IRON AGE HILLFORTS IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND BY DW HARDING

For so long, perhaps too long, hillfort studies have been central to research and to our understanding of the British Iron Age. Ever since Christopher Hawkes produced his landmark Antiquity paper in 1931, hillforts have been endlessly discussed in various attempts to categorise, define and interpret their significance in later Prehistoric studies (for example Jesson and Hill 1971; Cunliffe 1975; Forde-Johnston 1976). As a result site reports, articles and books that have outlined, reviewed, analysed and re-interpreted hillforts have dominated Iron Age studies for much of the twentieth century. Thanks to developments in aerial and landscape surveys, widespread geophysical surveys and results from development-led archaeological fieldwork from the 1970s onwards, there has been a change in direction for Iron Age studies and these site types no longer dominate research for this period. Nevertheless, recent research has shed new light and new perspectives on hillforts (for example Champion and Collis 1996; Sharples 2010) and current work place these sites within a wider research framework.

There remains no doubt that archaeologists remain obsessed with these sites; partly no doubt due to their dominant (earthwork) presence in the landscape and their size and scale: there’s nothing quite like scaling the monumental earthworks of Maiden Castle or Hambledon Hill (both in Dorset) to make you appreciate them! Perhaps also, these sites have clearly presented opportunities as the testing grounds for archaeologists, as many pre-eminent archaeologists have dug one (or two) in their day.

So, for a long time their enigma has endured as one of the great questions of British archaeology; what exactly is a hillfort? Perhaps also rising out of this is another, do we need yet another book on hillforts? Well, the short answer to the latter is both yes…and no. Harding’s contribution here can easily be used as an argument for either position.

Recent and current hillfort research takes into account a huge variety of different sites from Wessex to North Wales to Scotland: from the cliff castles in the southwest to those singular sites such as the massive Yeavering Bell (Northumberland) in the north-east. The regional focus of recent hillfort studies (eg, Payne et al, 2006; Oswald et al, 2006) have demonstrated their evident diversity, making it doubly hard to re-assess all the material out there and to synthesise these enormous datasets into one easy-to-read book.

Nonetheless in this tome Dennis Harding presents a good attempt and the end result is an all-encompassing survey. Harding’s goal is to re-define hillfort studies. His study ranges from discussions of landscapes, chronologies and functions (with two chapters outlining very different arguments). He also incorporates a consideration of available documentary sources and possibly relevant ethnographic models which he suggests may inform a deeper understanding of the place(s) of hillforts in British Iron Age society.

On the positive side, Harding re-orientates discussions away from the dominant region of hillfort studies, Wessex, which has held the main stage for much of the last 80 years. So the greater part of the book examines sites outside this region, and discusses in greater detail sites particularly in
the north of England and Scotland, with some discussion of Irish and continental examples (the focus of the ‘beyond’ in the book’s title). He explores in detail the landscape settings of these sites and places them within wider morphological contexts.

Alongside this Harding reclaims the use of the term ‘hillfort’. For too long, at least from a public point of view, hillforts have been considered synonymous with the Iron Age. This, as Harding argues, should not necessarily be the case as the term ‘hillfort’ might just as easily be interpreted in its simplest form, that is, a fortified hill. Harding devotes an entire chapter to the dating of hillforts which originate before and after the Iron Age and by doing so surveys sites which date from the Neolithic through to the medieval periods, and he also includes the ‘long’ Iron Age of the north and west of Britain, all of which lie outside the direct influence of the Romans. Here Harding uses the opportunity to present a more nuanced discussion of hillforts, sites which have been regularly left out of general overviews of the British Iron Age and their inclusion adds much to the general discussion.

Harding also devotes considerable discussion on the functions and settings of hillforts. He discusses these sites in terms of dating, landscape settings and likely functions. He focuses on structural elements such as ‘guard chambers’, entrances and the fortifications themselves. With each discussion, Harding is clearly very much against the idea of the ‘pacification’ of the Iron Age: a view frequently promoted in recent years, as discussed in Simon James’ article in the 2007 volume by Haselgrove and Pope, and recently discussed by Gary Lock (2011). Harding is rather dismissive of these arguments, clearly supporting those presented by James (ibid) and Armit (2007) who view hillforts at the heart of a violent and brutal British Iron Age.

In relation to recent debate Harding’s book is a positive contribution to wider current hillfort research. His focus away from those that have dominated past studies is refreshing and his discussion on sites from Ireland and some from Continental Europe places the British sites into a broader context. It also helps to remind archaeologists not to get too caught up in the minutiae of what the site category “hillfort” actually means and here he provides plenty of superb examples of lesser known sites from all over Scotland which have tended to be overlooked in hillfort studies. In this book Harding pulls back and reconsider hillforts in a different light.

However, this wider focus may be seen as the book’s shortfall for although it raises the profile of some lesser known sites that fall outside the classic Iron Age hillfort schema, it overlooks some of the more recent interpretations of these sites, and there is a struggle with some of the current debates in hillfort research (for example Sharples 2010). For one, Harding does not go into any detail regarding the chronology of Iron Age hillforts against the wider chronological context he has outlined for other sites. By doing this he also makes the exception for Iron Age hillforts, which goes against what he has been aiming for in this book; by singling these sites out and not discussing them in the wider context, he makes them different. Whilst chronologies are discussed in various other chapters, it therefore seems rather counter-intuitive to write a book about hillforts in Britain and not discuss Iron Age hillforts in a wider chronological context.

Such a lack of integration also has a knock-on effect in Harding’s more detailed discussion of the sites which fall outside a classic ‘hillfort’ definition and classification. In places this highlights Harding’s lack of faith in the current interpretive frameworks and on-going debate. There is a good example that highlights this. The discussion of Oppida from p. 130 onwards is slightly confusing. Firstly, the use of the term Oppida itself carries a specific continental meaning and so to apply it to very few British sites as clearly defensive central sites located on hilltops is problematic. A site such as Salmonsbury, Gloucestershire, is a multivallate nucleated settlement and its dominant location on the confluence of two rivers is almost the polar opposite of many of the smaller Cotswold hillforts which surround it in the wider locality. But it also dates to 400-
500 years later than many of these sites. In this respect Salmonsbury cannot be considered a direct comparison and is perhaps not the best example to have been discussed here. Whilst there is no doubt a need to expand on what defines a hillfort, somewhere like Salmonsbury does not fit within this category. Equally, the north Oxfordshire Grim’s Ditch is an intermittent ditch system with no focal entranceway, continuous defences or identified focus of use or settlement within; it is highly questionable whether this site should be mentioned in this book.

These discussions and Harding’s lack of faith in current research comes to the fore in perhaps the most interesting chapter in this book, chapter 2. This provides an introduction to hillfort studies and previous foundation research. It raises an interesting discussion about how we have traditionally approached hillfort studies, adding commentary on the excavations at Danebury and arguing that results from the detailed excavations at this site fits very much into the mould of those that had gone before, but Harding also argues that past hillfort excavations have never really fully answered fundamental questions. This presents an interesting challenge for archaeologists namely how does one best excavate a hillfort? The answer is not really provided here, but while the work at Danebury extended research opportunities in its scope to some degree, it is criticised by Harding for its lack of focus on the rampart and ditch and for presenting the site as one that is viewed as relatively isolated (considering the scale of excavation) and he criticises the insular ceramic chronology of the site rather than an absolute one – something not easily achievable for the British Iron Age. One can’t help feeling that Harding has slightly overlooked the principal research aims which underpinned the Danebury excavations and which have since provided considerable continuing opportunities for later and current generations of researchers with its extensive datasets (e.g. Hill 1995; Hambleton 1999).

Hillfort studies is a topic which clearly excites Harding but is also one that frustrates him too and at times this comes across in the book. There are pointed references to fieldwork being cut short through lack of funding and appreciation (as at Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire) and one is left with the general feeling that here much more could have been done. Whilst it may be easy to empathise with these sentiments and they provide an interesting perspective, it all rather falls apart at the end of chapter 2 when discussion degenerates into a rant against current debate ending with a selected quote from Lock’s 2011 article and particularly how incomprehensible this would have been to those hillfort pioneers such as Mortimer Wheeler and Kathleen Kenyon. This leaves rather a bad taste in the mouth – perhaps more objectivity and empathy rather than personal frustration should have prevailed in discussion here.

There is no doubt that Harding has spent a great deal of time on this book. It somehow feels as though this is his opportunity to continue his research and discussions, which he started with excavations at Blewburton Hill (Oxfordshire) in the 1960s (also cut short) and continued with his own edited volume on Hillforts (Harding 1976) and which here, in this book, feels like unfinished business. Unfortunately, since those heady days of hillfort research from the 1950s to the 1970s, much has moved on although in places it seems as though this book doesn’t reveal this as Harding doesn’t subscribe to recent ideas. He draws comparisons between the results of excavations by Wheeler and Hawkes in the 1930s and 1940s with those in the present day and although he does make some important and appropriate points, these can tend to get lost in pointed remarks and personal reflections. Harding happily provides a critique with what is wrong with hillfort studies but offers no major alternative solution.

Ultimately, I found this a frustrating book and as a result somewhat difficult to recommend. It has added some new perspectives to hillfort studies and provides a broader context on how we may approach their study and interpretation. In some ways it is refreshing that much of the discussion is direct and at times challenging: very rare in debate these days. However, I can’t help but feel that it would have benefited from a stronger editorial hand. At times personal rants
about the current focus of hillfort studies confuse the necessary discussion. While many of the illustrations and photographs add much, more could have been made of the relatively small amount of colour photographs allowed (particularly for such an expensive book). Many look more like holiday snaps rather than informative views of hillforts as many lack formal scales and for a few, it’s sometimes difficult to know what is being illustrated. With such a current wealth of aerial survey material available throughout Britain as well as extensive available archaeological (excavation) archival material, a bit more work researching the right kind of photos could have added much to the text.

Addressing such a large topic as hillforts was always going to be a challenge. With such a wealth of excavated material and past studies on this subject, Harding has somewhat succeeded in addressing some of the fundamental points of what it means to study the phenomenon that is the ‘hillfort’. However, at times much of this good work is lost amid the details of re-emphasising some aspects of previous research and criticising the directions academic debates have subsequently followed.

References


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