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Centralisation and Urbanisation in Iron Age Europe

edited by

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Front cover: 3D reconstruction of the Heuneburg at the height of its prosperity in the first half of the 6th century BC (after Fernández-Götz & Krause 2013; © Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Baden-Württemberg)

Back cover: Reconstruction of the *Pfostenschlitzmauer* wall of the Donnersberg *oppidum* (Photo: Manuel Fernández-Götz)

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Are the Developed Hillforts of Southern England Urban?

Niall Sharples

In recent years the hillforts of Britain are not normally incorporated into discussions of European urbanisation. Their role as central places and redistribution centres has been the subject of sustained and detailed criticism by a variety of scholars. This should not obscure the fact that some British hillforts are very large, densely packed settlements that were occupied for many generations. They control large agricultural hinterlands which appear to be devoid of contemporary settlements. To most casual observers these sites would appear to be more similar to contemporary towns than any other form of settlement. These hillforts therefore challenge our understanding of what a town might be and should direct our attention away from the simplistic evolutionary approaches to urbanisation that dominate many discussions. This paper will consider the issues involved by examining the ‘developed’ hillforts of Southern England and will look in particular at the evidence from Maiden Castle, Danebury, Hambledon Hill and Ham Hill.

Introduction

There are two principal stimuli for this paper. The first is my current participation in the exploration of the hillfort at Ham Hill in Somerset. The second is the increasing number of new detailed surveys of developed hillforts in Southern England. Both these stimuli are providing a wealth of information on the nature and significance of the hillforts of Southern England.

Ham Hill is the largest hillfort in Britain (Forde-Johnston 1976: 93) and at 88 ha is more than double the size of the hillforts at Maiden Castle, Hod Hill and Hambledon Hill, which are considered to be amongst the most substantial and impressive in Britain (Sharples *et al.* 2012). A naturally well defined plateau and spur was completely enclosed by ramparts which in places consist of up to three lines of bank and ditch. In their best preserved locations the difference in height from the base of the infilled ditch to the top of the eroded rampart is over 3.5 m (RCHME 1997). Excavations have revealed at least four major phases of construction existed and that these include elaborate dry stone revetments

and in the final phase a stone wall. The circuit of the inner rampart was just under 5 km and indicates the construction of this hillfort was a major undertaking which required the mobilisation of a substantial number of people.

The relatively flat plateau that forms the summit of the hill appears to be extensively occupied (Fig. 20.1). A geophysical survey, begun by GSB Prospection Ltd and recently completed by English Heritage, revealed a dense concentration of features which can be broken down into several distinct phases. The earliest structures appear to be field boundaries which form a coaxial system that sweeps across the plateau area. This is overlain by features, such as circular houses and grain storage pits, which are associated with the occupation of the hillfort. This occupation is divided by a major road which runs between the two hillfort entrances, additional roads appear to swing out from this principal road to allow access to the areas closest to the northern and southern ramparts. Oriented on the road system are a number of enclosures and these are clearly contemporary or later than the hillfort occupation.

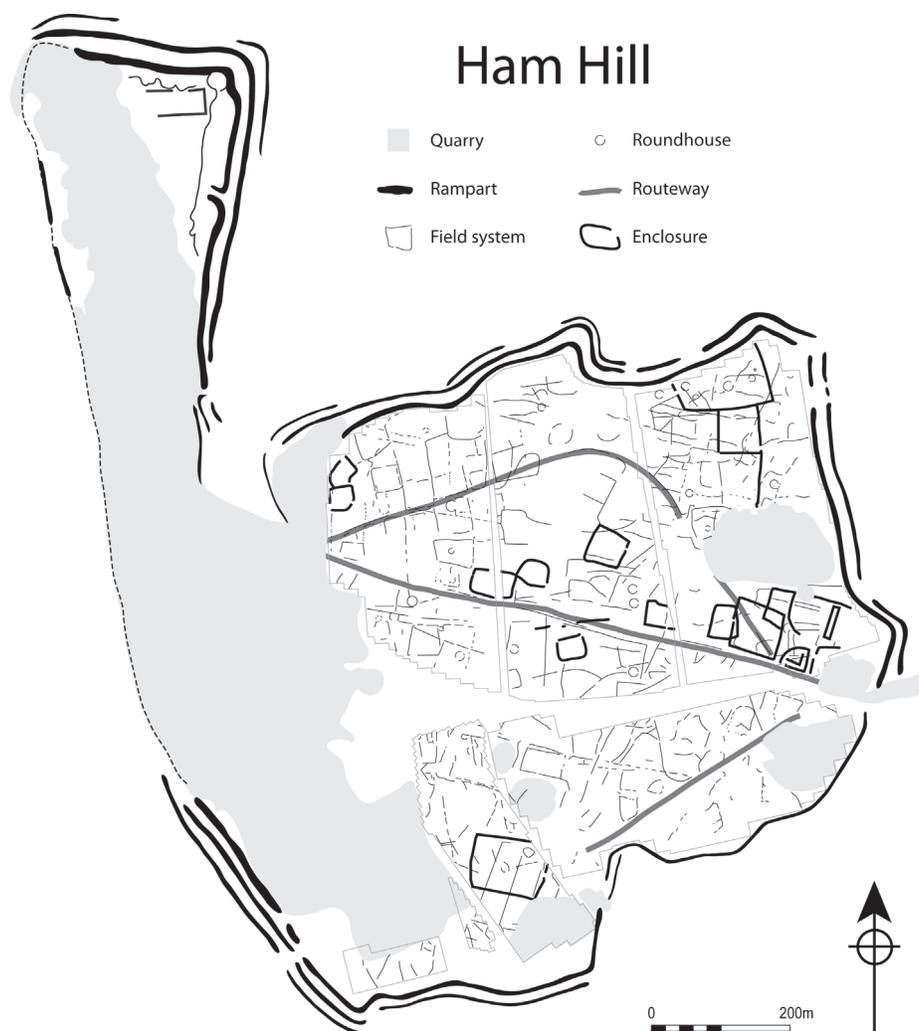


Fig. 20.1: An interpretive plan of the internal occupation of Ham Hill, Somerset (author)

Excavation in the southwest corner (Leivers *et al.* 2006; McKinley 1999; Slater & Brittain 2011) has confirmed that the interior is densely occupied. Settlement evidence includes large numbers of grain storage pits frequently found in clusters, roundhouses defined by eaves drip gulleys, and isolated post-built structures. These mostly belong to the 2nd–1st centuries BC and are contemporary with one of the large rectangular enclosures which despite an elaborate entrance appears to be unoccupied. The evidence indicates a dispersed settlement which though not as dense as found in some hillforts, nevertheless indicates the complete occupation of the enclosed area. The enclosures appear to be contemporary and indicate differentiated space that had a special significance.

On a European scale Ham Hill has to be considered a major settlement (Fig. 20.2). A comparison with the well known *oppida* of the Titelberg in Luxembourg, Hrazany and Stare Hradisko in the Czech Republic indicates that these

settlements are substantially smaller than Ham Hill and are only slightly larger than the hillfort at Maiden Castle. Only the exceptionally large *oppida* such as Mount Beuvray, Stradonice and Manching are substantially larger than Ham Hill (Collis 1984).

The scale of the hillfort at Ham Hill suggests a reconsideration of the status and significance of the developed hillforts of central southern England is necessary. In recent years these settlements have normally been excluded from the discussion of the origins of urbanism in non-Mediterranean Europe. Collis considers “these sites to be below the urban threshold, representing a ‘dead-end’ rather than a stage in the process towards urbanisation” (Collis 1981: 68). Attention has most often been focused on the continental *oppida* that appear in the last two centuries BC but in recent years the Late Hallstatt *Fürstensitze*, such as the Heuneburg, have been considered to fulfil many of the requirements of an urban settlement.

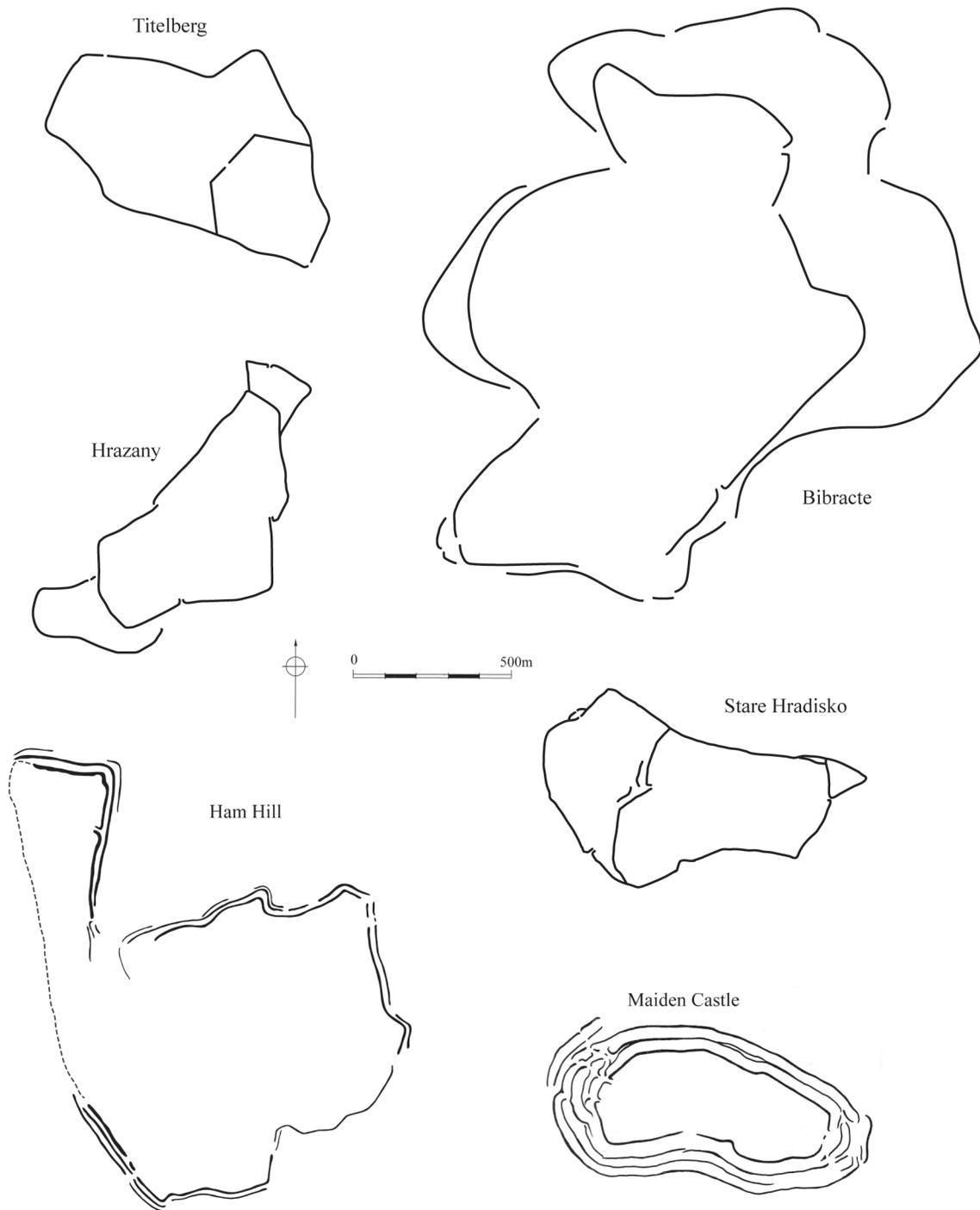


Fig. 20.2: A comparative plan of developed hillforts of Maiden Castle and Ham Hill and the Oppida of Titelberg, Hrazany, Stare Hradisko and Bibracte (author)

The dismissal of hillforts as a dead-end by Collis seems bizarre as most of the accepted urban phenomenon of the succeeding millennia could also be dismissed as dead ends. In Britain Roman towns were systematically abandoned in the 5th century AD and do not seem to have formed a

prototype for later Anglo-Saxon towns. Similarly medieval towns were very different to the industrial towns that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries and these likewise have had to be transformed and in some cases completely rebuilt to function in the post-industrial age we currently



Fig. 20.3: A plan of the Middle Iron Age occupation of the developed hillfort of Danebury, Hampshire (after Cunliffe 1995)

inhabit. As Collis himself notes ‘If hillforts are towns, they are as far removed from the pre-industrial town as the pre-industrial town is from the post-industrial’ (Collis 1984: 2). I think we should reconsider the significance of large hillforts because even though many people may not accept that they conform to a template of urbanism as a central place that does not preclude their being related to a broader concept of the urban.

Danebury

I will begin by providing a brief outline of the characteristics of the developed hillforts of Southern England. This term was created to distinguish the more massively defended hillfort that characterise the Middle Iron Age in Southern England (Cunliffe 1984a: 24–27). They were defined as having “a strongly-constructed defensive circuit, adopting the Glacis principal ... and an entrance approached by a long corridor usually ... created by turning the rampart-ends inwards and siting the gate at the inner end. Some forts were, however, more elaborate with multiple lines of defence and complex entrance earthworks and ... there was also a considerable variation in size” (Cunliffe 1984a: 27). Some of the hillforts derive from simple small Early Iron Age hillforts but others are new foundations in the Middle Iron Age.

The best documented hillfort in Southern England is Danebury in Hampshire, which was extensively excavated by B. Cunliffe throughout the 1970 and 1980s (Cunliffe 1984b; 1996; Cunliffe & Poole 1991). This is not the largest or most elaborately defended hillfort in Southern England. It qualifies as a developed hillfort because it has an elaborate entrance, a substantial heightened inner rampart and an

additional outer rampart. However, the inner rampart only encloses an area of 5.3 ha and the much larger area enclosed by the outer rampart appears to be unoccupied. It is not the smallest developed hillfort in England but it is certainly among the smaller examples of the form.

The other reason for including this hillfort in the category of developed hillforts is the density and nature of the settlement evidence from the interior (Fig. 20.3). In contrast to many simple Early Iron Age hillforts this hillfort was packed with the evidence for settlement; in particular grain storage pits, rectangular post built structures (4-posters) and roundhouses. The density of features was so great that the proposed total excavation of the hillfort had to be abandoned. Not only is the settlement densely occupied but the site has produced one of the largest assemblages of artefacts and ecofacts from the British Iron Age. The quality of the database makes this the one of the key sites for interpreting the European Iron Age (Kristiansen 1998: 302–305).

The size of the excavated area is important because it allows us to talk with confidence about the layout of the settlement, to quantify the principal settlement features and to identify unusual features, such as potential shrines in the centre of the enclosure. The size of the finds assemblage is also important as it enables us to chart significant changes through time (Osgood in Cunliffe 1995: 204–206). The principal features which were highlighted by the excavations are the increasingly structured and ordered settlement. This is very clearly depicted in the plan (Fig. 20.3), which shows the concentration of 4-post structures arranged along the roads that transect the southern part of the interior and the lines of houses that are found in the area immediately behind the northern rampart. The uniformity of the houses found in these rows is one of their most striking features as is the relatively unimpressive nature of the structural elements. Most houses have an outer wall diameter that lies between 4.5 m and 10.5 m and they are largely woven wattle without any substantial timbers (Sharples 2010: 196, 204–205). There are no substantial houses that could be regarded as high status residences within the hillfort at Danebury, though there is evidence for a cluster of unusual buildings, possibly shrines, near the centre of the hill.

Cunliffe has undertaken some analysis of the population that might have occupied the hillfort. He suggests two formulas that can be used to estimate population size. One estimate is based on the size of the settlement and suggests “that $P=146\sqrt{A}$ where P is population and A is the total area of the settlement in hectares” (Cunliffe 1983: 106). An alternative method is based on the number and size of the houses $P=A/10m^2$ “where A is the total floor area of all contemporary dwelling units in square metres” (Cunliffe 1983: 106) based on the estimated presence of 53 houses and the average floor area of the houses of 38.5 sq m. The former estimate provided a figure of 335 people the latter a figure

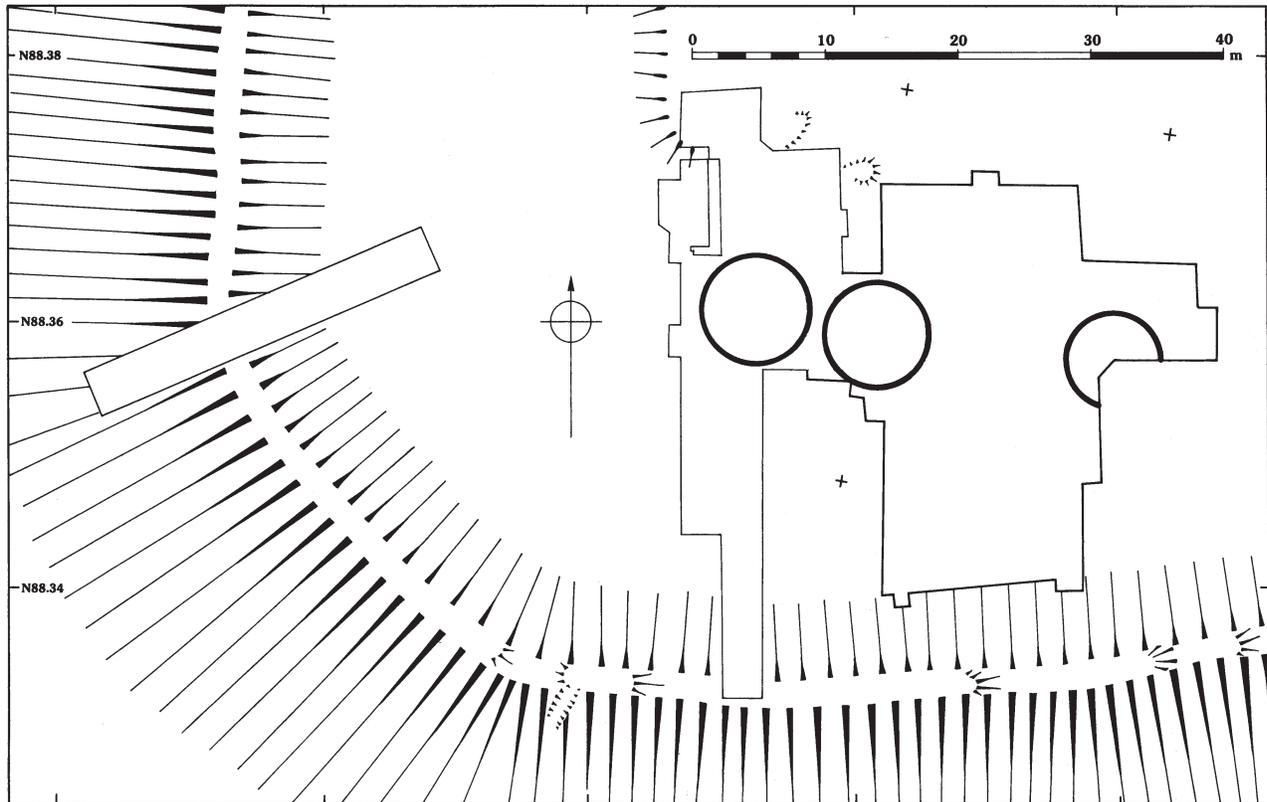


Fig. 20.4: A plan of the area excavation in the south west corner of Maiden Castle (after Sharples 1991a)

of 204 people and Cunliffe tends to refer to the population as lying somewhere between the two around 270 people.

This figure may be a bit low. The formula used by Cunliffe to calculate the number of people occupying a house was based on an estimate of one person per 10 sq m worked out by Narrol (1962) and this is now generally regarded as too low. More recent and more extensive analysis has come up with figures that tend to cluster round 6 sq m per person (Casselbury 1974). If this figure is used to recalculate the Danebury population then it increases the estimate of the number of people occupying the hillfort to around 340, which is very similar to the estimate of 335 people based on the area enclosed.

This is probably the most accurate population estimate we have for a hillfort in Southern Britain but it is important to remember Danebury is a very small hillfort. Most of the developed Middle Iron Age hillforts are much larger and recent work has revealed the density of houses in these sites is as great if not greater than we see at Danebury.

Recent surveys

Large excavations of developed hillforts are comparatively rare in Southern England and very few of the largest hillforts

have been extensively excavated. One of the largest and most elaborately enclosed hillforts is Maiden Castle in Dorset. This hillfort started life as a small 6.4 ha hillfort in the Early Iron Age and was considerably expanded in the Middle Iron Age to 19 ha when it was surrounded by three to four lines of substantial ramparts and ditches.

The excavation of the interior has been relatively limited comprising two areas; in the centre of the original Early Iron Age hillfort and in the southwest corner of the expanded Middle Iron Age fort (Sharples 1991: fig. 45). Both revealed dense settlement evidence and the density of settlement is confirmed by many small trenches scattered across the interior. A geophysical survey also conclusively demonstrated that the whole of the interior was densely occupied (Sharples 1991: fig. 30). The most coherent pattern of occupation was visible in the southwest corner of the hillfort where a row of small houses very similar to those visible at Danebury was identified in the 2nd century BC. The pattern in this area suggests three houses would occupy an area approximately 50 × 50 m (Fig. 20.4). We might therefore expect about 207 houses in the hillfort and, assuming the average house size is comparable to that identified at Danebury, approximately 1300 people might be present. This seems a bit of an underestimate to me.

Hambledon Hill is an exceptionally well preserved

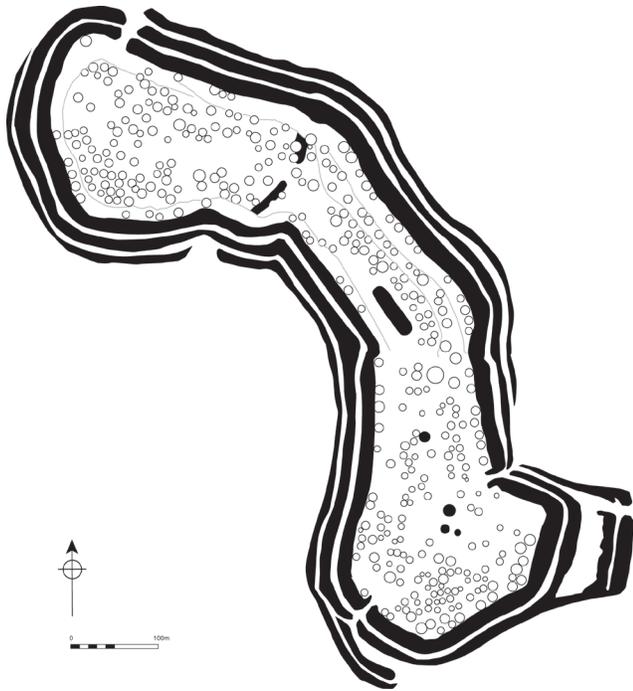


Fig. 20.5: An interpretive plan of the Developed Hillfort of Hambledon Hill (after RCHME 1996)

hillfort located in central Dorset on the northern edge of the chalk overlooking the Blackmore Vale and the river Stour. The site is almost completely unexcavated but it is exceptionally well preserved. The narrow sinuous form of the promontory on which the hillfort was built limited the amount of flat land present and restricted cultivation in the medieval period. The steep slopes required that houses were constructed on artificial terraces cut into the slope of the hill. These terraces survive as visible earthwork features and provide a reasonably clear indication of the distribution and number of houses in the interior of the fort (Fig. 20.5).

A detailed survey was completed in the 1990s (RCHME 1996). The hillfort enclosed an area of 12.3 ha and comprises at least two or possibly three phases of expansion. A minimum number of 365 building platforms were identified and using the calculations detailed above this could indicate a population as high as 2296 people. However, this figure is open to much more uncertainty than the estimates from Danebury and Maiden Castle. It is impossible to estimate the number of contemporary structures and as the expansion of the hillfort indicates a prolonged period of occupation it is possible that the platforms were not all occupied at one time, though it is theoretically possible. It is also possible that platforms were created that were not occupied by houses or even structures. Nevertheless, the continued expansion of the hillfort suggests a desire for extra space to accommodate an ever increasing population.

The hillfort at Hod Hill lies only 1.5 km to the southeast

of Hambledon Hill and I have previously argued that it may represent a relocation of the community of Hambledon Hill who found the sinuous nature of that hill inhibited the development of that settlement (Sharples 1991b). The two ramparts and ditches enclose a rectangular area of 22 ha. The site was partially occupied by a small Roman fort and this destroyed the northwest corner of the hillfort. A large part of the interior was ploughed in the early 20th century and visible archaeology survives only in a small segment of the southeast corner. Nevertheless, many houses, pits and enclosures are identifiable as upstanding features in this area. A limited amount of excavation was undertaken by Richmond in the 1950s (Richmond 1968) and this suggests that these features belong to an occupation in the last two centuries of the 1st millennium BC.

Our understanding of this hillfort has been transformed by a recent geophysical survey (Stewart 2008). This survey provides a very detailed picture of the eastern half of the hillfort; the western half appears to have been substantially damaged by cultivation, the construction of the Roman fort and by large scale terracing possibly associated with the creation of a parade ground. The survey confirms the evidence of upstanding archaeology and the clarity is sufficient to reveal the post-holes of granaries that lined the main road across the interior (Stewart 2008: fig. 4). The layout on the east side was clearly planned and comparable with what we have seen at other sites with houses and granaries arranged in lines along routes that traverse the interior. I estimate approximately 100 independent houses survive in the east half of the hillfort (Fig. 20.6). If we assume a similar number of houses were originally present in the west side then using the estimates discussed above a population of approximately 1258 people appears to have occupied this fort.

Hamlets, village or town

It is clear therefore that the Developed Hillforts of Southern England are significant settlements. They are densely occupied and have substantial populations of people living within the boundary. They also have a dependent population in the surrounding region who probably came to the hillfort on an annual basis and whose food reserves are stored here. The economic basis of these communities is resolutely agricultural and is based on an increased production of cereals and the maximisation of sheep herds (Jones 1996; Maltby 1996; Stevens 2003). Furthermore, for most of the hillforts occupation there is little sign of specialist production of complex objects (*contra* Cunliffe 1984a), exchange networks are strictly limited and internal hierarchies are suppressed (Marchant 1989; Sharples 2010; Stopford 1987). Competitive symbolic behaviour appears to be restricted to the construction of larger and more complex hillfort defences (Sharples 2007).

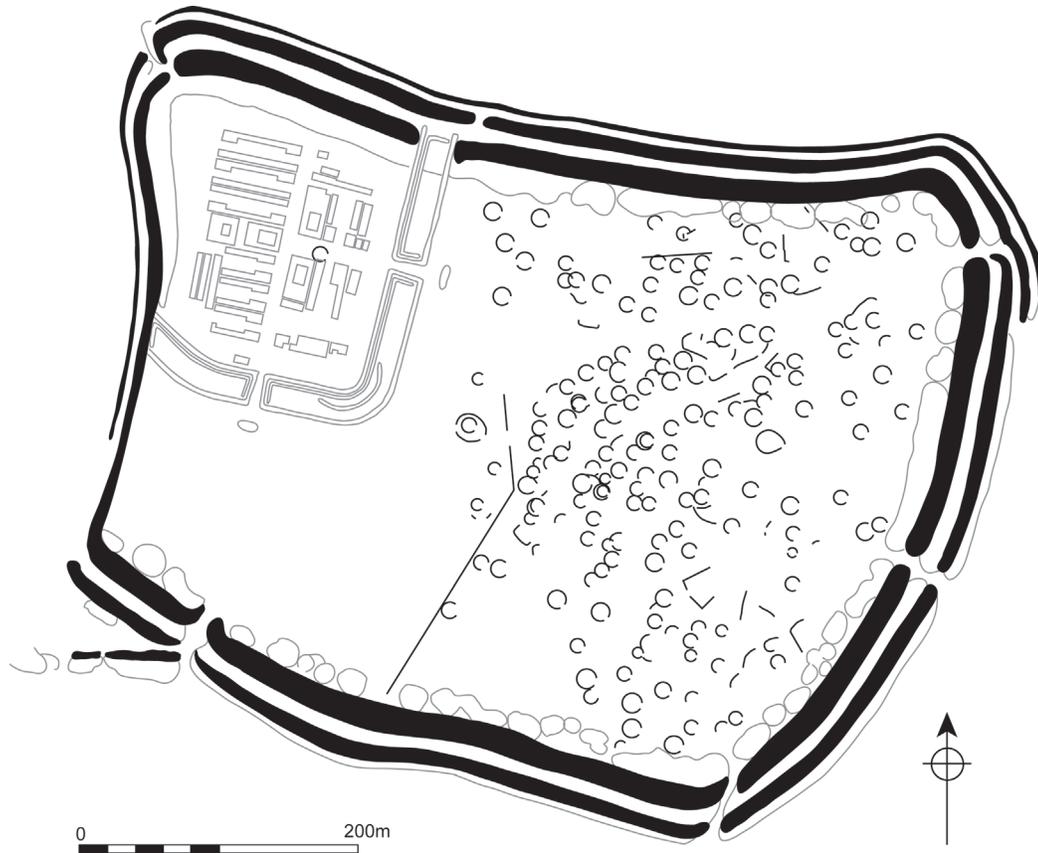


Fig. 20.6: An interpretive plan of the Developed Hillfort of Hod Hill (based on information in Stewart 2008 and Richmond 1968)

These characteristics clearly place Developed Hillforts in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the idea of urbanism. Commercial exchange and specialised craft production is often regarded as critical when it comes to defining a town (Childe 1950) as these provide evidence that the town acted as a central place and served the surrounding populations who were dependent on it for access to critical resources. Evidence for complex exchange patterns and specialised industry is searched for, and argued over, when we discuss the urban character of the *oppida* in the Late Iron Age and the *Fürstensitze* of the Early Iron Age (Collis 1984: 2–4). The lack of evidence for exchange and production in Developed Hillforts has been used to exclude hillforts from the debate.

If we exclude Developed hillforts from the class of settlements labelled towns it leaves us with the problem of defining what they are. How should they be classified? The density and permanence of settlement is much greater than preceding settlements and is on a different scale to settlement in the surrounding landscape. Furthermore, any individual who walked into a hillfort in the Iron Age would have been swamped by a barrage of sounds, smell and sights that would have overwhelmed them. The sensory experience

of a Developed Hillfort contrasted dramatically with the relatively homogeneous and unoccupied countryside that surrounded the hillforts.

The contrast between the sensory overload of the hillfort interior and the deserted calm of the surrounding countryside was exacerbated by the design of the Developed Hillforts. The ramparts were deliberately placed to restrict visual access to the interior and the increasing complexity of the entrance deliberately extended the transition from exterior to interior perhaps to provide time that enabled the visitor to brace themselves for the stimulus of the interior or perhaps to prolong the nervous tension that entrance entailed. It also provided an opportunity to monitor the visitor and assess their threat to the community.

In any view of these settlements the contrast between a developed hillfort and a normal farmstead must be seen as dramatic and enormous and it warrants the consideration that these settlements are of a different order of significance. The problem is to place them in a framework that moves from hamlet to village to town to city which envisages that each stage is a sign of evolutionary complexity which inevitably leads to an ideal form of human dwelling the contemporary city. To do so assumes a homogeneity in the

different settlement types which is problematic and that each stage leads automatically to the next and cannot be reversed or abandoned without it being a collapse that reflects the inadequacy of the settlement form.

The ancient town

The idea of the homogeneity of the ancient town has been challenged by a number of authors. G. Woolf (1993) demonstrated that there was a fundamental variability in the nature of the archaeological evidence from the different *oppida* scattered across Western and Central Europe in the Late Iron Age. Large numbers of these *oppida* failed to demonstrate evidence for: long distance exchange networks, industrial activity that was markedly different from that present in smaller settlements in the surrounding areas and evidence for public spaces where the body politic could meet and make decisions. He concluded that *oppida* could not be regarded as a coherent category of sites and failed to meet many of the key criterion of urbanisation.

Woolf essentially uses two criteria to define the urban qualities of continental *oppida*. First that they must be part of a settlement system which “must exhibit a degree of functional differentiation and specialisation between sites” ... “specialisation must involve a degree of ranking which expresses power differentials within society connected with the production and consumption of goods”; second “intra site organisation be different from that of other sites, and that any differences reflect a hierarchical distribution of functions within the settlement system, rather than a heterarchical one” (Woolf 1993: 227). However, he acknowledges that “this reflects a search for the familiar features of classical cities and medieval towns ... and as such is ethnocentric” (Woolf 1993: 227). Furthermore, these assumptions are based on an idealised Mediterranean city, which has largely disappeared in recent years due to an increasingly detailed work of archaeologists and historians.

Recent work on Mediterranean cities has demonstrated that these vary enormously in size, the degree of planned layout, the relative significance of agriculture and manufacturing and the importance of trade (Morgan & Coulton 1997: 128–9). Hansen (2006: 73) has argued that the average size of a Greek *polis* is 65 ha and a median size of 40 ha with some examples as small as 4 ha. The large city states such as Athens and Sparta are diametrically opposed in many of their fundamental characteristics but neither can be seen as particularly typical of the Greek city. Both cities are exceptional in having a large element of the dependent population living in the surrounding countryside. In most Greek cities the bulk of the population of the *polis* lived inside the city and survived by agricultural production in the surrounding countryside (Hansen 2006: 71). They were generally self-sufficient and markets were largely concerned

with the internal distribution of food and tools and not the import and export of commodities. Many of the other supposedly classic requirements of an urban centre are also clearly not visible in many *poleis*, including a grid layout, separation into functionally distinct areas, elite centres and communal meeting places.

Perhaps we should discard the notion of an ideal urban community and stop trying make our settlements conform to this ideal. The diversity is simply too great and it would be better to seek out much simpler common denominators. To my mind the key distinction is the relative size of the community and this brings me to the sociological definition of a city as “a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals” (Wirth quoted in Dickens 1990: 45). The crucial point of urban communities was to bring people together who had previously lived in dispersed settlements scattered throughout the landscape. The urban communities were primarily designed to create a new way of living.

The crucial point of similarity between developed hillforts, *oppida* and the Greek *polis* is the dramatic contrast between the densely occupied inside and the sparsely populated countryside. In such a situation we have to consider the social mechanisms that enable people to live in such close proximity to each other. This to my mind is the really significant issue and challenges the latter part of Wirth’s definition. It is clear that in many early urban communities there is a conscious reduction of obvious hierarchical differences and this is particularly clear in the Developed Hillforts, such as Danebury. Instead of social heterogeneity we see social homogeneity. A similar pattern is also visible in the regimented rectangular houses that fill the interior of settlements, such as Biskupin in Poland and Entremont in France (Armit *et al.* this volume). In the historical society of Ancient Greece the development of communal decision making, or democracy, becomes a defining feature of the *polis* but it is possible that similar decision making processes existed in Developed Hillforts.

If we get away from the concern with the classic definition of a city we might be better able to discuss the mutual similarities that link these settlements. Indeed, there are many similarities between the Developed Hillfort and the *polis* and a detailed comparison would help to illuminate the characteristics of both areas.

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