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Interpretierte Eisenzeiten 7. Fallstudien - Methoden - Theorie.

Published: 20/12/2017

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Karl, R. (2017). In charge since time immemorial? Disused monumental features as markers of inherited social status. In R. Karl, & J. Leskovar (Eds.), *Interpretierte Eisenzeiten 7. Fallstudien - Methoden - Theorie.: Tagungsbeiträge der 7. Linzer Gespräche zur interpretativen Eisenzeitarchäologie.* (Vol. 47, pp. 75-90). (Studien zur Kulturgeschichte von Oberösterreich; Vol. 47). Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum.

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In charge since time immemorial? Disused monumental features as markers of inherited social status

Raimund Karl

Abstract

Some later Bronze and Iron Age settlements in Britain are characterised by enclosing features. Particularly on sites occupied continuously for considerable lengths of time, these features were re-configured ever so often. Some of the old banks and ditches seem to have become disused, while others were newly erected right next to them.

The construction of new, additional, banks and ditches – a process usually referred to as ‘multivallation’ – has often been interpreted as an expression of social competition. By investing in conspicuous consumption of labour, communities would express their social and economic potency. Grandiose displays of monumentalised settlement architecture – often ‘useless’ in terms of defence or any other ‘practical’ purpose – would show that a community had resources to spare.

But why, then, let some of the old banks crumble? In this paper, it is argued that letting some banks crumble was at least equally significant as building new ones, because it demonstrated other, even more important qualities of a community: pedigree and permanence. New walls can easily be built by anyone, if he be sufficiently determined, including any social upstart. Old, crumbling banks, on the other hand, cannot easily be faked: they demonstrate that a community has been important since time immemorial, and thus has been, and can be, relied upon, not just today, but forever.

Zusammenfassung

Manche spätbronze- und eisenzeitliche Siedlungen in Großbritannien kennzeichnen sich durch Einfriedungen. Insbesondere auf lange besiedelten Fundstellen wurden diese Einfriedungen immer wieder einmal neu konfiguriert. Manche alte Wälle und Gräben scheinen außer Gebrauch gekommen zu sein, während neue direkt neben ihnen errichtet wurden.

Die Errichtung neuer, zusätzlicher Wälle und Gräben – ein als „Mehrfachumwallung“ bezeichnetes Phänomen – ist oft als Ausdruck sozialen Wettbewerbs interpretiert worden. Durch großartige Konsumation von Arbeitskraft würden Siedlungsgemeinschaften ihre soziale und wirtschaftliche Potenz zum Ausdruck bringen. Grandiose Inszenierungen monumentalisierter Siedlungsarchitektur – oft „nutzlos“ für Verteidigungs- oder andere „praktische“ Zwecke – würde gezeigt, dass eine Siedlungsgemeinschaft über einen Überschuss an Ressourcen verfügen konnte.

Aber weshalb lässt man dann manche der alten Wälle verfallen? In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass es wenigstens ebenso signifikant war, alte, verfallende Wälle vorweisen zu können wie neue zu bauen; denn diese bewiesen andere, noch wichtigere, Qualitäten einer Siedlungsgemeinschaft: Abstammung und Dauerhaftigkeit. Neue Wälle können einigermaßen leicht von jedem erbaut werden, wenn er nur entsprechend motiviert ist, inklusive von sozialen Aufsteigern. Alte, verfallende Wälle hingegen lassen sich nicht leicht fälschen: sie beweisen, dass eine Gemeinschaft seit langer Zeit bedeutend war, und man sich auf sie verlassen konnte und weiterhin verlassen kann, nicht nur heute, sondern für alle Zukunft.

British late Bronze and Iron Age enclosed settlements with a long occupation sequence often show a complex development of architectural features, particularly of relatively labour-intensive enclosing features. For instance, at the site of *Meillionydd* on the Llŷn peninsula in North-West Wales (fig. 1), which Kate Waddington, Katharina Möller and I have been excavating since 2010, continual occupation lasted for something between 400 to 600 years. After having excavated approximately one quarter of the site, we can distinguish roughly 8 main occupation phases, some with several sub-phases.

COMPLEX OCCUPATION SEQUENCES, RETENTION OF ERODING BANKS

Meillionydd

Like many other sites, the settlement at *Meillionydd* starts – in this case probably still in the late Bronze Age, around the 8th–7th century BC – as an open settlement. The earliest main building phase with its two sub-phases (Ia and Ib; fig. 2) is characterised by timber buildings, some of considerable size (of up to c. 14 meters diameter), clustering relatively loosely on a small ridge jutting out from the

slopes of *Mynydd Rhiw*. In these earliest phases of occupation, the settlement seems to have been unenclosed.

In the second main building phase, which has three sub-phases (IIa, IIb, and IIc; fig. 2), the site is enclosed for the first time, with a system of two concentric ditches, with a rather shallow, c. 2 m wide outer and a considerably deeper, equally wide inner u-shaped ditch, set about 3 meters apart. A few meters inside of the inner ditch, the site also seems to have been additionally enclosed by a strong timber fence; with an easterly-facing gatehouse set inside the earth bridge across the ditches. In the last of these three sub-phases, the road going into the enclosure was also metalled, with the metalling partially overlaying the northern terminal of the inner u-shaped ditch. This first enclosed phase seems to be dating to the early Iron Age; since some deposited Iron objects, including a spearhead, were found in the infill of that inner ditch. Still, the houses in the site were timber-built, with some of them reaching sizes of up to c. 15 meters in diameter.

The next main phase, with another two sub-phases (3a, 3b; fig. 3), saw a major architectural re-design of the site. Where house-building is concerned, the site's occupants switched to stone-built roundhouses, characterised by house walls with c. 1 m wide earth and rubble wall cores with more or less nicely set inner and outer dry-

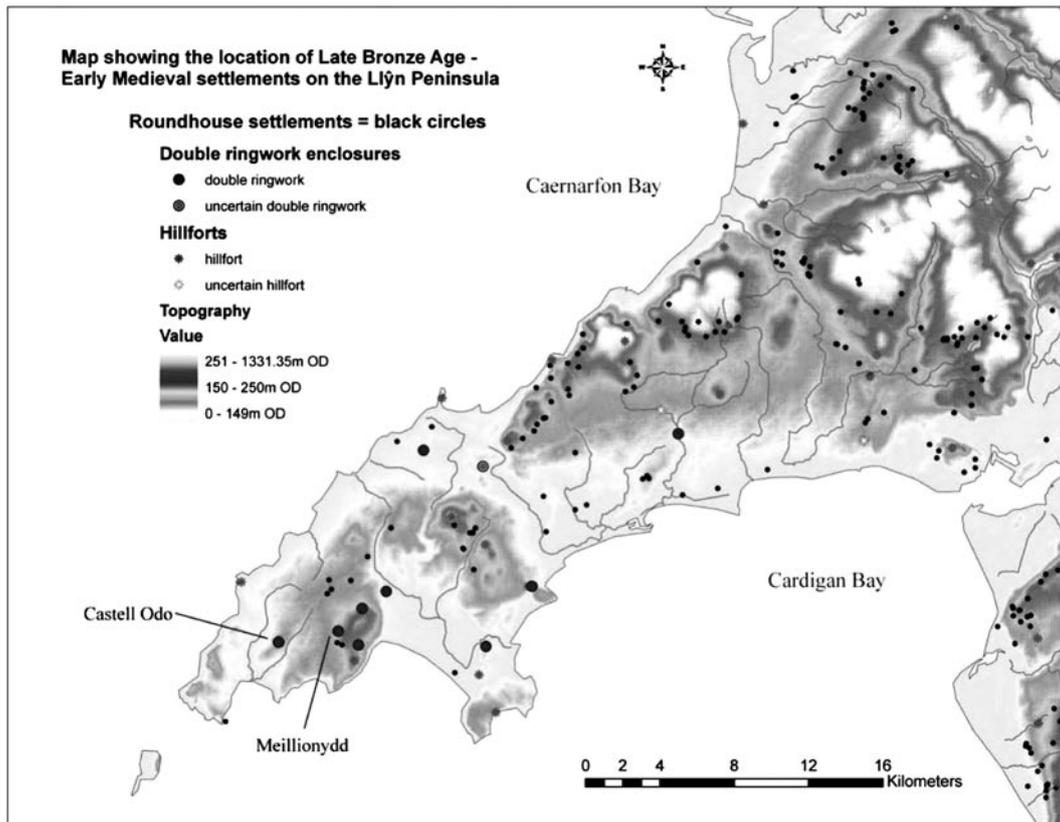


Fig. 1: 1st millennium BC and AD settlements on the Llŷn peninsula, North West Wales (image: K. Waddington).

stone facings. The diameters of the houses range from c. 4–5 meters (mainly for houses built between the inner and outer enclosing bank) to c. 6–8 meters (mainly for houses built along the inner side of the inner bank) and up to c. 10 meters (inside the inner enclosure, particularly the roundhouse facing the gate passage through both enclosing banks). Similarly, they replaced the ditches and timber fence surrounding their settlement with a double ringwork enclosure; consisting of two narrowly spaced concentric banks with c. 2.5–4 m wide earth and rubble cores and drystone inner and outer facings. This impressive double embankment – with banks originally presumably c. 2–2.5 meters high based on the tumble of the inner and outer facing collapse – also included an impressive inner entrance with a c. 4 m wide, c. 10 m long inturn. In this inturned entrance passage, a sizeable gatehouse (or even gate tower) was erected to make the inner gate even more impressive. In the second sub-phase, this gatehouse was replaced by yet another one of a similar size, and the

inner bank seems to have been partially repaired, as is indicated by a second set of inner facing, set about a meter inside an earlier nicely set inner facing, on the western side of the enclosure.

Yet, this rather impressively elaborated entrance into the site cannot have lasted overly long: already in phase 4 – presumably less than a century after the impressive gate had been built – that gate passage was completely blocked by the construction of a small, c. 4 m inner diameter, roundhouse right in the middle of it (fig. 3). This roundhouse, in the following phase 5, was replaced by yet another one, sitting slightly further to the east but equally completely obstructing the former gate passage (fig. 3). Since there as yet is no clear evidence of any other (westerly) entrance into the inner enclosure, it has thus to be presumed that by phase 4, the inner bank had been mostly abandoned and was eroding, though evidence from the 2017 excavations seems to indicate that the outer bank was still maintained.

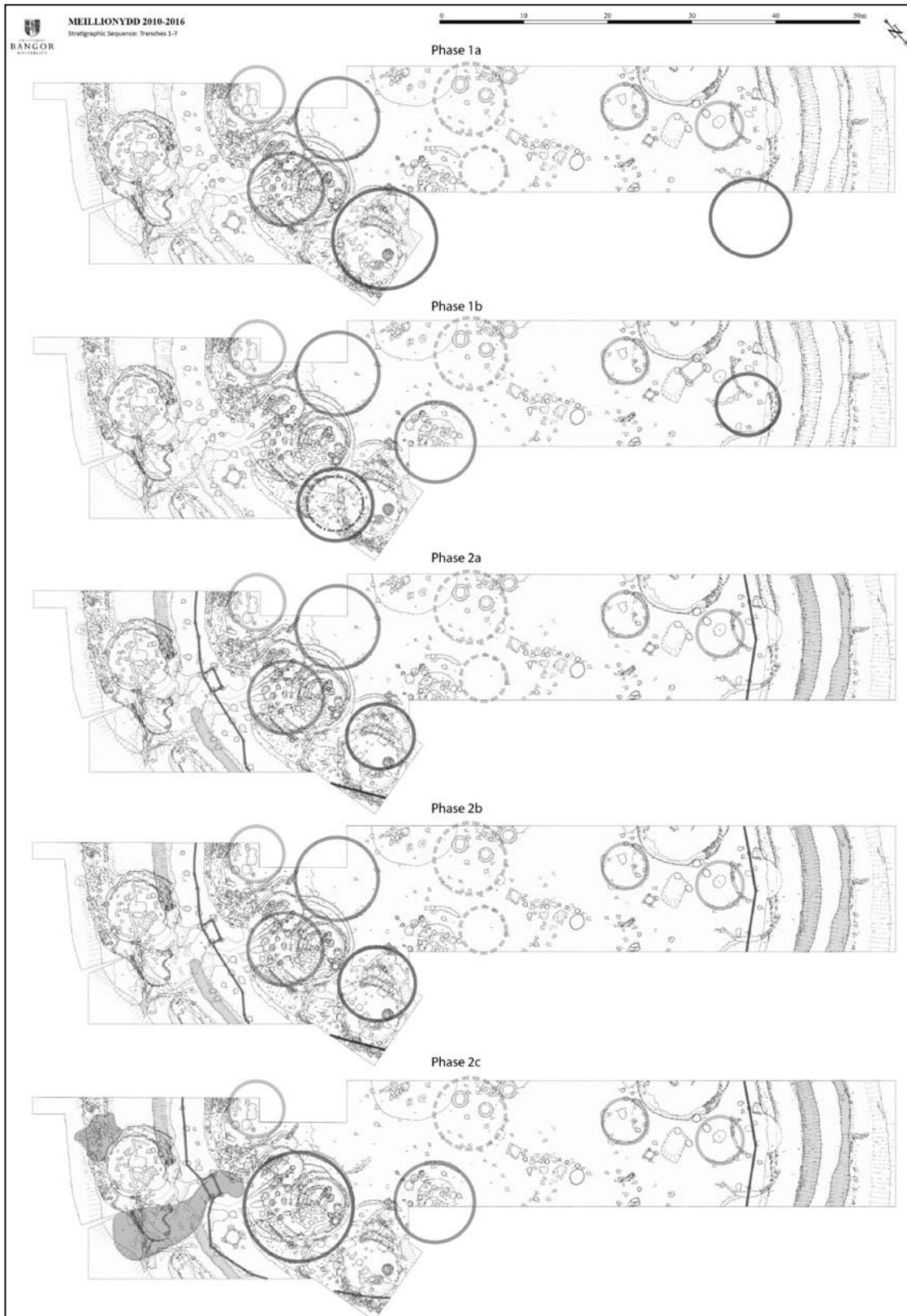


Fig. 2: Phases 1 a, b and 2 a, b, c of the occupation sequence at Meillionydd (excavations 2010–2016).

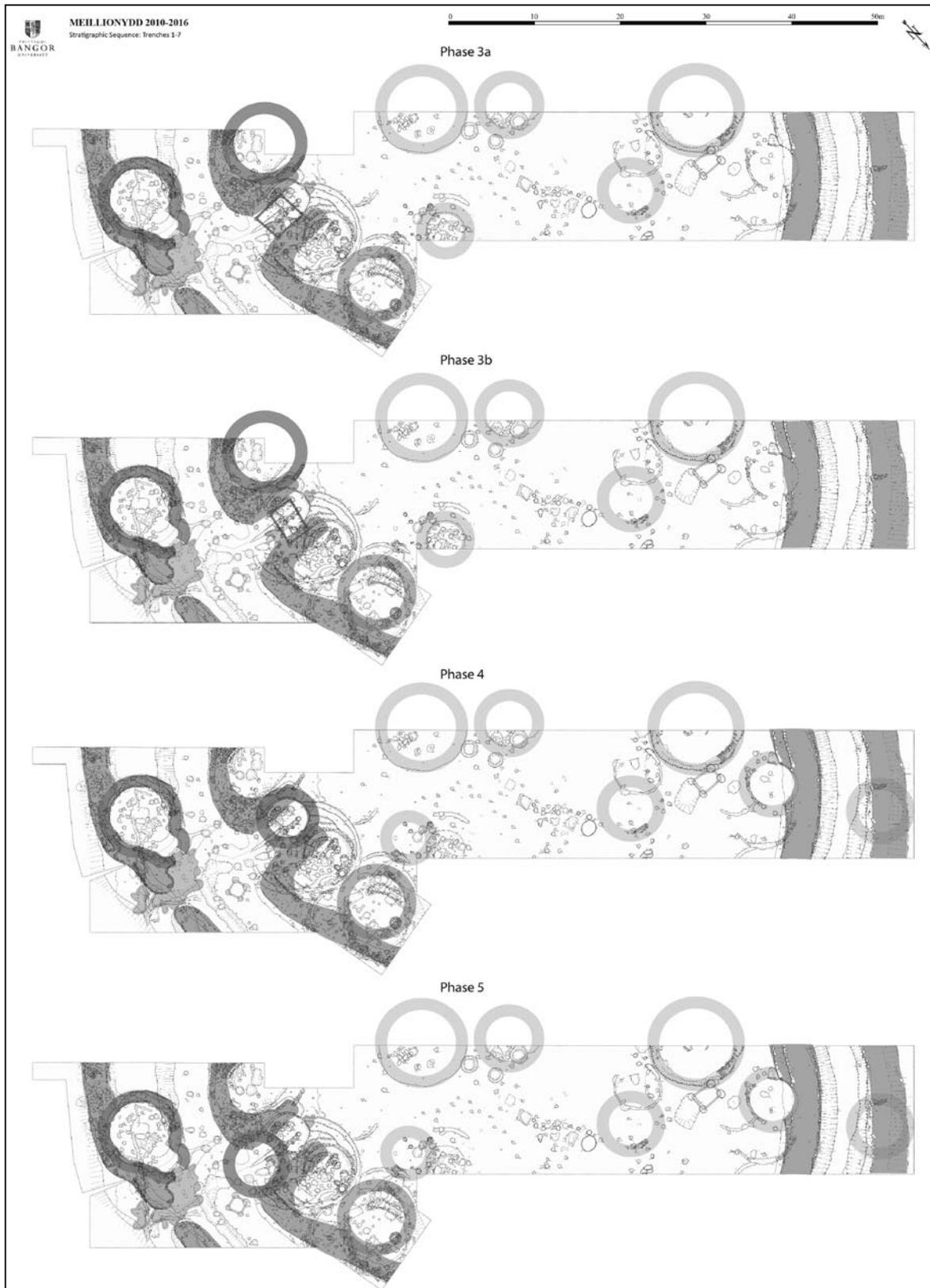


Fig. 3: Phases 3 a, b, 4 and 5 of the occupation sequence at Meillionydd (excavations 2010-2016).

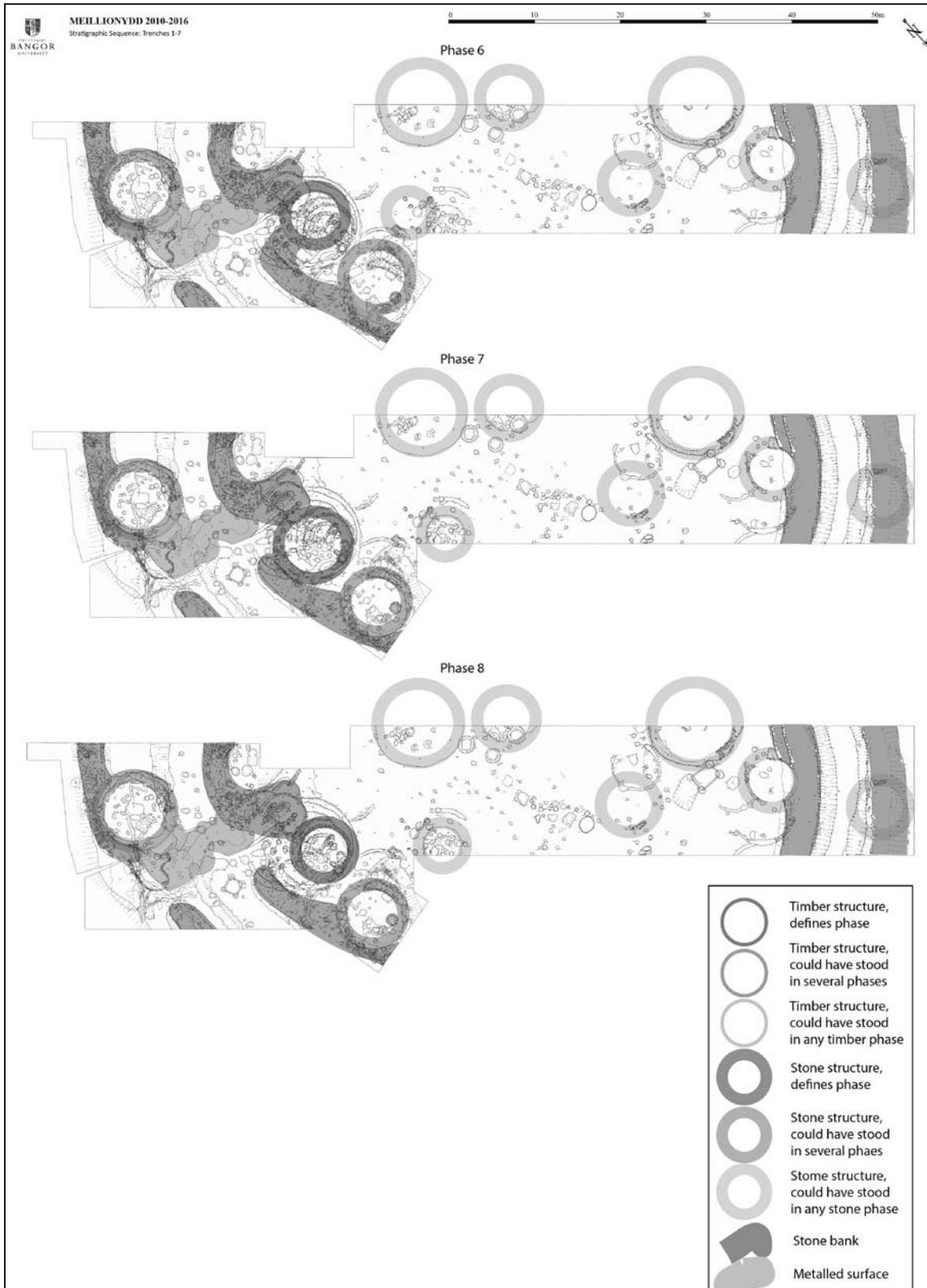


Fig. 4: Phases 6, 7 and 8 of the occupation sequence at Meillionydd (excavations 2010–2016).

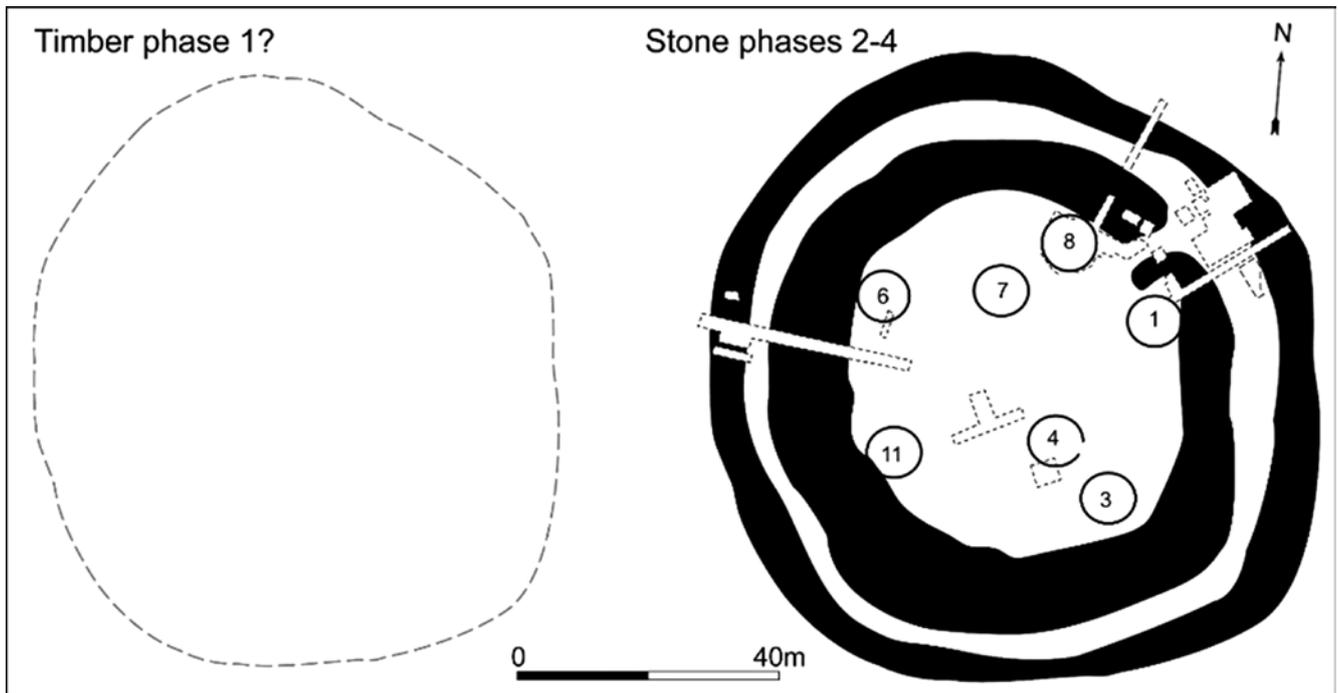


Fig. 5: Phases 1 and 2-4 of the occupation sequence at Castell Odo (Waddington 2013: 209).

That the inner bank, and presumably also the outer bank, had been mostly abandoned by phase 6 and continued to erode throughout the rest of the occupation of the site (up to and including phase 8) is indicated by the presence of a metallised road surface, running across the southern terminals of both the outer (where it also removed parts of the roundhouse in the southern terminal of the outer bank) and the inner bank (fig. 4). In addition, further intensive roundhouse building activity during these phases in the inner entrance area removed almost completely the remaining traces of the northern inturned terminal of the phase 3 inner bank; indicating that by this stage, the site had returned to be a mostly 'open' site, enclosed (if one can claim as much) only by the last crumbling remains of what had formerly been the sizeable and impressive banks enclosing the site.

This sequence of occupation events – a change from unenclosed, to lightly enclosed, to monumentally enclosed, before returning (albeit slowly) to less and ultimately unenclosed again – would fit well with a traditional 'standard' interpretative narrative; a narrative which could be summarised under the catchy title of 'the rise and fall of the lords of Meillionydd'. Presuming – as is often done – that labour investment into enclosure, and

especially relatively conspicuous consumption of human labour on 'private' monumental features, indicates success in status competition within the wider community, this narrative seems sensible enough. One might suppose, based on this presumption, that the status of Meillionydd's inhabitants increased, slowly but steadily, until its pinnacle in phase 3 with the monumental elaboration of its enclosing features. Then, however, there was a reversal in the fates of Meillionydd's inhabitants, and equally slowly but steadily, they slipped down the social ladder until, at the latest by phase 6 of the occupation, possibly around the start of the Middle Iron Age, they and their settlement had become quite 'ordinary' again.

Castell Odo

This traditional interpretation also fits well with some other similar sites, like that of *Castell Odo*, which lies just 3 miles west of Meillionydd, as the bird flies and is contemporary with it. There, limited excavations by Leslie Alcock (1960) in the late 1950s revealed a similar occupation sequence, even if the sequence uncovered by Alcock seems a bit simpler than the one we uncovered at

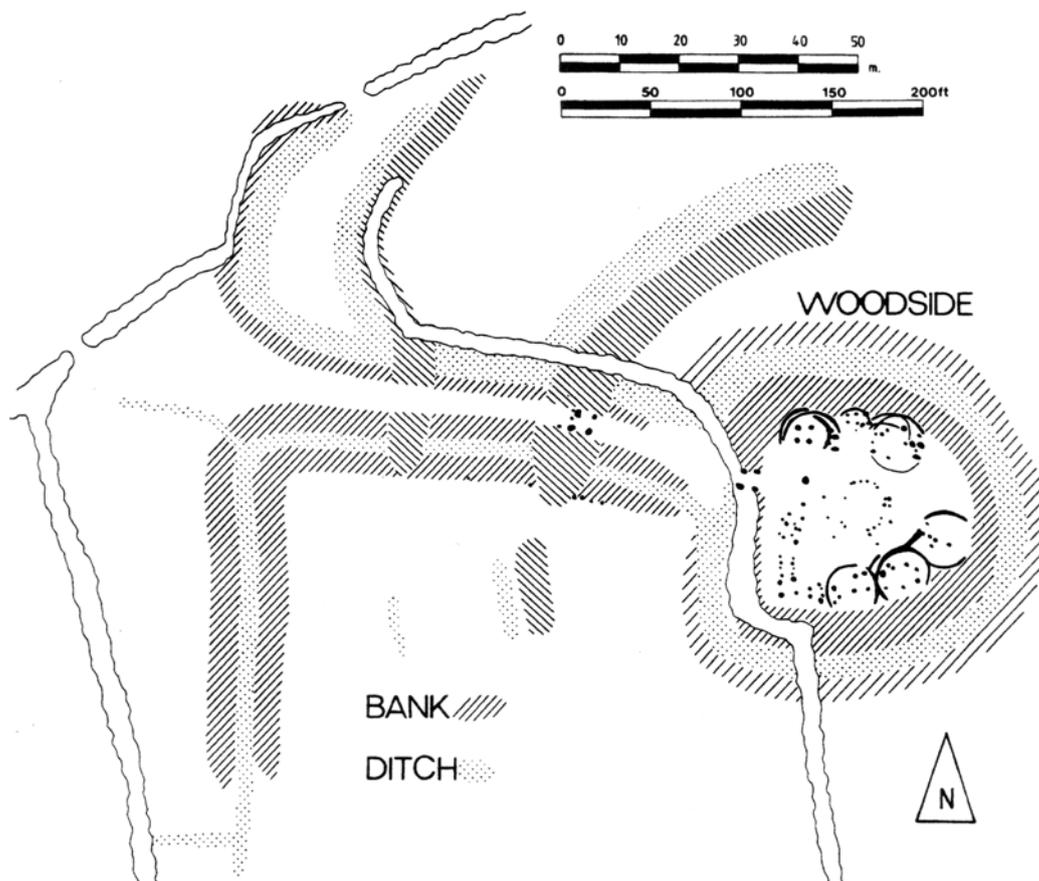


Fig. 6: Woodside enclosure (adapted from Williams 1988: 37).

Meillionydd: Alcock established only 4 separate building phases. Of those, the first one was a settlement enclosed by a timber palisade (phase 1; fig. 5). This was followed by 3 stone phases (phases 2-4). In the first of those, the site was transformed into a double ringwork enclosure, quite comparable to Meillionydd's phase 3, also with a developed inturned gate passage through the inner bank. This entrance, however, was severely damaged by later roundhouse building activity in the subsequent phases (phases 3-4), with the northern terminal of the inturned entrance through the inner bank obliterated nearly completely by roundhouses constructed on top and/or into it. Thus, in its later phases, Castell Odo's inner bank, much like Meillionydd's, must have become obsolete, while still being present as an eroding feature, as it still is today. Thus, Castell Odo would also fit this traditional interpretative narrative: the 'lords of Castell Odo' first rose to prominence, only to see their fortunes reversed after the double ringwork had been built, with their set-

tlement as much as their own status turning to 'ordinary' again by, at the latest, Alcock's phase 4.

Woodside

Yet, that straightforward interpretative narrative of the rise and fall of the fortunes of the inhabitants of a particular settlement become somewhat more difficult to maintain in some other cases. For instance, at *Woodside* in South West Wales, George Williams and Harold Mytum (1998: 17-21), observed a rather more curious entrance redesign sequence of the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. Woodside enclosure is characterised particularly by its impressively designed entrance, which in an earlier phase of construction consisted of an extended embanked and ditched inturned entrance passage, with a massive outer gatehouse ca. 2/3rd along its course towards the inner enclosure (fig. 6), which seems to have been con-

temporary with the actual inner enclosure, which, in its gap, contained an inner substantial gatehouse (Williams, Mytum 1998: 17–8). Yet, that ‘outer bank’ had never fully enclosed the site itself completely, but instead terminated some 50 meters north and south of the entrance itself: it was more ‘for show’ than for any other purpose, a monumentalised approach without any real function. In a later construction phase, that entrance passage was significantly remodelled by the addition of 2 additional ‘new’ lines of banks with outlying ditches (Williams, Mytum 1998: 20–21). Yet, not only did those new banks close off the ‘impressive’ earlier entrance passage completely and open up another way into the site just south of where the ‘original’ gate passage had been, building over the ‘outer gatehouse’ in the process; but they are also only relatively short stretches of embankment which never surrounded the site completely. Also, the earlier inner bank, which completely enclosed the settlement itself in the earlier construction phase seems not to have been maintained anymore in that latter building phase, but remained present as a slowly eroding feature only. Thus, in its later occupation phase, the site seems to have been mostly unenclosed, but elaborated with two substantial but pointless bank and ditch segments cutting across the former gate passage.

This, obviously, does not fit as nicely with the ‘rise and fall’ narrative as the Meillionydd and Castell Odo sequences. If the increasing status of the ‘lords of Woodside’ was expressed by monumental enclosure and entrance elaboration of their settlement in the earlier phase, what happened then in the later phase? Was their status expressed some more by the later banks? Did their status change, but only somewhat? Was it reaffirmed by new building activity, but not quite, because the new banks were, as far as can be said, never intended as a new ‘full’ enclosure of the site; which could much easier be had by repairing the old inner bank? And why, indeed, was labour invested into new banks which did not properly enclose the site, but the eroding inner bank not repaired?

Collfryn

Yet other sites, like *Collfryn* (Britnell 1989: fig. 7), create even greater challenges for the traditional narrative of the rise to prominence and fall of (the inhabitants of) a settlement site. Having been occupied from the Mid-

dle Iron Age to the Romano-British period, *Collfryn* is characterised by having 3–4 sub-rectangular, more or less concentric banks. Yet, these banks are not contemporary with each other. Rather, the site is enclosed by three banks in the Middle Iron Age, with an elaborated, complex outer entrance between the outermost and middle and a relatively simple gate through the inner bank. In the Late Iron Age, the former outer and middle bank are left to slowly erode, while a new bank is constructed in the space between the former middle and the inner bank. *Collfryn* thus is turned into a narrow bivallate enclosure with two further, old, eroding banks just outside. This is changed yet again in the Romano-British period, where the former middle and the inner bank are at least partially reused for turning the site into a double palisaded enclosure, and a new, relatively elaborate entrance passage or fenced path is created between them.

Such a sequence is quite difficult to square with the narrative of the rise and fall of a site: the status of the settlement seems to be expressed throughout its occupation, but the enclosing features re-arranged and re-defined ever so often. But while there continues to be considerable labour investment into the monumentalisation of the site throughout much of its occupation, its inhabitants, for no apparent reason, leave some of the banks of former occupation phases in disrepair, as slowly crumbling landscape features. As the construction of new banks demonstrates, they had the necessary manpower available that would have been needed to maintain the existing banks in decent repair, but chose not to do. Since they will hardly have tried to keep their settlement looking run-down, this obviously intentional choice must have had another reason.

BANK-BUILDING AS AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL STATUS

The idea that architectural monumentalisation of private spaces – as enclosed settlements, and especially enclosed farm- or ‘homesteads’ are – serves as an expression of status is neither new nor contentious. Architectural monumentalisation is conspicuous consumption of human labour, a resource particularly significant in all, and especially in pre-modern, pre-monetary societies, in which mobilising a sizeable workforce is difficult and requires complex mechanisms of creating social obligations (see Karl 2014;

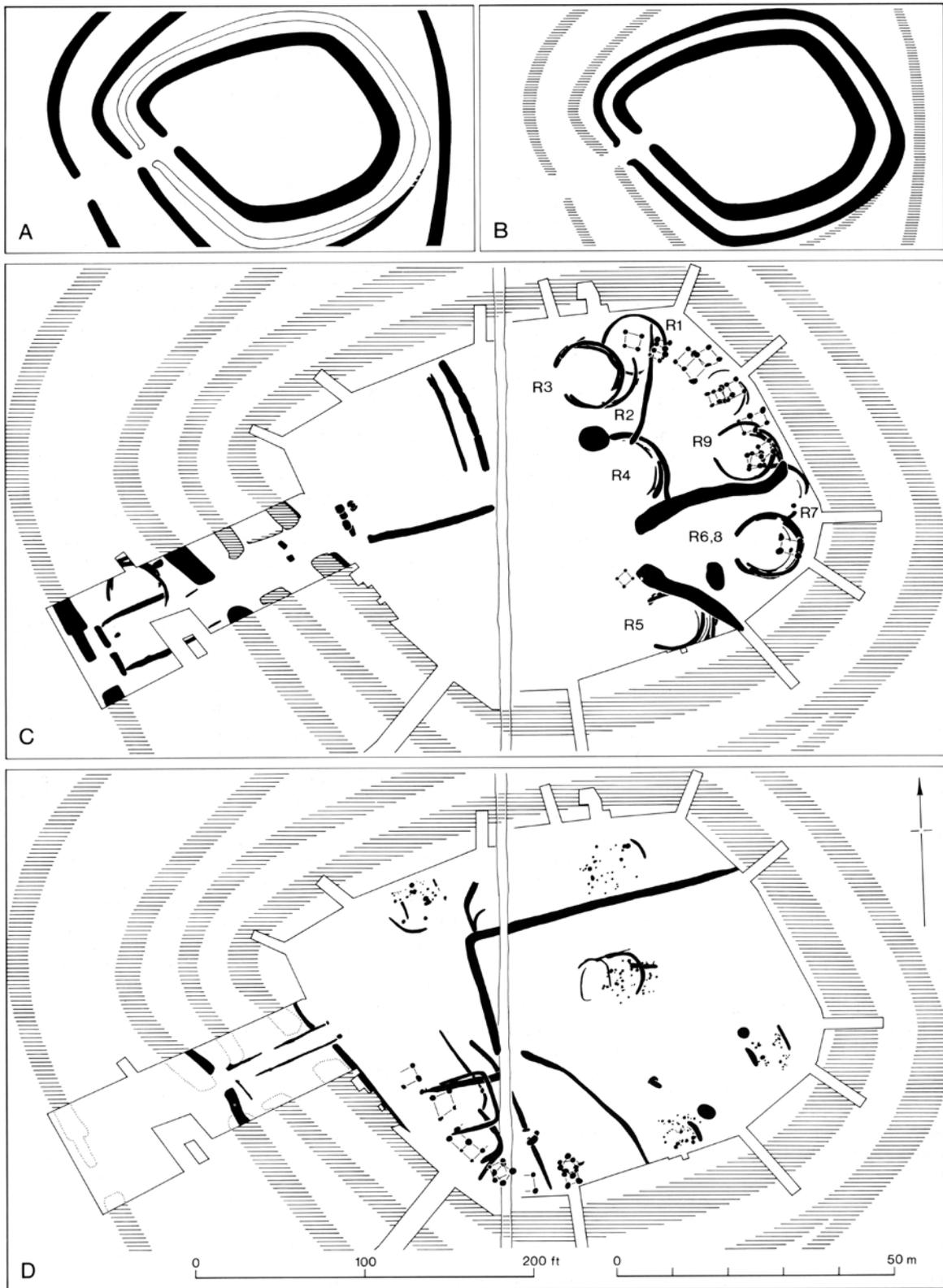


Fig. 7: Collfryn: A. Banks of the 3rd-2nd cent. BC, B. Late Iron Age Banks (grey: old banks showing no signs of ongoing repairs), C. Iron Age structures on the site, D. Romano-British structures on the site (Musson 1991: 188).

2015). As I already have argued elsewhere (Karl 2007: 66–7), particularly ‘wasteful’ projects, that is, projects where human labour is expended on projects which serve little to no ‘practical’ purpose, like constructing ‘useless’ banks as in the case of Woodside, serve particularly well to show that whoever could invest human labour so wastefully had control over a substantial surplus of manpower; that they indeed controlled so much manpower that they could expend it for no other purpose than fanciful follies. That, of course, particularly in pre-modern, pre-monetary societies where control over manpower had to be based on a tightly woven network of binding social obligations, was clearly a particularly powerful indicator of social significance, power, and status.

In Wales, a significant shift in the focal point for the expenditure of human labour can be observed, roughly, in the period between the late Middle Bronze and the beginning of the Iron Age, that is, roughly 300 years either side of 1,000 BC (Lynch 2000; Davies, Lynch 2000). Before that shift, architectural monumentality is mostly found in ‘communal’ ritual contexts, like stone and timber circles, henge monuments, communal barrows etc. After that shift, it can mostly be found in ‘individual’ settlement contexts, that is, in ‘hillforts’ and hillslope and lowland ‘enclosed homesteads’ like Meillionydd, Castell Odo, Woodside or Collfryn. This indicates that during the Late Bronze Age, conspicuous consumption of human labour is ‘individualised’ to particular settlement communities, and quite possibly also ‘privatised’ to individual ‘households’, and presumably also their owners. We find architectural monumentalisation now frequently in the context of – often long-lived – individual homesteads; and it is often positively ‘wasteful’, especially where the construction of both defensively and sometimes even in terms of actual physical enclosure ‘useless’ banks; banks which nonetheless clearly served, at least at some times, to exclude the ‘wider’ community, a community which almost certainly must have been involved in constructing them (see e.g. Karl 2007; 2014; 2015). Thus, archaeologically, we seem to be observing the emergence of households of ‘elite’ status during that period: households which could mobilise ‘external’ human labour for larger-scale building projects which benefitted, primarily, themselves and not (or at least not so much) the ‘wider’ community in which they were embedded.

‘Ramparts of vassalage’

Indeed, if we look into early medieval Irish literature, we find exactly this situation expressed in extant indigenous lawtexts like *Críth Gablach* (c. 7th–early 8th cent. AD) in the context of the construction of ‘ringforts’. ‘Ringforts’ are the typical form of early medieval Irish ‘elite’ settlement (Edwards 1990: 6–33; Stout 1997), which is morphologically near-identical with the ‘enclosed homesteads’ of the British Late Bronze and Iron Age (and, at least in westerly parts of Britain, also the Romano-British period and partially even the post-Roman period). *Críth Gablach*, the main old Irish lawtext on social status, states on the matter:

„What is the due of a king who is always in residence at the head of his tuath? Seven score feet of perfect feet are the measure of his stockade on every side [≈ 45 m radius]. Seven feet are the thickness of its earthwork, and twelve feet its depth. It is then that he is a king, when the ramparts of vassalage surround him. What is the rampart of vassalage? Twelve feet are the breadth of its opening and its depth and its measure towards the stockade. Thirty feet are its measure outwardly.“ (MacNeill 1923: 305)

Funnily enough, though this is almost certainly mere coincidence, this is a near-perfect description of the narrow double ringwork enclosure of Meillionydd. Still, it is meaningful in as much as constructing these ‘ramparts of vassalage’ is one of the (several) menial tasks (Binchy 1978: 570 [line 9]) that early medieval Irish (so-called ‘base’) clients owe their ‘lord’ in return for an economic credit (euphemistically often referred to as a ‘gift’) of (usually mainly agri-pastoral) resources (like land, or cattle). This system of clientage, based on the transfer of means of production from lords to their clients in return for regular food-rent and menial services, is the main means in early Irish law to create the binding social obligations that allow lords to accumulate larger amounts of manpower (and other resources) than their own immediate household (that is, the people living in the lord’s ringfort) can muster (Karl 2006: 296–325; 2014; 2015). Quite generally, enclosures in early Irish law are exclusively owned by ‘freemen’ or ‘lords’, and the more elaborated and monumentalised such an enclosure is, the higher its owner’s rank (also see Karl 2016).

FAKING IT

Clearly, construction of embanked enclosures in prehistory was a labour-intensive task: shovelling up the banks and collecting the stones for and constructing their inner and outer drystone facings was a task done manually by human labourers.

Yet, it was not an exceptionally massive task. For instance, the two banks constructed in phase 3a at Meillionydd have a radius of c. 45 and c. 55 metres respectively, which means their total length adds up to c. 640 metres length. Taking them to have been c. 4 metres wide each at the base, and about 2.5 metres high when first constructed, this gives us a total volume that had to be moved of c. 6,400 cubic metres. Assuming a reasonably fit human can shovel c. 5 m³ per day of shovelling, this means that the labour investment into constructing Meillionydd's banks was c. 1,280 working days. Assuming 10 people doing the work in one go, that would mean that they would have had to have worked on constructing the double ringwork for c. 3-4 months.

While this is certainly quite an effort, it is not an insurmountable amount of work. Rather, if social status is expressed by investing such an amount of labour, limited as it is, into the architectural monumentalisation of a community's settlement, 'faking' status would have been relatively easy. In fact, any social upstart who could organise a few of his buddies to help him with a bit of shovelling could, relatively easily, have built a double ringwork enclosure like Meillionydd; and thus could have relatively easily demonstrated control over an apparent surplus of manpower. Yet, building such banks by mobilising a few of one's friends, while demonstrating at least a modicum of control over a surplus of manpower, does not demonstrate longer-term stability of that control: the upstart may have been able to motivate his friends to help him build an impressive enclosure, but there is only limited reason to believe that he could mobilise them again for yet another comparably labour-intensive task. Quite to the contrary, having shovelled a lot of dirt for him, the upstart would now owe a great debt of gratitude to his helpers, rather than vice-versa.

Making matters worse for the upstart, most of the local community will know the upstart for what he is: as a social climber. Even if he was able to get his settlement monumentalised, the status expressed by 'new' banks may well turn out to be quite unstable. This is especially

so if the upstart is engaged in intense competition with other, and perhaps much more established, 'lords'.

INHERITABILITY OF STATUS

It would seem quite likely that social status was already inheritable in the Iron Age. For instance, we find perfect parallels regarding the inheritability of status in sources from Antiquity, e.g. Caesar's excursus on the Gauls in his commentaries of his Gallic wars, and early medieval Irish law. Caesar famously describes the criteria by which Gaulish nobles are distinguished as follows:

„And those of them most distinguished by birth and resources, have the greatest number of vassals and dependents about them. They acknowledge this sort of influence and power only.”
(b.g. 6, 15).

This indicates that both property and social status were inheritable in Gaul in Antiquity. The same principles can be found in early medieval Irish (and indeed early medieval 'Germanic' and medieval Welsh, as well as in Roman) law: both property and (if to a somewhat lesser extent, and linked to the inheritance of property) social status are clearly inheritable (Kelly 1988: 102-5). Particularly land, and to an only slightly lesser extent cattle and other portable agri-pastoral resources, are inheritable through the paternal line of descent; and the number of clients a person can afford depends directly on the surplus of agri-pastoral means of production that a person can afford to give, as loans, to clients. The number of clients a person can afford, in turn, determines the rank of nobility a person holds, that is, the 'noble' social status of a 'lord', and thus also the capability of the person to construct, elaborate and architecturally monumentalise their settlement (Kelly 1988: 26-36; Karl 2006: 296-325).

In archaeology, enclosure of 'private' space itself also provides a hint at the inheritability of at least property, and most likely also of status, especially in the case of settlement sites with a long occupation sequence, lasting over several hundreds of years. In these cases, enclosure creates a 'permanent' pattern of inclusion of some and exclusion of other segments of the local population, indicating that at least the community of occupants of such sites, if not a particular family, 'the owners', would have inheritance rights to the exclusive use of the thus separated property.

Indeed, pedigree is a defining feature of ‘nobility’ in the early Irish laws. Looking at Críth Gablach again, it is particularly interesting to examine the distinction explicated in this text between the highest rank of a property-owning ‘freeman’, and the lowest rank of ‘nobleman’ (MacNeill 1923: 293–7). Críth Gablach defines the highest grade of ‘freeman’, the *fer fothlai* (‘man of withdrawal’), as owning twice as much property as a lord of the lowest rank, the *aire déso* (‘lord of vassalry’). The *fer fothlai* also takes on clients as a lord would, by lending some of his surplus capital to less well-off ‘freemen’. Yet, under the law, he (technically in terms of not yet having the legal privileges reserved for nobility in early Irish law, and also in terms of his ‘social value’ as expressed by the compensation payments due for injuring or insulting him) remains a ‘freeman’, because, as Críth Gablach says of the *aire déso*, a lord has to be “*a son of a noble and a grandson of a noble, and having his house in his proper state, as to furniture and entertainment and rectitude.*” (MacNeill 1923: 297). Unless a person is of the proper pedigree, a noble he cannot be.

Having the right pedigree, thus, is an essential precondition for ‘nobility’ in early Irish law: a *fer fothlai* himself can never become a lord, because his ancestry is not sufficiently ‘noble’; he is an upstart, who, or indeed whose heirs, may not be able to sustain their wealth and status permanently. Only his grandson, at the earliest, can become a ‘nobleman’ in his own right (Kelly 1988: 28). In other words, an inheritance group needs to maintain its capacity to lend capital, and thus its ability to mobilise ‘surplus’ manpower for its own purposes, including the architectural monumentalisation of their own settlement, for at least three generations before it has acquired sufficient pedigree to be considered a ‘noble’ family; a family that could be relied upon by their clients since time immemorial (that is, since as long as anyone still alive can remember), and thus is likely to remain reliable for the foreseeable future.

DEMONSTRATING ANCIENT PEDIGREE IN PREHISTORIC TIMES

But how does a capable family demonstrate that it has such ‘ancient’ pedigree in times before the adoption of writing in their community, that is, in prehistoric times? How does an inheritance group demonstrate that

its status has remained ‘permanently’ stable; and that it ‘permanently’ has sufficient surplus capacity in terms of manpower, and thus in all likelihood also in other (agripastoral) resources?

It is, at this point, that the eroding old banks come in: virtually everyone can build ‘new’ banks, if they just have – even only short-term – access to sufficient manpower, and be it only by calling on their personal friends’ services. ‘Faking’ current capacity thus is relatively easy.

‘Faking’ old banks, on the other hand, is much more difficult. Not only does the local community remember that there were no banks around a site some weeks or indeed years ago, it is also practically quite difficult to ‘fake’ the physical appearance of old, eroding, formerly drystone-faced, earth and rubble core dump ramparts: these banks, as the field banks still being built in exactly the same technique on the Llŷn peninsula show, erode and decay in a very characteristic pattern. This pattern is quite difficult to reproduce, other than by building a ‘new’ bank and letting it slowly crumble: they remain relatively steep-sided for extended periods of slow erosion, with stone facing still preserved upstanding in some parts, and partially collapsed areas with considerable amounts of stone tumble, overgrown by grass and other forms of vegetation (like e.g. gorse, brambles, etc.) wherever not constantly walked on or grazed by sheep (fig. 8).

Old, eroding banks remain, quite recognisably, man-made structures, structures whose construction required the investment of considerable amounts of manpower, a long time ago. Assuming inheritability of property, they thus serve a very important purpose, a purpose as much, if not even more important, than newly erected banks: they demonstrate, quite clearly, that the inhabitants of a settlement enclosed by old, eroding banks, had ancient pedigree, and that their status as ‘lords’ was ‘permanent’.

The ‘lords’ of the British Iron Age, showing their pedigree

If one takes this to be the purpose of retaining old, eroding banks around settlements, even if, in some cases, new banks were also being constructed, this allows to create a different interpretative narrative, for Meillionydd as well as for other enclosed British ‘homesteads’ with a long and complex occupation sequence. Rather than tracing the ‘rise and fall’ of the fortunes of the community occupy-



Fig. 8: Foreground: a modern field bank with earth core and dry-stone facing in good repair. Background: an identically constructed, eroding bank. Notice the collapsed areas where the earth core is exposed after the facing has collapsed, interspersed with sections where the original drystone facing is still upstanding, and sections where the steep sides of the partially collapsed bank are overgrown with grass and other vegetation.

ing such a site, the abandonment of at least some, if not even all their banks to decay and erosion might indicate something entirely different: the establishment of a ‘permanent’, inheritable elite social status, the emergence of traceable ‘nobility’.

In case of the ‘lords of Meillionydd’, the enclosure of the originally open settlement on the western ridge off Mynydd Rhiw might well indicate their rise to an ‘elite’ social status. This may have been further expressed by turning what, at first, was a relatively light, ditched and strongly fenced enclosure, into a ‘monumental’ enclosure in phase 3a of its occupation. That particular enclosure, with its comparatively massive banks (at least compared to anything that had existed before in the area) and its clearly highly ‘elaborated’ inner entrance, which was clearly intended to impress visitors, certainly intended to make a statement about the importance of its inhabitants. That newly achieved importance – achieved most probably in competition, but also collaboration, with the inhabitants of contemporary, neighbouring sites like Castell Odo – may well have been that of a ‘leading’ role in the early Iron Age society at the end of the Llŷn.

Yet, once that status had been achieved, and duly expressed by conspicuous consumption of the surplus of human labour that had become available through achieving this role, re-expressing it through further, perhaps even more fanciful constructions, may well have become entirely unnecessary. After all, Meillionydd is situated near the very end of the Llŷn peninsula; that is, despite Ireland being visible from the site in good weather, quite literally at the end of the Iron Age world. There, status competition during the latest Bronze and early Iron Age may well

have been quite limited, to the next door neighbours at Castell Odo, with whom the inhabitants of Meillionydd may well have long-lasting and well-established relations, with no space available for newcomers and upstarts to set themselves up in competition with the established ‘nobility’ of the Penlŷn. Being the small world that the end of the Llŷn is, it may well be that there, there simply was no need to constantly reiterate that the existing ‘lords’ had sufficient capacity to ‘support’ their local communities with the ‘loans’ they needed, since everyone already knew. It may thus well be that the crumbling old banks, not maintained for generations and partially obliterated already by later building activity on site, were all that was necessary, since they sufficiently demonstrated the pedigree of the inhabitants of Meillionydd and Castell Odo, just in case anyone got any strange ideas about upsetting the existing social order.

In other, perhaps more central and thus more competitive parts of Britain on the other hand, like in Woodside, Collfryn, and other places, the occasional building of new banks remained necessary, to show to competitors and potential clients alike that the ‘lords of’ wherever still had the required resources to maintain their status. Still, even there, the old, crumbling banks of previous generations were at least helpful, if not even required, as proof of ancient pedigree. After all, they provided proof positive that the ‘lords of’ wherever were not mere social climbers, no recent upstarts who had, by sheer luck more than anything, acquired plenty of resources lately, but indeed had been in charge since time immemorial, and deservedly so.

TRACING THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

If the previous considerations are correct, the emergence of enclosed and, at least sometimes, repeatedly re-enclosed ‘homesteads’ is particularly important for understanding British prehistory: after all, they would allow us to trace, and pinpoint in time, the emergence of those kinds of societies which continued to dominate the British Isles for at least the next two millennia, and arguably, until today. They would allow us to pinpoint the emergence of a landed gentry, of the concept of inheritable nobility linked to the ownership of agri-pastoral means

of production, and indeed the emergence of an early form of rent-seeking capitalism.

Indeed, we could pinpoint the emergence of that new social order to the Late Bronze and earliest Iron Age in Britain, as a locally emergent phenomenon not imposed from the outside, but developing largely independently on these shores. It is in this period, after all, that we first witness the architectural monumentality that can be seen as a household-specific expression of social status by conspicuous 'private', rather than 'communal', consumption of human labour.

On the Llŷn, that process of emergence seems to have been a quite rapid process, which transformed society within just a few generations from what had come before to what was to be thereafter. Apparently, this process seems to have happened, within c. 100–200 years around c. 600 BC, apparently near-simultaneously at several sites (Castell Odo providing the obvious contemporary local parallel), with a flurry of building activity within a relatively short span of time. Within a few decades, or even less, of each other, some communities – presumably such that already had a competitive advantage over other potential competitors in the area – invested considerable amounts of labour into the architectural monumentalisation of their 'homesteads', only to almost immediately start to neglect the banks that they had had created for them, and indeed partially build into and over them.

Effectively, within two or three generations of monumentally enclosing their *lysoedd* (sing. *llys*, 'court'; an enclosed space, particularly an enclosed settlement; of a nobleman, a church, or of law), they turned them into *henllysoedd* (sing. *henllys*, 'old court', remains of an embanked enclosure, often of LBA/IA/RB date; frequently found on large landed estates, often close to its medieval or early modern main residential building), which they continued to occupy for at least several more generations, but without further investment into further architectural monumentalisation. This may well indicate that the newly emerged social system was rapidly accepted and became embedded within these two or three generations: 'nobility' had emerged, and after a few generations, nobody lived any more who could remember that there had been a time when there were no 'lords' of Meillionydd and Castell Odo, and indeed, perhaps, no 'lords' at all. Thus, the need for further labour investment into architectural monumentalisation disappeared as rapidly on the Llŷn as it had become necessary a hundred years or so before, and as a consequence, the inner bank of Meillionydd was repaired, and equipped with a rebuilt massive gatehouse, only once before at least the inner bank of the site was left to decay.

After all, the 'lords of Meillionydd' had been in charge since time immemorial, and who would dare to object?

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