RECENT WORK AT TINTAGEL (Figs. 7–13)

Tintagel in Cornwall is a site of acknowledged international archaeological significance. Known chiefly for long-range contacts with the Mediterranean world in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D., it also has a regional importance as a major post-Roman ‘citadel’ of the Dumnonian rulers of the time. Additionally, it is popularly associated with the heroic figure of Arthur. Following academic reassessment of this high-profile site in the 1980s, a project of survey and excavation has been undertaken under the overall direction of Professor Chris Morris of the University of Glasgow. This has recovered remarkable archaeological evidence shedding further light on the status, role and importance of this famous site. A small team of archaeologists returned to Tintagel Castle in June 1990 to undertake small-scale work. The site examined was a relatively sheltered, artificially terraced area below the crags on the eastern side of the site, first excavated in the 1930s. The excavation examined an area outside buildings probably dating from the 5th–6th centuries A.D. These investigations can be claimed to have been the most dramatic since work began in 1990.

It is inescapably the case that the main draw for visitors at the site of Tintagel is the alleged connection with King Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History of the Kings of Britain (c. 1135–38) is the source of the tradition of Arthur’s conception here. As Professor Charles Thomas has said: ‘On so slight a foundation, almost every subsequent writer was able to expand the conception of Arthur at Tintagel to his birth there and, by implication, ownership and even residency’. In 1942, Dr C. A. Ralegh Radford was moved to write that ‘Arthur … reigns supreme in Tintagel and few would wish to displace him’. By then, however, re-assessment of the historical and literary evidence and the results of Radford’s own excavations, were sufficient to encourage him to propose an alternative interpretation based upon an Early Christian monastic model. Then, during the 1970s and 1980s, reconsideration of both Tintagel’s role in the history and archaeology of the immediately post-Roman period and of post-Roman society as a whole led to a re-assertion of Tintagel’s status as a secular site, most probably a ‘citadel’ of the rulers, with a key role in the links to the Mediterranean world.

In 1983 part of the plateau of the island caught fire and much of the vegetation was destroyed, revealing remnants of new buildings and occupation areas. A survey in 1985 by RCHME of the whole of the surface of the island demonstrated that far more, and more varied, structures were now to be seen than were previously evident (Fig. 7). New questions thus arose about the nature and layout of this site, forming the background to the inception of the recent excavations and survey. In 1989 the principal author was invited to consider undertaking archaeological investigations in association with English Heritage, and work was begun in 1990 at Radford’s ‘Site C’, as a means of following up both his minimal publication of work here and one part of the 1985 survey (Fig. 8).

Excavation by the Glasgow University team has taken place on three terraces. In addition, salvage work has been undertaken by means of mitigation at specific locations on the plateau and on the ‘Steps’ site near the Inner Ward of the medieval castle. This latter work produced a remarkable concentration of artefacts probably from a midden related to

---

3 Thomas, op. cit in note 1.
Permission has not yet been given to publish this image in electronic media. Refer to published material.
an adjacent building, including 13 sherds of Phocean Red Slip Ware, 5 sherds of African Red Slip Ware, over 100 sherds of Bi amphorae, 88 sherds of Bii, as well as two vessel fragments of probably Merovingian glass. Some limited ecofactual material was recovered from small samples. Further, an important survey-project aimed at both locating previous excavation trenches and of maximizing the information to be gathered therefrom has been undertaken. Radford’s work was more extensive than reported in his ‘Interim Report’ of
1935 and excavations took place across both the plateau of the ‘island’ and around the margins, especially on the NE. side. Destruction of primary documentation during the war is apparently a crucial factor in the non-appearance of a Final Report, but archive material from a surveyor, J. Wright, in the 1930s can be used to ascertain the location and nature of Radford’s excavations, and it has now proved possible to plot, to a reasonable degree of accuracy, the location of many of the excavation trenches placed around the site. There is now at least some basic data on this work and the potential to maximize information retrieval in the future by minimal intervention on selected sites previously investigated.

The ‘Lower terrace’ of Site C produced unequivocal evidence for structures dating to the late and post-Roman periods, with the first absolute dates from the site derived from the radiocarbon method. These post-Roman structures are significantly different from the laid-out structures excavated in the 1930s (Figs. 9–10). Although they are not major buildings, nevertheless they are notable as a distinctive form of building (similar to some uncovered by the fire on the plateau), and a major contribution to the discussion of the nature and layout of this site at this period. The archaeological evidence from the earliest phase with both post-supports set into the bedrock and fragmentary wall remains suggests modest, but reasonably well-built buildings at this early stage of the structural history of the site. They were followed by evidence for more intermittent occupation of this terrace or platform through a series of hearths and floor surfaces, often with lines of stake-holes (interpreted as acting as windbreaks, but also conceivably relating to putative turf walls). Regular rebuilding of these simple structures took place. A third phase of a low, rather irregularly shaped, but neatly stone-walled structure indicates structural remains which would go with structures known from elsewhere in Cornwall: Bodmin Moor, interpreted

---

as transhumance huts,\textsuperscript{6} and the huts from Gwithian, dated to the 5th/6th–8th centuries.\textsuperscript{7} This structure would appear to represent a more substantial occupation that, while certainly not the buildings occupied by the upper echelons of society, would certainly fit with the concept of structures occupied by a retinue at specific periods of the year, or of a ‘caretaking’ group. Alternatively, these structures could possibly have performed the function of storage rooms, for instance, for the containers of wine and olive oil etc. This, of course, raises the question of ‘zoning’ on the site at this period and, as at South Cadbury and Cadbury Congresbury, there also were subsidiary buildings with fewer of the obviously high-status artefacts present than in the area of the ‘halls’.


Imported Mediterranean pottery accounts for almost 84% of the total from this terrace, of which rather over half of the total collection consists of fragments of storage vessels of well-known types (so-called B-ware), together with a number of other imported coarse wares, mainly East Mediterranean Red Ware. It is of some interest that a group of slate discs were found in contexts from which imported pottery sherds are found, and are interpreted as pot-lids (Fig. 11). Although the range of imported material reflects a heterogeneous origin in the Mediterranean area, a notable concentration within the deposits is of those wares which came from the eastern Mediterranean. As with the material previously published from the ‘Steps’ area, it is the case that the quantities of sherds (other than from fine table wares) recovered from just this one part of the Tintagel site are comparable with the totals from the whole of major excavations at other comparable sites of the period (such as Dinas Powys, Dunadd and South Cadbury).

Other finds included a small conical lead weight; small amounts of industrial debris, including a fragment of a crucible, which may indicate small-scale industrial working on the terrace; and a piece of vessel glass of 4th-century type. The date-range for occupation on this terrace in the late phases was deduced from the conventional dates of the Imported pottery i.e. mid-5th to mid-6th century, or possibly up to A.D. 600. A group of Romano-British Native pottery, although likely to come from late (i.e. 5th century) usage on the terrace, raises the probability of 3rd- to 4th-century activity on Tintagel Island, if only from the presence of these types of pottery (Fig. 12). Also, the glass vessel sherd could — as suggested by Hilary Cool — possibly be of 5th-century date.

The Lower Terrace was the first part of the site at Tintagel on which a systematic programme of environmental sampling was undertaken. The identification of significant ecofactual material has led to important results for an understanding of both the exploration of the local environment and the nature of the economy of the site of Tintagel Island. It is clear that quite a wide range of trees and shrubs was exploited for fuel, with a preference for oak and hazel for construction: hazel especially for smaller posts or wattles and oak presumably for the larger posts and beams. Vanessa Straker is of the opinion that the species identified could have grown locally, and the basic necessities of heat and shelter be supplied from local resources. Some of the charcoal also implies the availability nearby of edible resources: bramble, apple and pear. Amongst the plant remains, the identification

---

8 Harry and Morris, op. cit. in note 5, 79.
of cereals is of considerable interest and has implications for the inter-relationship of the island and its hinterland. Barley and particularly oats are represented throughout the deposits. The presence of various weed seeds implies the existence of arable fields and suggests that the cereals, while they may have been grown and harvested unripe (and partially cleaned) away from the island, were cleaned here prior to consumption of the ‘prime grain’. The waste from cleaning may well have been given to the animals as fodder, even if the oats and barley themselves were not. Blackberry, crowberry, wild celery, and vetch or pea, although found in tiny numbers, point to a variation in diet on the site at different periods. Despite the absence, due to the acidity of the soil, of uncarbonized bone, quite unexpected was the identification by Simon Mays of carbonized human bone from three of the five contexts in which identification was possible. There can be little doubt that the suggestion of human cremation on the site in early phases is quite dramatic and adds an entirely new dimension to the understanding of the nature of the site.

The conventional dating of the Imported ceramic material has been mentioned above, but it became clear that there were significant underlying deposits which had carbonized material. Charcoal from a succession of hearths provided the opportunity to apply independent, absolute forms of dating to the deposits upon this terrace. A sequence of dates can now be proposed by Alex Bayliss and Rachel Harry at the 95% confidence level. In essence, an early phase is 395–460 cal AD, whereas later phases date from 415–535 cal AD and 560–670 cal AD. The implications for the artefactual material are that the vessel glass was indeed 5th-century and may have been of some antiquity before deposition here; that ‘Native’ pottery appears to carry on well past the conventional end of the Roman Period; and that imported pottery appears to last rather longer on the site than anticipated by conventional dating: certainly to the late 6th century and possibly going on.

9 Harry and Morris, op. cit. in note 5, 106–08.
into the 7th. The stratigraphical and structural implications are also not insignificant. The third building on the site has only a 5% chance of being before the period A.D. 560–670 and activities of the succeeding phase, representing the collapse of the building, obviously post-date this, but include Imported pottery. A date-range of 460–535 cal AD is given for the second building on the site. An early fire-pit is contemporary with human bone possibly deriving from cremation activities, and dates these activities to the late 4th to 5th centuries. This date of 395–460 cal AD also gives a *terminus ante quem* for the preceding structure, which it is suggested is Late Roman in date.

In 1994 and 1998, excavation was undertaken to examine in detail the buildings on the ‘Middle Terrace’, first excavated by Radford. The work within and around the structures suggests that the building-complex is dated to the post-Roman (5th-/6th-century) horizon, as borne out by the absence of any stratified later medieval material from the site, and the ubiquitous presence of characteristic imported wares of the 5th and 6th centuries, including *amphorae* or storage vessels, and fine tablewares, from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.

A remarkable find of a small cache of glass fragments was made in a securely stratified context outside the building. A dozen pieces from a single vessel were found together. This vessel appears to be unique: Dr Ewan Campbell suggests that the fragments belong to a substantial glass flagon of a type whose closest parallel would appear to be from 6th-/7th-century Malaga and Cadiz. This is the first time that a possible *direct* link between Spain and Western Britain at this period can be demonstrated.

Even more remarkable is the find of a securely stratified inscription on a piece of slate acting as a cover for a drain (Fig. 13). The stone (clearly broken for such re-use) has remains of two inscriptions set across its face, in quite different techniques. The more
obvious inscription has remnants of at least four letters, although it is impossible at the moment to say what this represents. A second, more lightly incised inscription with smaller letters below is, as Professor Thomas points out, basically in Latin (with some Primitive Irish and British elements). The forms of certain letters appear in British inscribed stones from Scotland to Cornwall post-500, and are certainly known elsewhere from 6th-century North Cornwall. It probably reads PATER / COLI AVI FICIT / ARTOGNOV, and Professor Thomas suggests that a likely sense would be: Artognou, father of a descendant of Coll, has had (this) made/built/constructed. Clearly, it attests to a quasi-Romanized way of life on this major post-Roman site, through the continuing use and writing of Latin in a meaningful manner in the 6th century. Also of considerable significance is the implication that literacy was present within the entourage of the Dumnonian rulers. The British name represented by the Latin ARTOGNOU is ‘Arthnou’. The first element uses the element (Celtic) art-os, Irish art, Welsh arth (meaning the animal ‘bear’), like many others, such as the Old Welsh Arthmail, Arthien etc. There has been much media speculation about the inscription, but suffice it to say that it does NOT read ‘Arthur’. We must dismiss any idea that the name on this stone is in any way to be associated with that legendary and literary figure. While this may disappoint the romantic, it is clear that the more prosaic names and words, found uniquely in an archaeological context here along with the remarkable glass demonstrate the capacity of the site to surprise us even after years of investigation.

In relation to the broader British picture, most recent discussions of such sites tend to place Tintagel in a key position in relation to both social organization and economic activity. In part, Tintagel’s perceived special position relates to the scale of the site as a whole. For long apparently the largest monastic site, it is now one of the largest secular sites of the period, with a site area directly comparable with Cadbury Castle and demanding a similar ‘special explanation’. For Professor Leslie Alcock, the term civitas appears to encapsulate its status most appropriately at this period, and it would then be a south-western British equivalent of the Northumbrian and northern British civitates at Bamburgh and Alt Clut (Dumbarton). In the social context of post-Roman Britain, it would then seem perverse not to accord Tintagel and Cadbury ‘royal’ status, with a descending hierarchy of other sites, identified archaeologically as ‘aristocratic’ establishments at Dinas Powys, Hen Gastell and Longbury Banks in Wales.11

The discussion of the site’s status is of course inseparable from the consideration of the implications of the rich material arriving at the site, and its comparison with others of the period. Pre-eminent amongst this material is, of course, the imported pottery (including A and B wares, Phocean Red Slip Wares, African Red Slip Wares, and a variety of imported coarse wares) for which it is recognized by all concerned with this period that there is more present here than at all others put together in Britain and Ireland. It is not a surprising suggestion that Tintagel was the primary point of entry for this material, with subsequent redistribution elsewhere, from whence come the collections at accessible sites such as Cadbury Congresbury and Dinas Powys. There is little doubt that most specialists dealing with the ‘exotic’ material of this period (the glass, for instance from Dinas Powys was long ago recognized as having a particular importance) would assert the existence of a significant, if not extensive, trade-network into south-western Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries originating in the Mediterranean, although later superseded by connections with the Continent. Even if the question of the return cargoes is to some extent speculative,

being largely based on documentary sources, logical inferences, and attested occurrences of, for instance, Cornish tin or Mendips lead, it seems only logical now to see the visible extant archaeological material from Tintagel as the tip of a fairly large iceberg. Debate over whether the Mediterranean material entered the western seaways of Britain through direct contact with the eastern Mediterranean Byzantine world, through transhipping or through ‘space-filling’ on the 5th- and 6th-century equivalent of tramp-steamers or ‘puffers’ will no doubt continue for some time, but the fact that North Cornwall was at the heart of this enterprise would now seem to be beyond doubt.

CHRISTOPHER D. MORRIS, COLLEEN E. BATEY, KEVIN BRADY, RACHEL HARRY, PAUL G. JOHNSON AND CHARLES THOMAS