

Book Review

MOEL-Y-GAER (BODFARI): A SMALL HILLFORT IN DENBIGHSHIRE, NORTH WALES BY GARY LOCK

Archaeopress Archaeology 2022. 140 pages, 128 figures, 7 tables (colour throughout). ISBN 978-1-80327-312-9 (£28, paperback)

This attractive, full colour, A4-format publication by Archaeopress sheds some welcome light and new detail on an under-studied Iron Age hillfort in the Clwydian Range of Denbighshire, north-east Wales, as well as presenting a fresh regional interpretation of the neighbouring hillforts. Its author, Emeritus Professor Gary Lock, was one of the lead investigators on the *Atlas of the Hillforts of Britain and Ireland* and is one of the leading experts in the study of British hillforts. Here he turns his detailed attention to the structural history, life and landscape setting of a small Welsh hillfort with the help of a team of investigators, describing a programme of survey and excavation which commenced in 2011.

The Clwydian Range in north-east Wales is a curving north-south arc of hills broadly linking the Dee Valley near Llangollen in the south to the north Wales coast at Prestatyn, bordering the lowland Vale of Clwyd on its west side. The range is well known in Iron Age studies as being home to one of the largest hillforts in Wales – Penycloddiau – and a coherent group of other large hillforts. These include Moel Hiraddug to the north overlooking the coast, and to the south a group including Moel Arthur, Moel-y-Gaer Llanbedr, Moel Fenlli and the partly scree-built Caer Drewyn which overlooks Corwen and the Dee Valley. This regional hillfort group is thought to have been the distinct homeland of the Deceangli peoples, conquered early on by Roman troops in the 1st century AD. The southern hillforts were the subject of the major three-year Lottery-funded ‘Heather and Hillforts’ Landscape Partnership Scheme in 2007, and have been the focus of several recent excavations and PhD studies in the intervening years; but Bodfari remained overlooked.

The subject of this monograph, Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari), occupies an unusual position within this Clwydian group, commanding The Gap, a narrow, deep watershed which cuts through the north-south run of higher ground. Unlike its neighbours, which are usually sited on high summits, Bodfari is

positioned on a lower west-facing spur of the Clwydian Range, commanding views across the Vale. Lock and his team selected this hillfort as a testbed for a campaign of integrated survey, including geophysics and LiDAR, followed by seven seasons of excavation, with a view to incorporating the site into the wider research themes of the region.

The monograph is clearly laid out in the chronological order of the project. Following a succinct 'Introduction' which establishes the setting of the hillfort and its historical context, the first chapter by John Pouncett outlines the survey approaches to Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari). These included reprocessing and morphometric analysis of existing Environment Agency LiDAR data, providing a basemap for a topographic survey; this was an essential first step to supersede the existing 1964 Ordnance Survey plan. Geophysical surveys followed, both magnetic and resistance, together with trials of Electrical Resistance Tomography and Ground Penetrating Radar. This suite of survey approaches informed the excavation strategy, providing a precision base for all intrusive work.

The next chapter, 'Excavation', runs for 77 pages and describes the results from each of the six trenches in order. It's a section clearly written by and for archaeologists; plans are 'king', with each sub-section opening with topographic surveys to locate the trenches, often at full-page. Photogrammetry was usefully employed for on-site recording, still an emerging tool in excavation recording at the time. However, unlike some modern reports where an orthophoto may be used with little or no interpretation or overlay, here orthophotos are reproduced side by side with meticulously detailed interpreted drawings.

Given the prevailing geology and terrain, the archaeology in places looked challenging to excavate and interpret. A possible roundhouse was explored in Trench 1, but structural evidence proved fragmentary despite good evidence for nearby areas of cobbling and a structural bank. Trenches 2 and 3 investigated geophysical anomalies in the interior discovered during the survey phase, with an extension to Trench 3. Trench 3X extended to an impressive 30m to investigate the Phase 2 rampart in the south-western part of the hillfort. This produced a useful cross section of the upper rampart and rock-cut ditch, along with radiocarbon dates suggesting a *terminus post quem* of 410-200 cal. BC for the beginning of rampart construction. Trench 3X is dealt with in some detail, with numerous illustrations and context descriptions describing the structural sequence. Trench 4, while limited, revealed evidence for potential tool marks on the cut bedrock associated with rampart construction. Trenches 5 and 6 were perhaps the most revealing in tackling two of the entrances into the hillfort. Trench 5 was opened in the vicinity of an antiquarian trench, previously opened by Philip Stapleton in

1908. Among other structural details, Trench 5A revealed part of the outer face of the Phase 1 rampart (Figure 71), handsomely built with horizontal stretchers and small orthogonal headers between – a considered piece of Iron Age building, making the most of the available stone. Trench 5B produced evidence for the building of the Phase 1 rampart, with ‘suspiciously early’ (p. 65) Later Bronze Age radiocarbon dates which were taken as providing a *terminus post quem* for activity in the area, not necessarily related to rampart construction. Other details of the gate were revealed including remnants of a curvilinear gateway recess. Finally, Trench 6, measuring 12m x 10m, was sited to investigate the character of the northern inturned entrance, inadequately planned during earlier investigations and clarified during the survey stage. This revealed a complex surviving sequence including a hooked inturn forming part of the Phase 2 entrance, incorporating some large structural stones. This is a most interesting discovery and further helps to characterise the defensive architecture of this fort.

Following the ‘Excavation’ section, Michael J. Allen and Alan J. Clapham provide a comprehensive ‘Environmental’ section. This is followed by a detailed chapter on ‘Radiocarbon dating and chronological modelling’ by Derek Hamilton where a chronological model for activity at the hillfort is provided. Here we are grateful for the quality of specialists assembled by Lock to analyse the data from Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari). Perhaps the only disappointment from the project was the sheer lack of finds. In total Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) has produced three spindle whorls; one was found in the nineteenth century, and two were found in the present excavations. A further twist is that the two modern finds were not released for post excavation analysis and recording by the landowners. A fragment of cattle mandible was also discovered in the excavations. One does wonder about the lack of potential finds that might have expected; where are the glass beads, pottery sherds, evidence for agricultural activities and food processing, or even metal working evidence? The lack of finds at least helped to confirm a complete lack of Romano-British occupation.

A major outcome of this project, and the publication, is surely Lock’s comprehensive new ‘Discussion’ on the regional context of Bodfari and the Clwydian Range hillforts. This section summarises the evidence for rampart construction and typology, detailing the allowances made by the builders for the generally poor quality of the locally available stone; faces were carefully bonded with stretchers, or white lime-rich clay, to stabilise the wall. The rampart was of different construction and more impressive in the north-western quadrant compared to the south-western quadrant, which may have been due to reasons of defence or ostentation. Lock broadens his discussion out from Bodfari to discussion of the defensive architecture and excavation histories of the wider contingent of the Borderlands forts, extending south to Ffridd Faldwyn in Montgomeryshire and north to Moel

Hiraddug, Dinorben, Tre'r Ceiri and others. Morphology and chronology are discussed, as are internal details such as evidence for roundhouses.

Lock's 'Conclusion' section sums up the arguments of the 'Discussion' and usefully places this hillfort in the wider context of current research questions about the Iron Age of north-east of Wales, and southern Britain as a whole. It is perhaps one of the frustrations of the Welsh Iron Age that, following a long campaign of targeted excavation, questions of why Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) was built and what it was used for remain unanswered; the lack of finds following careful, scientific excavation, does not help. It means that theoretical approaches to the interpretation of Welsh hillforts are still required to advance the discipline in tandem with fieldwork. One of Lock's conclusions is that – in the face of extraordinary variation across the hillforts of Wales – wide-ranging syntheses may remain difficult, and that targeted research of 'spatially inter-related sites at a more regional or sub-regional scale' may be far more productive. For Iron Age Wales, with such strong evidence for regional diversity, this is a point well made.

The volume concludes with sections on the work of the artists in residence, Simon Callery and Stefan Gant and a note on community involvement. Gary Lock and his team are to be congratulated on the prompt publication of their campaign of survey and investigation, as are Archaeopress for the production of an attractive, readable and affordable monograph; a PDF eBook for personal use can be obtained for as little as £16. The volume is recommended to all, and especially to students and Iron Age specialists seeking an up-to-date statement on the regional archaeology and research themes of later prehistoric Wales and the Borderlands.

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