which is no bad thing, as a counter to the usual Wessex-dominance of such books, especially in view of the distribution map (Figure 2, p.4) which shows what a thoroughly Welsh phenomenon hillforts are. There is useful discussion on a number of topics: unfinished hillforts (pp.56–8); disease (pp.112–13); conflict (pp.140–6); routeways (pp.162–3, 277, 291–2); siting of hillforts in relation to good soils and mineral deposits (pp.268–9, 282–6); stock management and transhumance (pp.287–91); and ritual (pp.292–301). The Bibliography is extensive, but perhaps not comprehensive, several sites being referenced only to secondary sources rather than to more detailed primary sources. It is also slightly disappointing not to see more use being made of the data collected by the Atlas of Hillforts Project, though that is being published comprehensively elsewhere (e.g. Lock and Ralston 2019), as well as online. Some figures are included, such as those intended to emphasise the scale of hillfort ramparts and ditches (pp.52–3), but because they are given little or no context they are fairly meaningless; is 1760 cu ft of rock dug from an 8ft length of ditch a lot or a little, and compared to what? The book concludes with some figures on excavations and geophysical surveys of hillforts (pp.311–12) but there is no statistic for how many hillforts have seen high quality analytical earthwork survey. Given that hillforts are, at least as much as any other monument type, defined by their earthworks, this is a pity.

Several passages are thought-provoking but also frustrating. For instance, much is made of the frequent proximity of Bronze Age barrows to hillforts and some impressive examples are mentioned (p.45) but, given the ubiquity of Bronze Age barrows, one has to wonder whether this is statistically significant. Examples of artefacts found at (or near) hillforts are taken from many different periods, from the Bronze Age or earlier to the Roman, somewhat indiscriminately (e.g. pp.126–39). Little attempt is made to tease out whether these represent different patterns of deposition at different times and what that might mean, or whether some of the earlier objects may have been curated items. Relatively few examples are from the major Iron Age *floruit* of the hillforts.

As mentioned above, there is some interesting consideration of the relationship of hillforts to routeways, particularly riverine and coastal. However, the proximity of a hillfort to a river measured as a horizontal line on a map (pp.277, 283, Figure 86) takes no account of the actual topography and access to the river; Little Doward is very close to the River Wye but to get from the hillfort down the precipitous slopes to the river is a challenge and it may be a question as to how anyone in the hillfort could 'control' passage along the river.

The author is surely right to say that slave raiding was a widespread experience in Britain in the last two centuries BC (pp.142–3, 171) but he suggests, without presenting much direct evidence, that slavery might have been the result of insular inter-tribal conflict. It seems to me that it is still a matter for debate whether slavery is an institution of city states and nation states, rather than of the sort of traditional societies that existed in Iron Age Europe (whatever Roman authors may have claimed and despite the wise words of Tim Taylor (2005)). Slave raiding here was more likely driven by the enormous hunger of the expanding Roman republic for slave labour (see Mata 2019 for a recent discussion). This must be a major factor in the changes in society seen towards the end of the British Iron Age but unfortunately the narrative of the Late Iron Age is somewhat muddled in Ian Brown's account, with the events of the Roman invasion and conquest treated before mention of the development of the 'oppida' (pp.236–8). There is also, incidentally, no mention of the 'oppida-like' complexes of Wessex (Corney 1989). When it comes to direct conflict with Rome at the end of the Iron Age, Ian Brown takes, perhaps reasonably, a traditional view of the conquest (pp.142–3, 233). There is only selective mention of the re-appraisals of the 'war cemeteries' at Maiden Castle and Spettisbury Rings (Redfern 2011 is quoted but Sharples 1991a, 124–5; 1991b, 81–2; Stewart and Russell 2017, 158–66, are not).

If anyone is curious about the title of the book, Ian Brown explains that it was inspired by John Manley (p.xiii) and he justifies use of the term 'beacon' (e.g. p.274) in a way which I don't find entirely convincing. 'Hillfort' may not be an ideal term but it is surely better than 'beacon

enclosure', which is what the author seems to be suggesting as an alternative in his concluding sentence (p.316).

This book is packed with facts and is therefore a useful resource but a really exciting, punchy, informative book about British hillforts remains to be written and it becomes, in a way, an increasingly difficult task because, as Ian Brown demonstrates here, the body of evidence is now very large and is growing, even if it is not always the evidence we would like to have. Whoever writes that book will have to be very selective and tell a coherent story of the hillforts using the clearest and most relevant examples; and they will need a good editor.

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