

## 4

# Understanding hillforts: have we progressed?

by Barry Cunliffe

By their very nature hillforts have been a source of fascination for antiquarians and archaeologists alike over many centuries. Prominently sited and redolent of power, these sites have challenged the imagination. When were they built, in what circumstances, who lived there and what were their lives like? – the questions have remained much the same for generations and still demand answers. The explanations of early antiquarians were imaginative, inevitably involving mythical beings, historical figures or races of invaders – the giant Bevis, Caesar or Alfred, the Danes and the Saxons: folk tales and pseudo histories merged. The 19th century saw the beginnings of serious intrusive investigation. Sometimes excavations were carried out on a large scale. At Worlebury in Somerset the Reverend Francis Warre excavated nearly a hundred Iron Age pits within the protection of the fort's defences and later C W Dymond sectioned the ramparts and gates, publishing the results in a creditable monograph (Dymond 1886). This was antiquarianism of a serious kind, but the beginning of systematic archaeological research into hillforts can be fairly said to lie with General Pitt Rivers. In 1867 Colonel Augustus Henry Lane Fox (as Pitt Rivers was then known) conducted a survey of the hillforts of the Sussex Downs, carefully observing them all and offering a soldier's-eye perspective of their significance (Lane Fox 1869). Ten years later, between 1877 and 1878, he turned to excavation in an attempt to answer some of the questions he had raised earlier, sampling Cissbury, Highdown, Mount Caburn and Caesar's Camp, Folkestone (Lane Fox 1881; Pitt Rivers 1883).

In the 20th century hillforts have featured large in the research designs of archaeologists. In the first four decades of the century about 80 forts were sampled by excavation (Cunliffe 1991, 1–20). Many of them were concentrated in central-southern Britain. In Wiltshire Maud Cunnington examined eight forts between 1907 and 1932, in Sussex E C Curwen tackled five

between 1926 and 1932, Christopher Hawkes sampled a similar number in Hampshire between 1925 and 1939, while in Dorset Mortimer Wheeler and his team excavated three, one of them, Maiden Castle, on an heroic scale showing, for the first time, the great potential of area excavation within the interior (Wheeler 1943).

The excavations of the period 1900–60 were carried out within the invasionist paradigm. The forts were believed to be the result of turbulent times when Britain was subject to waves of invasion and internal strife. In consequence excavation tended to focus on defences and gates where, it was believed, signs of the history of these invasions, and responses to them, could be read. Although Wheeler's area excavation at Maiden Castle was an exception in providing details of the occupation within, 'invasions' featured large in the site's interpretation. At an early stage in the development of hillfort studies Christopher Hawkes had outlined the invasionist hypothesis in his famous paper 'Hillforts' published in *Antiquity* in 1931. He was to restate his views in a much elaborated form in an equally famous paper 'The ABC of the British Iron Age' published in *Antiquity* in 1959. In many ways this was the valedictory appearance, for the 1960s were to see the wholesale rejection of invasionist explanations and with that came a refocusing of interest on the hillfort phenomenon.

Questions now began to centre on hillfort functions, redirecting attention away from the defences and on to the interiors. Between 1960 and 1970 in the Welsh borderland three hillforts – Croft Ambrey, Credenhill and Midsummer Hill Camp – were examined by Stan Stanford who devoted considerable attention to their interiors (Stanford 1971, 1974, 1981). Meanwhile, at South Cadbury in Somerset extensive sampling of the interior was undertaken by Leslie Alcock from 1966–70 as part of an ambitious project of investigation (Barrett *et al* 2000). This decade of activity amply demonstrated the value of large-scale

excavation. It was now possible to begin to glimpse something of the ordered arrangement of the structures within and, from the comparatively large quantities of material recovered, to gain a clearer idea of the activities that went on within the enclosure.

In 1969 the excavation of Danebury began. It was planned from the outset to be a long-term programme designed to examine the hillfort thoroughly and to explore its regional context. In the event the excavation of the fort extended over 20 seasons (1969–88) (Cunliffe 1984a, 1995; Cunliffe and Poole 1991) and excavations on broadly contemporary sites in the surrounding landscape, including the forts of Bury Hill and Woolbury, lasted another eight (1989–97) (Cunliffe 2000; Cunliffe and Poole 2000a, 2000b).

In parallel with the Danebury programme other hillforts became the focus of extensive area excavation, the most notable being Maiden Castle in Dorset (Sharples 1991), and Winklebury (Smith K 1977) and Balksbury (Wainwright 1969; Wainwright and Davies 1995; Ellis and Rawlings 2001) in Hampshire. Thus, in the last 40 years of the 20th century, the sample of hillfort interiors examined on a suitably large scale had greatly increased and something of the variation among them was beginning to become apparent, allowing a number of possible development scenarios to be offered. The more relevant of these have been summarised above in Chapter 1.

Area excavation had shown the great potential of the patterns, inherent in the mass of features found inside the forts, to modelling socio-economic systems, and a number of geophysical surveys had amply demonstrated the power of these techniques in realising these patterns inexpensively and without recourse to destructive excavation. Thus it seemed logical that a profitable next step in hillfort studies would be to undertake thorough surveys of a sample of forts to enhance the anecdotal database that had accrued through excavation and one-off surveys. In this way the Wessex Hillforts Project was conceived. The results of that work have been fully presented in this volume and the project evaluated, and it remains now to offer some brief assessment of what has been learned in the broader context of Iron Age studies.

### Some parameters

It is as well to begin by reminding ourselves of two basic truths: first, the main period of hillfort building and use spans the Late

Bronze Age and Iron Age – a period of about a thousand years; and second, magnetometry reflects, but does not necessarily fully represent, what is beneath the ground, irrespective of age. As an illustration of the first point the survey of Castle Ditches (*see* Figs 2.46, 2.47) is instructive. The complex of features revealed within the fortifications is evidently of more than one period but without excavation they are impossible to phase or date. One might hypothesise that the ditched enclosures, and many of the hut circles, should belong to the Late Iron Age or even to the Roman period, and might therefore be of much later date than the initial construction of the fortifications, but magnetometry alone will not tell us. Similarly at Oldbury (*see* Figs 2.61, 2.62) the internal ditch that divides off one part of the fort could represent an earlier, smaller, fortification but it could equally have been constructed much later after the main fortifications had reached their fully-evolved form. Again, without excavation the question must remain open.

The second reservation – the difficulties of relating the magnetometry to the archaeology – is nicely displayed by the survey of Danebury (pp 58–62). The survey gives the impression only of a very ‘noisy’ response without allowing the true density of the discrete features, demonstrated by excavation, to be fully appreciated. The survey is a fair reflection of what is known to be there without actually representing it in fine detail.

Magnetometry, therefore, provides a valuable way of seeing, even though our vision is often blurred and lacking depth of focus. So long as this is realised it can be used, along with other classes of evidence, to excellent effect in the exercises of pattern recognition that enable some structure and direction to be given to our precepts of 1st millennium BC society.

Before proceeding further it is as well to attempt a general definition of ‘hillfort’. For the purposes of the present discussion it is characterised as an enclosed place constructed in a highly-visible location to serve as a focus (if sporadic) for communal activity. Even in so bland a definition there are implications that some might find unacceptable but further restriction would be over-cautious, so let us accept

- enclosure,
- visibility, and
- communal functions

as the most common denominators of ‘hillfort’.

Once built the *boundary* and the *visibility* remain consistent features, although their meaning might change. The functions performed, if indeed there are any following the act of construction, are likely to vary from site to site, and at any one site they would also vary through time. The functions might also affect the boundary, which could be enlarged, enhanced or redefined in some other way, depending on its meaning in the social context of the time.

To attempt to understand the complexity of meaning embedded in hillforts, using the physical evidence that remains, a reasonable approach would be to seek to discern patterning in the data. The most easily accessible categories to examine are:

- size
- location
- boundary form/complexity
- activity
- chronology

Size, location and boundary form are generally accessible through topographical survey, but understanding of the boundary can usually be enhanced considerably through excavation.

The range of activities that went on within the enclosure is more difficult to discern. Surface survey may, in circumstances where preservation is good, allow coherent plans of earthworks to be produced, as in the case of Beacon Hill (Eagles 1991), but interiors are seldom undamaged and such features as there are may not represent all phases of activity. Aerial photography may enable more details to be added, but since many interiors are now unploughed opportunities for observing crop marks or soil marks are few. The value of geophysical survey is that it overcomes this difficulty and can provide a total plan of the large features present, but such surveys are usually without much chronological refinement. Only by recourse to excavation can questions of activity and chronology be adequately addressed, and excavation on a large scale is required if detailed diachronic models are to be constructed. These reservations need to be spelled out if only as a firm reminder of the limitations that restrain hillfort studies.

That said, 100 years of survey and excavation among the hillforts of Wessex, 80 years of aerial photography and 20 years of geophysical survey have created a database

unparalleled in Europe. It is not unreasonable therefore to expect some patterns to emerge, the explanations of which may contribute to our understanding of society in the 1st millennium BC.

## Different ways of seeing

Since the publication of Hawkes’ famous paper ‘Hillforts’ (Hawkes 1931) archaeologists have attempted to categorise hillforts using what little evidence was to hand. For the most part the divisions made were usually based on size, location, rampart structure and date. In a comparatively recent attempt the present writer offered a scheme for Wessex (Cunliffe 1984b), which recognised certain broad categories of fort:

- *early hilltop enclosures*, usually in excess of 10ha in area
- *small, strongly-defended settlements* in prominent positions, usually 1–3ha in area
- *early hillforts*, univallate contour works of usually 3–7ha
- *developed hillforts*, also usually in 3–7ha range but often multivallate and with complex entrance features

Dating evidence was consistent enough to suggest that the early hilltop enclosures belonged to the Late Bronze Age or earliest Iron Age (*c* 800–600 BC). The small, strongly-defended settlements seemed to date towards the end of this period. The early hillforts belonged to the Early Iron Age (600–400 BC) while the developed hillforts seemed to be more a feature of the Middle Iron Age (*c* 400–100 BC). This simple scheme, which takes with it no particular implications of social status or function, still holds good in broad terms but many refinements can be made.

In this volume Mark Corney has drawn attention to subtle differences in rampart morphology, noting that in many forts the enclosing earthworks seem to have been built in a series of roughly straight lengths. He has identified two distinct groups, one with the length averaging 32m and another with length of about 50m. What this means is difficult to say, but if each straight length was built by a social group then it could reflect different social structures.

A second observation concerns the blocking of entrances. Most *early hillforts* had two entrances, usually at opposite sides of the enclosure, while many of the *developed hillforts* had only one. Excavations

at Danebury showed that at this fort one of the entrances of the early hillfort was blocked when the fort's defences were elaborated and strengthened (Cunliffe and Poole 1991, 23–32). This phenomenon now appears to be quite widespread in Wessex, as Corney has demonstrated in this volume (pp 138–9). It is now possible to list five certain examples, with another seven as possibilities. This reflects a pattern of behaviour evident throughout Wessex, and if the entrance blocking took place at broadly the same time, then it must represent a significant socio-political horizon. The evidence at Danebury indicates a date in the late 4th to early 3rd century BC for this event.

Another pattern to be recognised is a certain regionalism in the type of entrance earthworks preferred. Two distinct groups can be defined, one in Dorset characterised by the entrance of Hambledon Hill, the other in Hampshire where entrances like those of Beacon Hill are preferred (Cunliffe 1991, 339). It would no doubt be possible to refine this approach still further with more detailed work.

Sufficient will have been said to show that, using a restricted range of typological observations enhanced with some knowledge of chronology where available, it is possible to discover significant variation among the earthworks grouped together as hillforts.

## Assessing function

To take the study of hillforts further, beyond generalising comments based on their typologies, it is necessary to generate new portfolios of evidence, principally from excavation and from geophysical surveys. Within the area of Wessex covered by this study six hillforts have been sampled by excavation on a comparatively large scale: Barksbury; Danebury; Winklebury; Maiden Castle; Bury Hill; and Woolbury, while a significant number (most of them described in this volume) have been subjected to large-scale geophysical surveys. The excavated hillforts of the Danebury region (Danebury, Barksbury, Woolbury and Bury Hill) have been discussed as a group quite recently in the report on the Danebury Environs Programme (Cunliffe 2000, 135–203) and a summary of the main conclusions has been given above (pp 10–14). Andrew Payne has also, in this volume, provided an overview of the results of the geophysical survey programme (pp 143–150) in which he emphasises the varied patterns of activities

reflected in the survey plots indicating everything from 'empty hillforts' to forts densely packed with settlement evidence. While the Danebury Environs Programme showed that the development of hillforts was far more complicated than previously thought, the Wessex Hillfort Project has added another level of complexity, although it is without the chronological control necessary to enable the two types of evidence to be directly compared. This should not, however, prevent us from attempting to offer a general model consistent with our much enhanced database.

Before proceeding to create a narrative it is necessary to explore the potential range of functions to which hillforts may have been put. Some of the more likely possibilities include:

- the act of building as a demonstration of group cohesion
- enclosure used for communal pastoral activities
- defined space for social/religious interactions
- storage for communal surplus
- settlement for a community on a cyclic basis
- settlement for a community on a permanent basis
- settlement for elite and entourage
- focus for redistribution and production
- defence in time of unrest
- territorial marker

Several points need to be emphasised. The list does not claim to be definitive. Each of the functions listed could be divided into subsets and there is also a degree of overlap between them. The act of listing does, however, provide a way of focusing the question of how hillforts functioned in the social system of which they are so dramatically a part. The starting point for any discussion must be the acceptance of the fact that the defined place, which we characterise by the portmanteau term 'hillfort', may well have been used for a variety of functions and that these functions may have changed over time, new uses being introduced and old discontinued. So many are the possibilities of combination that each fort may have its own distinctive 'history' of use. Put more starkly: there may be no such thing as a typical hillfort.

There is also the question of time span to be addressed. A few examples will be instructive. At Barksbury it is evident from the more recent excavations (Wainwright 1969; Wainwright and Davies 1995; Ellis

and Rawlings 2001) that the early hilltop enclosure of the 9th to 7th centuries BC was most likely abandoned for some while before being reused again in the Middle Iron Age as a convenient place to establish a farming settlement, typical of many others in the region. The excavated evidence would support (but does not prove) the interpretation that this farm continued in use into the Roman period when a masonry-built hall was erected. Occupation lasted into the 4th century AD. In this particular case it is best to regard Balksbury as two totally different sites, the early hilltop enclosure and the later farmstead, the later use being unrelated to the earlier. That said there is the question of legitimacy. Could it be that the community founding the farm was claiming an ancestral link with builders of the enclosure? If so then it could be argued that there is a real thread of continuity.

There is a comparable situation at Alfred's Castle. Here magnetometry supported by excavation has shown a densely-used 'hillfort' of the Early Iron Age to have been reused by a Roman farmstead. Similarly at Tidbury aerial photography has shown there to be a substantial Roman villa within the hillfort defences. Alfred's Castle and Tidbury are small fortifications, which *could* have housed the permanent settlements of elites from the Early Iron Age, in which case it might reasonably be argued that the Roman phase was, functionally, a continuation of the Early Iron Age use. In other words, although Balksbury, Alfred's Castle and Tidbury could all be described as 'hillforts' with Roman villas in them, their histories might have been very different, Balksbury showing a discontinuity in social function while Alfred's Castle and Tidbury might have retained their elite status over many centuries.

Continuity, discontinuity and the strengths of the thread of legitimacy are difficult issues to deal with even when there is excavated data to bring to bear. Can the building of the medieval chapel in St Catherine's hillfort be argued as continuity of legitimacy? And to take it still further, what significance, if any, should we attach to the burial of Lord Carnarvon in Beacon Hill? An elite burial found within the confines of a hillfort may have many explanations! Perhaps the simplest way to view all this is to accept that once a prominent boundary has been set up to define a place the enclosure thus formed is likely to have been used in many different ways by subsequent communities. Their uses

will reflect local and regional needs. It is the task of archaeology to examine the disparate and highly incomplete data that may survive, and be potentially discoverable, in an attempt to establish what patterns may be discernible and to offer explanations for them.

## Towards a narrative

Writing a narrative requires a chronology. The time frame adopted here can be summarised as follows:

- Late Bronze Age–earliest Iron Age (900–600 BC)
- Early Iron Age (600–350 BC)
- Middle Iron Age (350–100 BC)
- Late Iron Age (100 BC–AD 43)

The dates can be regarded only as approximate but the scheme provides a general structure that is compatible with the available evidence (Cunliffe 1995, 13–18; Cunliffe 2000, 149–96).

### Late Bronze Age–earliest Iron Age (900–600 bc)

Two quite different types of 'hillfort' belong with this period: large *hilltop enclosures* and small *strongly defended forts*.

The hilltop enclosures form a cohesive type. They are usually more than 10 ha in area, their 'defences' are comparatively slight, the emphasis being on the ditch rather than on the banks of spoil thrown out from it, and the enclosures are often sited at high and rather exposed locations. Examples in the study region include Balksbury, Danebury (outer enclosure), Walbury and Martinsell. Beyond the study area Harting Beacon, West Sussex (Bedwin 1978, 1979), Bathampton Down, Avon (Wainwright 1967) and Norbury Camp, Glos (Saville 1983) belong to the same category.

Balksbury is the most informative. It has been subject to a number of campaigns of excavation during the last 60 years or so as the result of which much of the interior has been excavated (Hawkes 1940; Thompson 1958; Wainwright 1969; Wainwright and Davies 1995; Ellis and Rawlings 2001). The work has shown that the enclosure bank and ditch was built in the 9th–8th centuries BC and the enclosure continued in use for about two centuries during which time the

bank and ditch was refurbished on at least two occasions. Internally the only significant features of this phase to be identified were a number of small four-post 'granaries' and a few lightly-built circular 'huts'. The most interesting aspect of the recent work has been the examination of the build-up of colluvium, containing midden material, against the inside of the enclosing bank. Analysis suggested that the high organic component of the deposit probably derived from animal waste and other organic material brought in for fodder and litter (Ellis and Rawlings 2001, 87–8).

Excavations at the other sites of this type, Danebury, Norbury and Harting Beacon, have emphasised the lack of internal features, other than small four-post structures, but add little more to the discussion. The two early hilltop enclosures chosen for geophysical survey in this project, Martinsell and Walbury, confirmed that the interiors of these sites were without significant features such as pits and ditches and showed very little evidence of any type of human activity.

Taken together the evidence suggests that the primary function of these enclosures was pastoral, to provide corral space for livestock at certain times during the year. In this context the four-post structures could be interpreted as fodder ricks, while the light circular buildings could have provided shelter for those tending the beasts. The size of the enclosures might suggest that they served large communities and this takes with it the possibility that they were places where the community could gather at certain times during the year for ceremonies and feasting when the more practical tasks of culling, castration and the redistribution of stock were being undertaken. Some supporting evidence for this comes from Balkerbury, where it was found that the colluvium contained midden material possibly derived from feasting. As to the size of the territory to which the enclosure belonged, it may be relevant to note that some of the pottery found in these deposits came from as far away as 10–15km.

If we are correct in accepting that the early hilltop enclosures served as meeting places associated with livestock management, then they may be seen to reflect a level of socio-political organization representing a community spread over a considerable landscape. The demise of the majority of these sites by the Early Iron Age implies a significant shift in organisation. It

is at this time that many of the more conventional hillforts came into existence.

There is another, rather ill-defined, category of enclosure that should be mentioned at this stage, since most appear to have been built in the earliest Iron Age though some continued in use into the Early Iron Age. These are difficult to define precisely but might be characterised as small, strongly defended, early hillforts and would include such sites as Budbury, Avon (Wainwright 1970), Lidbury, Wiltshire (Cunnington and Cunnington 1917), Oliver's Camp, Wiltshire (Cunnington 1908 and this volume, pp 128–30), Highdown Camp, West Sussex (Wilson 1940, 1950) and Alfred's Castle, Oxfordshire (this volume, pp 81–9). The sites are of less than 3ha in extent, they favour ridge-end locations (although some are found in less defensible and more open central downland settings) and often have more than one line of defence. All seem to have been intensively occupied with the exception of Oliver's Camp, which produced comparatively little material and no major internal structures. The recent excavation at Alfred's Castle by Gary Lock and Chris Gosden will, when published, provide a much-needed insight into sites of this kind. At present all that can be said – and it is no more than a suggestion – is that they might have been elite settlements of some kind, the prominent location and impressive defences being the symbols of elite status distinguishing them from contemporary farmsteads. On present evidence they are broadly contemporary with the large hilltop enclosures and seem not to have continued in use much after the beginning of the Early Iron Age. At Alfred's Castle, however, as we have seen, the enclosure was later used for a Roman villa establishment.

It is tempting to suggest that the early hilltop enclosures and small, strongly defended early hillforts characterise a particular type of social system operating throughout much of Wessex, and adjacent regions, at the end of the Bronze Age and beginning of the Iron Age, *c* 900–600 BC. The enclosures are only part of the picture and there is much new evidence now available from other categories of contemporary sites. This is not the place for a more extended discussion but the overall impression is that this was a period of transition in the course of which the economic, social and belief systems changed rapidly. The great majority of our hillforts belong to the subsequent period.

## The Early–Middle Iron Age (c 600–100 bc)

In a general scheme for the development of hillforts in Wessex, put forward nearly 20 years ago (Cunliffe 1984b), the writer suggested that it was possible to define two broad phases. In the first, dating to the Early Iron Age, many hillforts were built. They were usually contour works averaging about 5ha in extent and defined by a single rampart and ditch with two entrances on opposite sides of the enclosure. The ramparts, where they had been sectioned, were found to have been faced externally with timber or stone to create a vertical wall. Forts of this sort were called *early hillforts*. By the Middle Iron Age many of the forts built in the early period had gone out of use. The few that remained were more strongly redefended, often with one or more lines of defence and complex entrance earthworks. Some were extended in area. In all cases ramparts built in this second period were unrevetted, giving rise to a continuous slope, or *glacis*, from the top of the rampart to the bottom of the ditch. Forts with these characteristics were referred to as *developed hillforts*.

At a basic level of characterisation this simple model remains valid but other excavations, at Maiden Castle, Uffington, Segsbury, Danebury, Bury Hill and Woolbury, together with the results of the geophysical surveys published in this volume, make it possible to add new levels of complexity. Perhaps the most striking thing to emerge is that while a broad sequence of development can be offered based on plan and defensive form and complexity, evidence for internal activity shows that there need be no direct correlation between the form of the fort and what went on within. The situation is complex, though not entirely without pattern. It will be convenient to discuss the forts in a broad chronological sequence based on the form of their defensive circuits before considering the variations apparent in the intensity of their use.

Reviewing all the evidence at present available for the development of hillfort enclosures in Wessex it is possible to distinguish five distinct categories. These can be placed in a chronological sequence to which broad dates can be assigned (Table 4).

Not all phases may be represented at every site, and without excavation it is often impossible to be sure if a particular phase is present or absent, but that said, the scheme does comfortably contain the array of data presently available. A brief survey of some of the key evidence from excavations will help to demonstrate the validity of the scheme.

*Early 1 hillforts* by definition have ramparts faced with timber or stone walling. Many could have had two opposed entrances but in the absence of excavation this cannot always be demonstrated. The key examples from the wider study area include Chalbury (Whitley 1943) and Maiden Castle in Dorset, Danebury, Winklebury and Bury Hill 1 in Hampshire and Torberry I in West Sussex (Cunliffe 1976). All have produced pottery dating to the 6th or 5th century BC.

Their relationship to the early hilltop enclosures of the preceding period is not immediately clear but the early hillfort at Danebury was built within the early hilltop enclosure, suggesting a degree of continuity. It could also be argued that Bury Hill 1 ‘replaced’ Barksbury and Torberry I ‘replaced’ Harting Beacon by virtue of their proximities. What is known of their chronologies would support this interpretation.

*Early 2 hillforts* are similar in plan and size to Early 1 hillforts and have opposed entrances but are characterised by the *glacis* style of rampart. Examples include Woolbury and Quarley Hill in Hampshire and Figsbury in Wiltshire. All three were constructed on sites not previously enclosed and all have evidence that their ramparts were enhanced on more than one occasion. The associated pottery suggests a date in the 5th to 4th centuries BC. It is probable that some, at least, of the Early 1

**Table 4 Summary of the five distinct hillfort categories**

<i>enclosure type</i>	<i>characteristics</i>	<i>ceramic phase</i>	<i>date</i>	<i>example</i>
Early 1	vertical faced rampart	cp 2 3	6th–5th BC	Bury Hill 1
Early 2	<i>glacis</i> rampart	cp 3	5th–4th BC	Quarley Hill
Developed 1	entrances modified	cp 4/5 6	4th–3rd BC	Beacon Hill
Developed 2	only one gate; ramparts and gate enhanced	cp 7	3rd–2nd BC	Danebury 5
Late	circular and multivallate	cp 7	late 2nd BC early 1st AD	Bury Hill 2

hillforts continued in use during this period: at Bury Hill 1 which began as an Early 1 hillfort the rampart was enhanced at this time.

*Developed 1 hillforts.* To divide Developed 1 and Developed 2 hillforts is somewhat arbitrary but the reality of this was demonstrated by the Danebury sequence. Developed 1 hillforts can be defined as earlier forts with enhanced entrances, sometimes with external hornworks added to create a more impressive approach. Danebury 3 and 4 is of this type. Beacon Hill would also appear to be a good example in one of its phases. Fosbury and Oldbury are other possibilities, but without excavation it is impossible to be sure. At Danebury the dating evidence suggests a 4th to 3rd century BC date.

*Developed 2 hillforts.* Hillforts of this type usually have only one entrance and there may be evidence that one or more earlier entrances have been deliberately blocked. In the cases where only the one gate remains it is usually elaborate with a long passage approach created by outer hornworks, inturns or a combination of the two. The ramparts have usually been considerably enhanced in size with material quarried from immediately inside. Examples include Danebury 5 and 6, Winklebury, Beacon Hill, St Catherine's Hill, Segsbury, Uffington, Barbury Castle, Castle Ditches, Oldbury Castle, Yarnbury and Maiden Castle. Where dating evidence is available it suggests a date in the 3rd or 2nd century BC.

*Late hillforts* is a category designed to accommodate double banked enclosures of the type represented by Bury Hill 2, Chisbury and Suddern Farm, all of which seem to have taken this form some time in the early 1st century BC.

Without far more excavation it will be impossible to give a definitive account of all the possible sequences embedded within the earthworks of hillforts, but of the sites beginning as *Early 1 hillforts* some were abandoned (eg Chalbury), some develop as *Early 2 hillforts* (eg Bury Hill 1) and some continue to be modified to the stage of *Developed 2 hillforts* (eg Danebury, Maiden Castle and Winklebury). *Early 2 hillforts* are known which were built *de novo* and did not develop further (eg Figsbury, Quarley Hill and Woolbury). Ladle Hill may well be an example of a fort of this type, begun but never completed. No examples are known of

sites that began as *Early 2 hillforts* continuing to develop, but this does not imply that there were none.

The *developed hillforts* present a different problem. All the examples from which there is excavated data (Danebury, Maiden Castle, Winklebury, Yarnbury, Torberry, Uffington, Segsbury, and others) began as *early hillforts*. None can be shown to have been built in the *developed style* on virgin sites. In contrast the few *late hillforts* known were all built on new or abandoned sites.

Always remembering that arguments based on absence of evidence are inherently weak, a few generalisations may be offered by way of summary:

- most of the hillforts built in the 6th to 5th centuries BC continued to be developed to the 2nd century BC, although this need not imply continuous use
- many of the hillforts built in the 5th–4th century BC were short-lived
- there appears to have been a period in the early 3rd century BC when forts with two gates had one blocked
- the few distinctive *late hillforts*, of the early 1st century BC, did not develop from earlier forts (although in the case of Bury Hill 2 it occupied part of the site of a long-abandoned early fort)

The discussion so far has been based largely on the evidence of excavation, augmented in part by topographical considerations. We must now extend the debate to examine what was going on inside the hillforts using the data from excavations, now greatly enhanced by the results of the recent geophysical surveys of 18 hillforts published in this volume.

In his summary of the results of the geophysical surveys (Chapter 3) Andrew Payne has stressed the variety of activity patterns represented. Five broadly defined arrangements can be identified:

- no recognisable activity
- limited pit scatters usually clustered in discrete areas
- dense, even pit scatters
- zones of pits interspersed with circular structures
- complexes of enclosures associated with circular structures and pits

What is particularly striking is that there is no direct correlation of activity pattern and hillfort type. Norsebury, a comparatively small site with simple earthworks, was

densely packed with features while Fosbury, a large seemingly developed hillfort, appears to be largely empty in contrast to others of the same type (eg Barbury Castle and Danebury) the interiors of which were packed with features.

This apparent lack of correlation also gains support from several excavations. Danebury, Winklebury and Uffington all began as typical early forts with timber-faced ramparts and were later developed. In all three cases one gate was blocked and the rampart heightened when the defences were turned into a *glacis*. The further elaboration of the Danebury entrance and the massive final heightening of the rampart may belong to a later stage not represented at Winklebury and Uffington. Even so the settlement pattern in the three hillforts is very different in all comparable periods. While Danebury was densely packed with pits and other structures throughout, Winklebury appears to have been far less intensively occupied, and the excavators of Uffington, basing their reasoning on magnetometry supported by trial trenching, believe that the fort was used only slightly and sporadically (Miles *et al* 2003). The early hillfort of Bury Hill 1 adds further contrast in that the part of it not obscured by the later fort was totally empty of features – a fact supported by a comparatively large excavation.

Sufficient will have been said to show that the evidence, both from excavation and geophysics, argues strongly for the need to separate hillfort type from internal activity when attempting to understand the functions of hillforts. How, then, can we approach the problem if indeed it is at all possible to take the debate further?

One way would be to suppose that the actual enclosure was the all-important feature to the community who built it. It was, at the very least, a symbol of social cohesion and the dominant positions chosen visibly proclaimed the community's power over a wide area. The excavations at Danebury produced an array of evidence suggestive of the regular renewal of the enclosure boundary. It was possible to show that the ditch had been cleared out on a frequent cycle and the debris piled up to form a gradually growing outer bank (often called by the military term 'counterscarp'), while the rampart was added to several times, but far less frequently than the ditch renewal. We have suggested that these different cycles of renewal were symbolic rather than practical (Cunliffe 1995). At several sites, including Bury Hill 1, Quarley Hill, Figsbury and

Woolbury, where there is little or no evidence of internal occupation, the ramparts were enhanced often on more than one occasion. This would support the idea that renewal is likely to have been a symbolic act – perhaps the reaffirmation of the boundary enacted at a moment of significance in the life of the community.

The entrances are also worth considering in this context. The opposed entrances, so common among the early forts, are more appropriate to a society structuring its comings and goings and perhaps indulging in formal processions than one wishing to defend itself against aggression. It may not be entirely irrelevant to point out that the henge monuments of the 3rd millennium BC were similarly arranged with opposed entrances. The gates themselves – the liminal spaces that linked the inner and outer worlds – must have been endowed with special significance. When, during the Middle Iron Age, the enclosures were reconfigured to have only a single gate, that structure was usually greatly elaborated to make the liminal space much more extensive by creating a long passage formed by hornworks and inturns. It is conventional to explain these complex entrances in terms of their military capabilities or as symbols of elite power. Both explanations are possible and reasonable, but there need be no conflict between these aspects and the ritual significance of entrance passages.

If we extend this line of reasoning to suggest that each hillfort was the result of a community creating its own social place, then the appearance of a fort could symbolise the crystallising out of a socially cohesive group who, through the act of construction, proclaimed their identity while also making a claim to territory. If this, admittedly tenuous, line of reasoning is allowed, it could be further argued that in the hillforts we see a direct reflection of regional history, and that from them a socio-political narrative can be constructed.

## A tentative narrative

In the 9th century BC or thereabouts Late Bronze Age communities occupying the chalklands of Wessex created large enclosures (*early hilltop enclosures*) in upland areas where communities could come together at certain times during the agro-pastoral year when livestock needed to be closely managed. At other times they dispersed to their farms, the elites occupying prominent settlements defined by banks and ditches.

The 7th century BC saw a marked change with the abandonment of the old enclosures and the creation of new communal enclosures (Early 1 hillforts) some of which might have directly succeeded the earlier enclosures while others were constructed without precedents. New forts continued to be created (Early 2 hillforts) in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, gradually filling up the landscape. As focal points for their communities they are likely to have been used in a variety of ways quite possibly governed by a strict annual calendar. One can imagine assemblies associated with religious rituals and feasting at which the 'business' of the community was enacted – gift exchanges, marriage settlements, law giving, the forming of allegiances and the host of social interactions necessary for society to sustain and reproduce itself.

The archaeological evidence gained from excavation shows that some sites were intensively used while others produce very little sign of activity. A convincing explanation for this disparity is not immediately apparent. Why, for example, was Danebury (in period 2) packed with storage pits, 'granaries' and circular houses arranged in zones and separated by streets when the neighbouring contemporary sites of Quarley, Figsbury, Bury Hill 1 and Woolbury appear to have been largely empty of structures? The simplest explanation would be that at this early stage Danebury began to perform a range of functions that the other forts did not. This does not necessarily mean that the other forts fell out of use – indeed there is evidence of continued, if sporadic, activity in each. They could have been maintained for assembly, while Danebury began to acquire the trappings of a more permanent settlement with a very considerable capacity for the storage of commodities in underground silos ('storage pits') and above ground 'granaries'. If we are correct in assuming that the underground silos were used predominantly for storing seed corn, then the community using Danebury had the capacity to store the seed for a considerable area of planting. The presence of what appears to be small rectangular shrines indicates another activity.

It is not, perhaps, too fanciful to suggest that the differences that appear at this time reflect two different aspects of the economy: enclosures for predominantly pastoral-related functions and enclosures reflecting agrarian production, the two being the components of a single system. Another way of viewing the pattern is to see Danebury as a focal site articulating all communal activi-

ties, while Quarley, Figsbury, Woolbury and Bury Hill 1 were peripheral locations for a more limited range of interactions. The enclosures were broadly similar in form. What went on in them was not.

For all its limitations the Danebury region provides an incomparable set of data but it need not be typical of the whole of Wessex. Each region should be considered on its own merit. At Winklebury the early phase was quite different from Danebury. A number of scattered circular houses were identified, together with many four-post 'granaries', but pits were rare. In the comparatively large area stripped only 3 of the 79 pits excavated belonged to the early period (Smith K 1977). Clearly the grain storage function, so evident at Danebury, was insignificant at Winklebury. Winklebury then, like Danebury, might have assumed 'settlement' as one of its functions but without the large-scale storage capacity. Another site that may be comparable with Winklebury is Chalbury, Dorset (Whitley 1943) where a number of houses have been identified but few pits. Few other early forts in Wessex have been excavated on a scale suitable for assessing internal arrangements.

To summarise, in the early forts we have tentatively identified three functions:

- assembly
- settlement
- storage

Assembly is assumed to have been a function of all early forts. Of these, fewer developed settlements within their defences and far fewer a large storage capacity in underground silos. This divergence can begin to be recognised at least as early as the 6th century BC.

The excavation at Danebury suggested a phase of disruption at the end of period 2 (coincident with ceramic phase 5) at the end of the 4th century BC when there is evidence of a widespread fire followed by a period of diminished use (Cunliffe 1995, 13–18). It is tempting to ascribe this to social unrest. How widespread this might have been remains to be defined, but that it coincides with a major change in pottery style recognisable over a considerable area may indicate that we are observing here a social dislocation of more than regional significance. After this distinctive horizon many of the early hillforts show no sign of any further use, while others continued to be utilised, their enclosing earthworks being refurbished.

The horizon of dislocation is of very considerable interest and deserves more attention than can be given here. The simplest explanation of the phenomenon is that there was a widespread social crisis brought about perhaps by the emergence of competing polities. Once it was resolved some of the old polities, who had maintained their integrity and dominance, continued while others were disbanded or absorbed. This could explain the abandonment of some of the hillforts and the development of others.

In this scenario the developed hillforts of the 3rd to 1st centuries BC represent the successful polities. At Danebury it is possible to show how the fort was re-established in period 3 with heightened rampart, an elaborated south-west entrance and an annex. Occupation continued (period 4) and further modifications were made when the rampart was refurbished once more. At this time the south-west entrance was blocked and the east entrance greatly elaborated (period 6). Excavation within the fort shows a continuation of the processes already apparent in the earlier period. Roads were maintained and the 'shrines' rebuilt, zones were set aside for rows of large six-post storage buildings, storage pits were dug in large number and circular houses, rebuilt on up to six occasions, clustered in the lee of the rampart. Altogether the structural evidence suggests heavy and continuous activity (although it is impossible to say that it was entirely without interruption). Added to this, the material remains point to a wide range of activities being undertaken, including manufacturing and redistribution.

The evidence is sufficient to suggest that Danebury, in its developed phase, had acquired central place functions (Cunliffe 1995, 91–5). Danebury, therefore, can be characterised as an intensively used developed hillfort.

A number of other hillforts belong to the same category. Maiden Castle is a well-known example and needs no further comment. The recent excavation at Segsbury suggests that it, too, might be considered in the same class (Lock and Gosden 1997b, 1998; Lock *et al* 2005). The geophysical survey (this volume, pp 92–3) seems to imply rather less activity when compared to Danebury but this is belied by the excavation, which demonstrated densely packed features including a large number of pits. The rampart was greatly increased in size in the later period and there is a strong probability that one of the earlier gates was blocked.

On the basis of the geophysical surveys Norsebury Ring, Barbury Castle and Castle Ditches all give the appearance of having been densely occupied. Barbury Castle and Castle Ditches have the massive ramparts and complex gates typical of the Developed 2 hillforts. The latter has a complex pattern of enclosure within, but it remains a distinct possibility that this is Late Iron Age or Roman in date, in part obscuring a plan dominated by pits. Norsebury Ring remains something of an anomaly because of its small size and comparatively slight defences. Lack of excavation means that little more can be said. It seems, then, that a number of the developed forts like Danebury continued to be densely occupied and were provided with extensive storage facilities in underground silos.

Other forts that continued in use into the Middle Iron Age display much less evidence of activity. Uffington, Liddington, Beacon Hill, Winklebury and probably St Catherine's Hill all had one of their earlier entrances blocked and except for Beacon Hill, which is unexcavated, all had their early ramparts refurbished. Thus they conform to our Developed 2 hillfort type. In all five cases the magnetometry shows that internal occupation was restricted in extent and not apparently very intense. Excavation at Uffington (Miles *et al* 2003) and limited trial trenching at Liddington (Hirst and Rahtz 1996) confirmed this.

From what has been said it will be clear that sufficient evidence, both from excavation and from geophysical survey, is now available to allow certain generalizations to be made. After the phase of social dislocation in the 4th century BC a number of forts continued to be maintained. Some were intensively used and were provided with a large grain storage capacity while others were used to a very much lesser extent and some may have been abandoned altogether. Those that were intensively used were refurbished on a number of occasions and by the late 2nd century BC their ramparts were substantial and their gates massively elaborated. It would be tempting to equate the Developed 2 hillforts with intensive occupation but Fosbury proves to be the exception. The nature of its earthworks puts it squarely within the Developed 2 hillfort category but the geophysical survey shows it to have been largely devoid of internal features. Except for this example, one might have argued that all Developed 2 hillforts were likely to have been intensively occupied!

The first half of the 1st century BC seems to have been a time of massive social and economic change and for the first time we can begin to glimpse a difference between two regions of Wessex. The area which, by the second half of the century, had become the territory of the Atrebates (approximately Hampshire, Wiltshire, West Sussex and Berkshire) developed in one way while the territory of the Durotriges (broadly Dorset and southern Somerset) developed in another.

In the territory of the Atrebates the earliest sign of a change is the construction, within the long-abandoned hillfort of Bury Hill, of a new defended enclosure consisting of a ditch almost circular in plan with a substantial bank both inside and out. The magnetometer survey showed that the inside was quite densely packed with storage pits, a fact confirmed by excavation which suggested that the pits and associated buildings dated to a late phase in the Middle Iron Age (ceramic phase 7) and that occupation was comparatively short-lived (Cunliffe and Poole 2000b).

One possibility that suggests itself is that Bury Hill 2 was constructed by a polity that was in some way challenging the authority of the nearby, long-established, Danebury. It may be relevant that it was about this time that Danebury was abandoned and its entrance destroyed by fire. Whether or not Bury Hill outlived this phase is impossible to say on the basis of the ceramic evidence at present available. Other sites broadly similar in form to Bury Hill 2 developed elsewhere in Atrebatian territory in the 1st century BC and into the 1st century AD. Examples include Suddern Farm (Cunliffe and Poole 2000c), Boscombe Down West (Richardson 1951) and possibly Chisbury (Cunnington 1932a). There is no evidence that the old hillforts continued in regular use after the beginning of the 1st century BC.

In what can be regarded as Durotrigian territory there is evidence to suggest that some of the forts were maintained or at least reused. Excavation shows this to have been so at Maiden Castle (Wheeler 1943; Sharples 1991), Hod Hill (Richmond 1968) and South Cadbury (Barrett *et al* 2000) and it could well be that the ditched enclosures, defined by geophysical sources, within Castle Ditches (p 106) belong to this phase of use, but without excavation this must remain speculative.

Standing back from the great mass of detail summarised so briefly above it is possible to discern a distinct patterning. On one

level there is an increase in the number of hillforts during the period from the 6th to 4th centuries BC. This is followed by a phase of social disruption after which some of the hillforts continue in use into the 3rd century BC but only a few are maintained in strengthened form to the end of the 2nd century BC. The early 1st century BC was a period of rapid social and economic change that saw the demise of forts across much of the region, except in the territory of the Durotriges where some continue into the 1st century AD. Overall, after a peak in the number of forts in use in the 5th century BC, there is a gradual decline in the number maintained.

Among the early hillforts, irrespective of form, a variety of uses can be defined. All were probably used for some kind of assembly, some for settlement as well and among this group a few were intensively occupied and provided with a substantial storage capacity. From the 4th century BC onwards, the developed hillforts that continued in use divide into the same three functional types.

There seems to have been a direct continuity between early and developed forts in that no developed fort is known, in Wessex, to have been built *de novo*: where there is direct archaeological evidence each developed fort can be shown to have begun in the early period. The late hillfort of Bury Hill 2 was, however, without direct precedent, although it occupied a site fortified in the early period.

The thread of continuity that runs through all this is particularly interesting. A hillfort such as Danebury was first built within an early hilltop enclosure in the 6th century BC and continued in use into the early 1st century BC performing a wide, and probably increasing, range of functions. As such it was a *preferred location* throughout the Early and Middle Iron Age. There were others of the same kind. Maiden Castle and South Cadbury are well known, and recent excavation suggests that Segsbury probably conforms to the type. Other strong contenders are Badbury Rings, Yarnbury and Sidbury. It may be that with the development of these preferred locations and the focusing on them of more and more communal functions, hillforts occupying the more peripheral locations gradually fell out of use.

If this sketch approximates to reality then it might imply an increasing centralisation, the population focusing on fewer and fewer centres. These are issues wide open to debate. So long as that debate is firmly rooted in the reality of the data it cannot fail to be profitable.