

ANNUAL REPORT: PENYCLODDIAU 2016 FIELD SCHOOL

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[Our supervisory team (including three generations of IFR students) in the hillfort ditch]

Background

Located in the UK, the 2016 University of Liverpool Archaeology Field School took place between July 16th-August 12th. This was the fifth season of excavation at Penycloddiau hillfort, Flintshire (North Wales) by the Department of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology, at the University of Liverpool. The Liverpool department ranks within the UK Top 5 for international archaeology research (REF2014, RAE 2008) – coming top in the UK for staff research outputs in the UK Government’s 2014 Research Excellence Framework.

The Liverpool team is working in partnership with Cadw (Welsh Assembly Government), Denbighshire County Council, and the University of Oxford excavations at neighbouring Bodfari hillfort. Our investigations aim to characterise the chronology and function of the Clwydian hillforts, via targeted excavation at the previously un-investigated contour-type hillfort of Penycloddiau; and update current understanding of the nature/chronology of later prehistoric settlement in North Wales, in line with current research frameworks both for Wales and the UK.

At 21 hectares, Penycloddiau hillfort is one of the largest pre-Roman Iron Age sites in the UK. Previous work suggests that similar large contour enclosures may be a very early type (c. 1000-500 BC) – as such, our excavations aim to help date the origins of the hillfort in western Britain.

Our excavation consists of two large open-area trenches:

Area 1: 36 m x 8 m across the hillfort earthworks: quarry scoop, inner rampart, ditch, outer bank

Area 3: 12 m x 12 m over a prehistoric house platform

Research accomplishments

Our 2016 research aims were to:

- Excavate the hillfort ditch to natural, record in section, and backfill with stone (Area 1)
- Excavate the roundhouse occupation deposits and floor – 100% sample (Area 3)

We achieved both aims. The hillfort ditch was found to be V-shaped, rock-cut, 1.9 m deep, and spatially linked to the external walkway around the hillfort's inner-rampart. Meanwhile, at the crest of the outer-rampart, a heavily-collapsed palisade-type feature was excavated: stone-packed, with a silt fill, the timbers had apparently decayed *in situ*, before collapsing west. Elsewhere, we continued excavating/recording the collapse sequence in the quarry scoop.

On the house platform, two ceramic base-sherds were retrieved from the occupation deposit (this is extremely rare for the region); we discovered that the house floor was of beaten-earth construction; and initial assessment of the heavy residues suggests a quantity of degraded low-quality ceramic in the floor itself. The floor was sampled according to a radial, spatial design.

Our 2017 season will see: completion of the house platform, including a section through the platform apron material; and full excavation through both inner and outer ramparts, to record construction sequences, gain samples for radiocarbon dating, and test for a pre-rampart phase.

Student contributions/involvement in research

With all late post-Medieval/Medieval deposits recorded in previous seasons, this year's students were able to excavate prehistoric archaeological deposits. Our students are very much at the trowel's edge, working with their supervisors – who are hands-on – to elucidate the stratigraphic sequence. This year, following their general training, our IFR students were tasked with excavating the palisade feature on the crest of the hillfort's outer bank. This was not an easy task, as the feature had been heavily destroyed upon collapse, but they did a really good job: retrieving all structural information and a 100% sample using opposing-quad section-excavation. In Area 3, students undertook the lifting and 100% sampling of the house floor.

Our IFR students also took part in our programme of heritage communication – giving site tours to visitors and guests, a big contribution towards helping the project to sustain what have become strong links with our project partners, and with the local community.

Dissemination

A web report will soon be live on the University of Liverpool's project webpages, and a comprehensive, open access interim report – documenting this year's excavations in detail – will also be available by January 2017. The project has a relatively strong social media presence, with over 1000 likes on Facebook (where our favourite photographs of the season have now been uploaded) and over 200 followers on Twitter. This season's excavation results will be discussed at the UK Hillforts Study Group meeting in November and a joint talk with Prof. Gary Lock (University of Oxford) has been requested by the Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust. We are currently in talks about collaborating with the AONB and archaeological cartoonist John Swogger (Çatalhöyük) regarding a project to disseminate excavation results to the wider community.