

Finding Duropolis

A new kind of Iron Age settlement

Investigating an enigmatic set of cropmarks has revealed a major new prehistoric settlement in Dorset. **Miles Russell and Paul Cheetham** describe how their search for Late Iron Age activity led to Duropolis.

Until 2012, our excavations at Winterborne Kingston, Dorset, were focused on an early Iron Age banjo enclosure and a later Iron Age 'Durotrigian' burial ground (CA 281). Quite where the people laid to rest in this cemetery had originally lived remained unknown. Then, in the exceptionally dry spring of 2012, something emerged in the fields to the immediate south of our site: a veritable 'rash' of pits, ditches, and lesser features. This was an exciting discovery – a previously unknown and apparently very large area of prehistoric occupation was sketched out in the ripening crop. Could it be what we had

been searching for since the start of the project: the settlement that had existed during the crucial years running up to the Roman conquest?

In search of the Durotriges

The Durotriges Project had been set up to investigate the transition between the late Iron Age and Roman period in Dorset. During the first six years, an early Iron Age banjo enclosure, a later Bronze Age settlement, a late Roman villa, a sub-Roman farmstead, and cemeteries dating from the late Neolithic, early Bronze Age, late Iron Age, and later Roman periods were all investigated. Unfortunately, there was one major omission in this otherwise excellent sequence of occupation and burial data: an omission that was, given the nature of the Durotriges Project, rather critical. We had not yet found a later Iron Age settlement.

The appearance of the cropmarks therefore came at an opportune moment. Checking with local metal-detectorists Clive Gibbs and Ian Darke, who had first drawn our attention to the area in 2008, they confirmed that the cropmarks



appeared in an area of farmland where small, but appreciable, quantities of later prehistoric and Roman metalwork had been located. With the permission of the landowner, Rebecca Hill, we conducted a quick surface collection survey that identified prehistoric pottery, including a small amount of Black Burnished Ware, the diagnostic type find of the later Iron Age in Dorset.

Enthused, we set out an area for geophysical survey in the late spring of 2015. This was completed by Dave Stewart, a key member of the Durotriges Project since its inception, who had just completed a (soon to be published) analysis of all hillfort interiors in Dorset. Undaunted by the scale of the task, he finished the survey in a matter of days, and immediately began processing the data. The results were exciting. Spreading out over a minimum of 20ha were a large number of pits and ditches, together with a suite of irregularly shaped features, possibly indicating areas of industrial activity. Within this zone, at least 20 ring ditches, between 10m and 15m in diameter, could clearly be identified. These features, which could only be prehistoric roundhouses, were not readily apparent in the cropmarks, and strongly suggested that we had indeed discovered an area of significant habitation.

Two areas measuring 20 × 20m were selected for sample excavation. Trench A was positioned in order to expose two potential roundhouses (the outer walls of which appeared to overlap, possibly providing a degree of chronological variation), together with 22 pits and a series of small ditches and other activity areas. Trench B was designed to examine a large and distinct roundhouse, measuring at least 15m in diameter, surrounded by a series of substantial ditches and at least 15

ABOVE In the dry spring of 2012 an enigmatic set of cropmarks drew attention to a previously unknown prehistoric settlement at Winterborne Kingston.

LEFT Trench B, one of two opened over the new Iron Age settlement in 2015. Intended to expose what appears to be a massive roundhouse gully, 15m in diameter, it also revealed the partial footprint of further buildings, and the residues of possible industrial, agricultural, and craft activity.

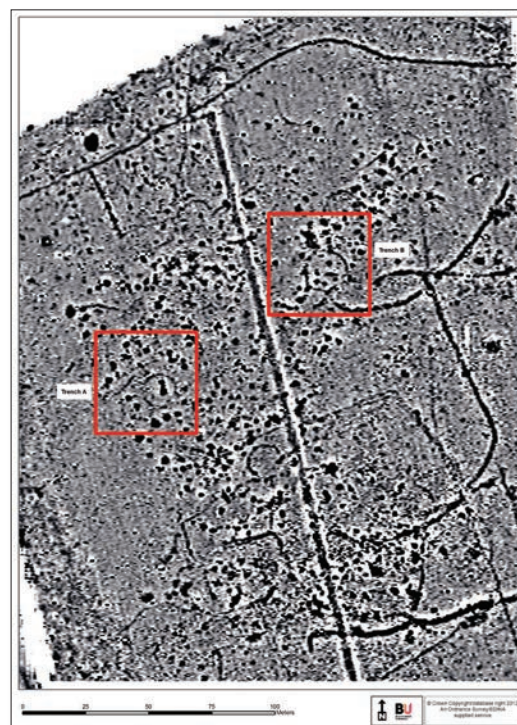
RIGHT The geophysical survey of the area that produced the cropmarks revealed an array of features. Two areas were selected for excavation, one seemingly featuring two intersecting buildings, and the other containing an apparent roundhouse 15m in diameter.

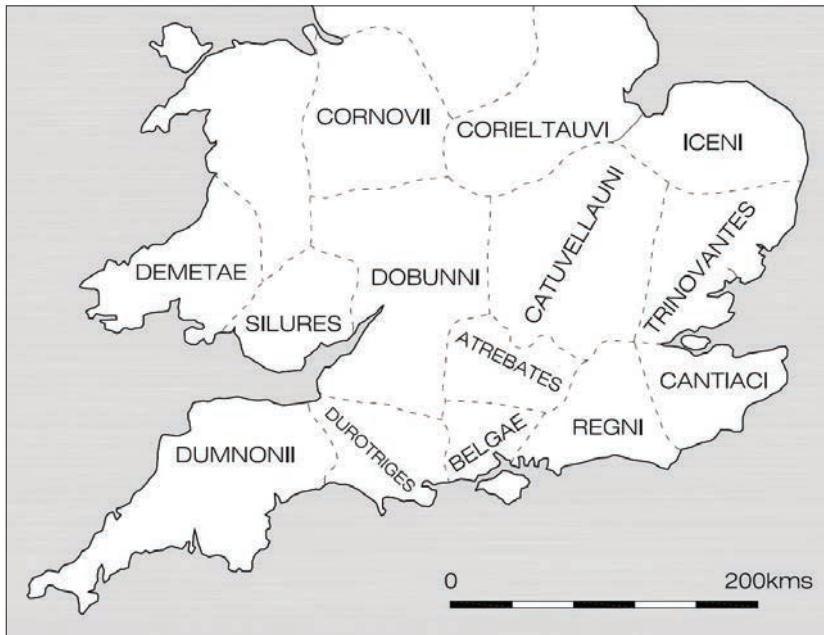
pits and other areas of possible industrial, craft or agricultural activity. Early in June 2015, having established a 'base camp', digging commenced.

Native resistance

The Durotriges were one of the few major Iron Age tribes in Britain identified and acknowledged by the Roman state in the later 1st century AD. Although we know nothing about their origins, history or social organisation – for like all pre-Roman communities in the British Isles, they stubbornly refused to write anything down – their cultural footprint is distinct. Occupying an area that roughly equates with modern-day Dorset, together with significant areas of southern Wiltshire and south-eastern Somerset, the pottery, coinage, and burial practices of the Durotriges, combined with their use of elaborately defended hillfort enclosures, mark them out from their contemporary neighbours, especially the Atrebates and the Belgae (to the east), and the Dumnonii and Dobunni (to the west and north).

The Durotriges' territory has been well served by archaeological investigation. From the work of Colonel Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers in the late 19th century, via Tessa and Mortimer Wheeler, Geoffrey Wainwright, Barry Cunliffe, Martin Green, and Lilian Ladle, among many others, a succession of key Iron Age sites in





ABOVE A plan showing the approximate boundaries of the major Iron Age tribes in southern England and southern Wales acknowledged by Rome.

the county has been exposed, excavated, and recorded. In recent years, National Trust archaeologist Martin Papworth has conducted a detailed reinvestigation of the various archaeological components that comprise the Durotriges, his work and publications helping to create a more balanced and objective understanding of the tribe.

Despite recent work, however, there is still a feeling that we remain in the shadow of Maiden Castle, arguably the most impressive Iron Age hillfort in Britain, which was memorably excavated by the husband-and-wife team of Tessa and Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s. It is almost impossible today to discuss the Durotriges without mentioning the Wheelers; so important was their investigation and subsequent publication of Maiden Castle, that it has impacted on all discussion of prehistoric Dorset. The Iron Age burials excavated within the eastern entrance of the hillfort, which lies a mere 16km from Winterborne Kingston, appealed to Mortimer Wheeler's sense of drama, offering him an opportunity to link the archaeological evidence

to a specific historical event, namely the Roman Conquest. At least 14 of the 52 bodies exhumed by the Wheelers showed signs of trauma, most clearly the famous burial of an adult male with an iron projectile, probably a bolt fired from a Roman *ballista* (catapult) embedded in his spine. As a former artillery officer, Wheeler found such evidence hard to resist, and his published report is a beautifully written, if semi-fictionalised, account of the industrial carnage resulting from a Roman assault.

Excavations directed by Sir Ian Richmond within the multivallate hillfort of Hod Hill, also in Dorset, in the 1950s, built on and developed the Wheeler story. Here, a series of iron projectiles, again interpreted as *ballista* bolts, were recovered. Richmond interpreted these as the residue of a withering Roman artillery barrage directed against the 'chieftain's hut', which undoubtedly brought about the defenders' capitulation. Unfortunately, Richmond's well-written report focused on the 'death' of the Iron Age settlement, rather than its occupation. Once again, the Durotriges were defined by their apparent fiery demise, instead of by their life and culture.

Whether one agrees with the approach taken by Richmond and the Wheelers or not, it can be difficult to see the archaeological reality beyond these evocative accounts. Wheeler's understanding of Maiden Castle has since been questioned, on the basis that signs of violent injury on the skeletons could relate to longer-term indigenous processes – such as sacrifice, execution or single combat – rather than a single dramatic event. But it is difficult, when looking at Iron Age Dorset, to extract oneself from the narrative of conquest and assimilation, a narrative that focuses on the notion of unrelenting Roman invaders brutally subduing the native population.

Digging the Durotriges

While not wishing to turn our backs on the excellent work of the Wheelers and Richmond, we wanted the Durotriges Project to provide a more nuanced approach to the past, moving away from the archaeo-historical accounts that have tended to dominate the literature. We also wanted to distance ourselves from the hillfort, a type of archaeological monument that has overshadowed most studies of the period, to see whether an examination of more open rural settlements could shed light on the true

BELOW The obverse and reverse of a Durotrigian coin found during the excavations.





nature of later Iron Age tribal society, and reveal what cultural aspects, if any, endured into the Roman period and beyond.

The fieldwork of the Durotriges Project forms an essential component of all undergraduate archaeological training at Bournemouth University. It is entirely funded, facilitated, and resourced by the Department of Archaeology, Anthropology and Forensic Science in the Faculty of Science and Technology. From the start of the Project, all survey, excavation, and post-excavation has been carried out by a combination of Bournemouth University staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, participants on the archaeological field school, and a variety of local volunteers. If it is sometimes an exhausting process, with anything up to 200 people participating daily, it is never less than rewarding. In 2015, however, the results were greater than we could ever have hoped for.

Surprising settlement

Both sample trenches revealed that the area had originally been far more densely occupied than we suspected. Although only three roundhouses were clear on the geophysical survey within the trenched areas, the footprints of at least 16 discrete buildings were revealed. The defining feature of each potential roundhouse was the 'ring gully', a shallow cut that seemed to represent

ABOVE The 2015 excavations from the air. In the foreground the large roundhouse in trench B is clearly visible, while beyond the intersecting gullies of two roundhouses in trench A appear as brown earth against the white chalk.

BELOW Trench A under excavation. The two intersecting roundhouses lie to the left of the photograph, while traces of a further five structures can be seen across the trench.

the foundation slot for a cob or wattle-and-daub wall. Where gaps in the gully circuit were identified, these faced in a south-easterly direction, towards the general direction of sunrise in mid-winter and, perhaps more critically, away from the prevailing wind, in the manner of many other, later prehistoric roundhouses. All ring gullies enclosed large pits that appeared to be broadly contemporary, although few traces of other internal elements, such as postholes were recorded. It is possible, of course, that such features have been removed by plough attrition.

Within and outside the areas defined by the ring gullies, a total of 18 cylindrical pits, measuring between 50cm and 2.5m in depth, were examined in 2015. As has already been noticed ➤





ABOVE One of the roundhouse gullies in trench B being recorded. Settlement within the excavated area proved to be far denser than initially suspected.

with regard to the Winterborne Kingston banjo enclosure (CA 281), the term ‘storage pit’ is traditionally applied when discussing such features, although no definitive evidence as to the nature of storage has yet been found. Presumably, if purely functional in purpose, the pits were designed to hold a particular type of foodstuff, such as dairy produce (in the manner of a cold store) or grain, with perhaps each pit or silo storing the surplus produce of a single agricultural cycle. Some of the pits, it was observed during the dig, had been backfilled shortly after they went out of use, while others had been allowed to weather for a considerable period of time before being filled in.

At the point of disuse, the majority of pits, where bottomed, were found to have contained a special, placed deposit. The nature of these deposits varied from pit to pit, one comprising the fully articulated remains of a dog. Others contained deposits of triangular baked-clay loom weights, quern stones, upended and perforated pots, or the inverted skulls of cow or horse; in one case, an articulated horse forelimb was extended with cow bone and an associated cow rib. The structured nature of deposition, and

the complete absence of what one may describe as disordered midden waste, makes it clear that these were not simple dumps of domestic refuse, but something rather more special. Similar deposits of sheep, dog, pig, and, in one special case, human bone had been noticed within the banjo enclosure, together with associated deposits of freshly dismembered horse and cow. No two patterns of deposition were directly comparable, but together they provide a window into the belief system of our Iron Age ancestors who were, perhaps, making offerings to their gods in order to guarantee the continued success and fertility of crops, herds, and community.

Three of the pits within trench A appear to have received secondary deposits placed on top of weathering cone fills, presumably at some significant time after formal pit abandonment but prior to the total backfilling and sealing of holes. One deposit comprised the articulated remains of a sheep, set down with the skull of a cow placed directly against its posterior; a second consisted of the fully articulated remains of three pigs, laid out in careful order. Presumably all three had been killed together, and buried within pit-fill as an offering. After these placed deposits were inserted, they were sealed by fully backfilling the pit in a single, swift operation.

At least seven areas of quarrying and additional activity were encountered within the trenches. Three such areas within the more northerly trench B were closely associated with charcoal, baked clay, iron slag, at least one possible furnace bottom, and a small number of lead and copper alloy droplets. It is probable, therefore, that activities focusing around the potential roundhouses included iron metallurgy and the

BELOW One of the cylindrical pits emptied during the excavations (**LEFT**), and another containing horse and cow bones (**RIGHT**). Here, an articulated horse forelimb is associated with two cow bones.





“Creating a catchy name for the site that is not covered by established terminology, yet conveys its unusualness and regionality, was irresistible.”

reworking of bronze. The processing and preparation of food, weaving and textile manufacture, as well as the manufacture of pottery and other ceramic artefacts such as loom weights may also have occurred here.

It is not known at this stage whether all the gullies represented ‘houses’ in the conventional sense, as opposed to lesser structures or specific areas of defined or enclosed activity, nor whether they were all occupied (or used) at the same time. Similarly, we cannot be sure that all of the pits and postholes recorded were part of the same phase of occupation and activity. A date range for settlement, in the absence of radiocarbon determinations, which are currently being resolved, is provided by the artefactual, and particularly the ceramic, assemblage. These indicate that the major phase of activity was between c.200-50 BC. This is clearly a settlement of the middle to late Iron Age, albeit one that did not, at least in the areas so far exposed, continue on into the Roman period.

Despite these uncertainties, it is clear that the number and density of structures recorded within the two trenches suggests a significant period of occupation, one that seems all the more unusual in that it does not appear to have been fully enclosed, nor defined by a rampart and ditch in the form of a hillfort, *oppidum*, or other enlarged farm. If the numbers of ring-gullies revealed within trenches A and B continued across the entirety of the area of geophysical survey, we would expect somewhere between 150 and 200 roundhouses, a number

ABOVE Three pig skeletons at the bottom of a storage pit. Were these animals killed to appease the gods?

BELOW A storage pit under excavation, with a horse’s skull appearing at its base.

unheard of in Dorset and the South-west outside the security of a hillfort (indeed covering an area comparable to that of the interiors of many of the Dorset hillfort enclosures). This, of course, creates a problem, for how does one refer to the site without recourse to standardised archaeological monument descriptions?

Defining ‘Duropolis’

During the days that followed the first exposure of our potential roundhouses, we were visited repeatedly by reporters and journalists. It soon became clear that simply describing the site in a factual sense – ‘what we have here is a large, apparently unenclosed, later Iron Age settlement comprising multiple ring gullies, some of which may or may not be roundhouses, surrounded by a host of pits and activity areas’ – was not doing us any favours (and may well have left some listeners feeling drowsy). What we needed was a name for the site: a shorthand that could be used without reference to existing terminology, for the site was clearly not an *oppidum*, hillfort or banjo enclosure. Hence we coined the name ‘Duropolis’.

When you examine it closely, ‘Duropolis’ is a fairly meaningless term for the settled area, as Winterborne Kingston is clearly not a *polis* (in the ancient Greek sense), and neither is it securely related to the main phase of Durotrigian activity (which seems to be focused more in the early 1st century AD) – but then that is the point. Creating a catchy name for the site that is not covered by established terminology, yet conveys a sense of unusualness and regionality, was irresistible. In the sense of gaining press and public attention, it also proved invaluable. Some papers, of course, managed to make the discovery of Duropolis ‘beneath the fields of Dorset’ sound as if we had stumbled on a long-lost civilisation (the ➤



Getting involved

More fieldwork is being planned for Duropolis in order to clarify the extent, nature, and chronology of the prehistoric community revealed at Winterborne Kingston in June and July 2016. If you would like to participate in the field school, volunteer or visit on the public open day, please email us at enquiries@bournemouth.ac.uk or access details on our website at <https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/study/courses/durotriges-big-dig>


RIGHT Machine clearance of trench A at the beginning of the 2015 excavations.



British equivalent of Atlantis, perhaps), but most reported the site factually and objectively.

Intriguingly, the excavations at Maiden Castle in the 1980s by Niall Sharples, which revised the Wheelers' phasing, demonstrated that occupation of that particular hillfort had been in sharp decline from 100 BC. Is it possible that Duropolis was an example of the type of settlement that came to prominence just as the hillforts became less relevant and depopulated? Does Duropolis herald the end of hillfort culture in Dorset, and represent a period of social and political stability that has previously gone unidentified in a climate of interpretation focused on conflict and conquest? If so, could Duropolis be less the Dorset equivalent of a 'lost' civilisation (an Atlantis) than perhaps a Shangri-La?

To modern eyes, Duropolis seems unusual. It was a late and apparently large, substantially unenclosed settlement in a part of Iron Age Britain where such a dense concentrations of people should not, apparently, exist. We do not yet know, though, just how exceptional or typical Duropolis was in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. Geophysical survey at a number of sites elsewhere in the South-west, including Carrun Farm and Middle Amble Farm by Mark Borlase in Cornwall (CA 309), suggest that they may actually be quite

common. Perhaps we have been so fixated on the more prominent side of the later Iron Age – the *oppidum*, hillfort, and banjo enclosure – that we simply have not noticed, nor indeed looked for, the less obviously monumental. Perhaps more 'Duropolitan' settlements exist out there on the lower-lying slopes of Dorset, Devon, and Cornwall. Only further fieldwork will tell us. One thing is clear, however, our present understanding of the nature and level of social organisation in the late Iron Age of south-western Britain would appear to be profoundly flawed. 

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FURTHER READING

J Gale (2003) *Prehistoric Dorset*, History Press.
M Papworth (2011) *The Search for the Durotriges*, History Press.

BELOW The 'Durotrigan wave'. Students participating in the excavation mark out in exuberant style the outer wall of an Iron Age roundhouse.

