Excavations at Moel y Gaer, Denbighshire, Wales

Moel y Gaer is the northern most of a series of hill-forts in the Clwydian Mountains all of which are very poorly understood in terms of function and dating. Basic survey of six forts was carried out by the Heather and Hill-forts Project run by Denbighshire County Council. This began in 2011 with extensive LiDAR analysis and a range of geophysical surveys followed in 2012-16 by Phase 1 targeted excavation. Phase 2 of the work will cover the period 2017-20. The importance of hill-forts for understanding the north Welsh Iron Age settlement record has been emphasised within several recent research agendas and in response to this Bodfari is the only hill-fort within the Clwydians with complete geophysical coverage and integrated excavation.

Phase 1 excavations concentrated on a section of middle rampart and a round house positioned on an artificially levelled platform. The rampart was particularly exciting being stone built and having two and possibly three phases of building. One of the problems with the Iron Age of North Wales is the lack of material culture and an absence of pottery. We have been able to obtain a radiocarbon date for the roundhouse of 300-200 cal BC from bone which, again, is extremely rare for Clwydian hill-forts. More radiocarbon dates from charcoal beneath the rampart are in process.

Phase 2 excavations, 2017-2020, will concentrate on the possible entrance to the west and the northern in turned entrance. These will be the first hill-fort entrances to be excavated in the Clwydians and the western one is of particular importance as it may represent an early phase in the hill-fort development before the northern main entrance was constructed together with multivallation around much of the enclosure circuit.
The evidence for this early univallate phase is a robbed out inner rampart within two trenches excavated as part of Phase 1. Phase 2 will attempt to confirm this by exploring a length of this rampart that includes a possible entrance suggested by minimal early 20 century excavations. The main in turned northern entrance which is part of the later multivallate enclosure will also be explored.

The excavation has a ‘core team’ of 12 experienced people and also attracts many volunteers both local and from further afield including local school pupils and local archaeological society members. Training is given in excavation methods together with general discussions about the Welsh Iron Age, we also hold an Open Day and visits organised by Denbighshire County Council. Funding for this work comes from a variety of sources and the grant from the Mick Aston Archaeology Fund is going towards excavation costs and on-site facilities. There are also two artists in residence on the excavation who are producing work which will be displayed in a local gallery.

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