

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION AT FIN COP HILLFORT, MONSAL HEAD: A SUMMARY REPORT

By CLIVE WADDINGTON (Archaeological Research Services Ltd,
Angel House, Portland Square, Bakewell, Derbyshire DE45 1HB)

The hillfort known as Fin Cop is perched on the crest of a steep-sided bluff around the 330m contour with steep scarps dropping off over 170m to the floor of the deeply incised valley known as Monsal Dale below. The site commands panoramic views in all directions and the other Peak District hillforts at Burr Tor and Ball Cross are visible from the site. This intervisibility is no doubt significant as it would have allowed for rapid communication between the valley-based communities of the Derwent and Wye, although whether or not the forts were in use at the same time remains to be demonstrated rather than assumed.

The site lies on Carboniferous Limestone bedrock itself overlain by a soil horizon. The limestone parent material has given rise to a base-rich fertile soil which varies in depth across the site and has supported farming activities from perhaps as early as the Neolithic to the present day.

The upstanding visible remains comprise a turf-covered denuded stone bank and partially infilled ditch which define a scarp-edge enclosure encompassing around 4 hectares, with a short section of a second bank and ditch on the east-facing section of the circuit forming the one area of bivallate defence. Although turf-covered the bank is actually a wholly stone-made rampart and the ditch is rock-cut. The banks have been heavily robbed in the past for stone, both for marlign the fields and construction of the dry stone field walls. A faint trace of a possible boundary running along the scarp edge itself shows on some aerial photographs but the existence of such a feature needs to be tested by further excavation. Some possible hut scoops are visible on the west side of the fort beyond the dry stone wall and a cluster of Beaker-period stone cairns are situated around the highest point on the hilltop. There may be some additional cairns towards the corner of the bluff still within the area defined by the hillfort circuit. Other surface remains visible at the site include a post-medieval limestone quarry and kiln in the southern part of the fort interior and faint traces of ridge and furrow agriculture in the field containing much of the southern half of the hillfort.

Excavations took place at Fin Cop over a three week period during July-August 2009 as part of a Heritage Lottery funded project organised by Longstone Local History Group supported by Archaeological Research Services Ltd, the Peak District National Park Authority and English Heritage. Initial work had included a detailed desk-based assessment, a detailed earthwork survey of the site (Figure 1) and a geophysical survey. The excavations comprised the excavation of 16 one metre square test pits in a line across the interior of the hillfort together with four excavation trenches, of which one (Trench 3) was closed after turf removal. This was because the large quantity of small finds encountered in the topsoil horizon of Trench 3 was such that there would not have been time to properly excavate and record this trench. We intend to return to this trench in subsequent seasons to complete its excavation.

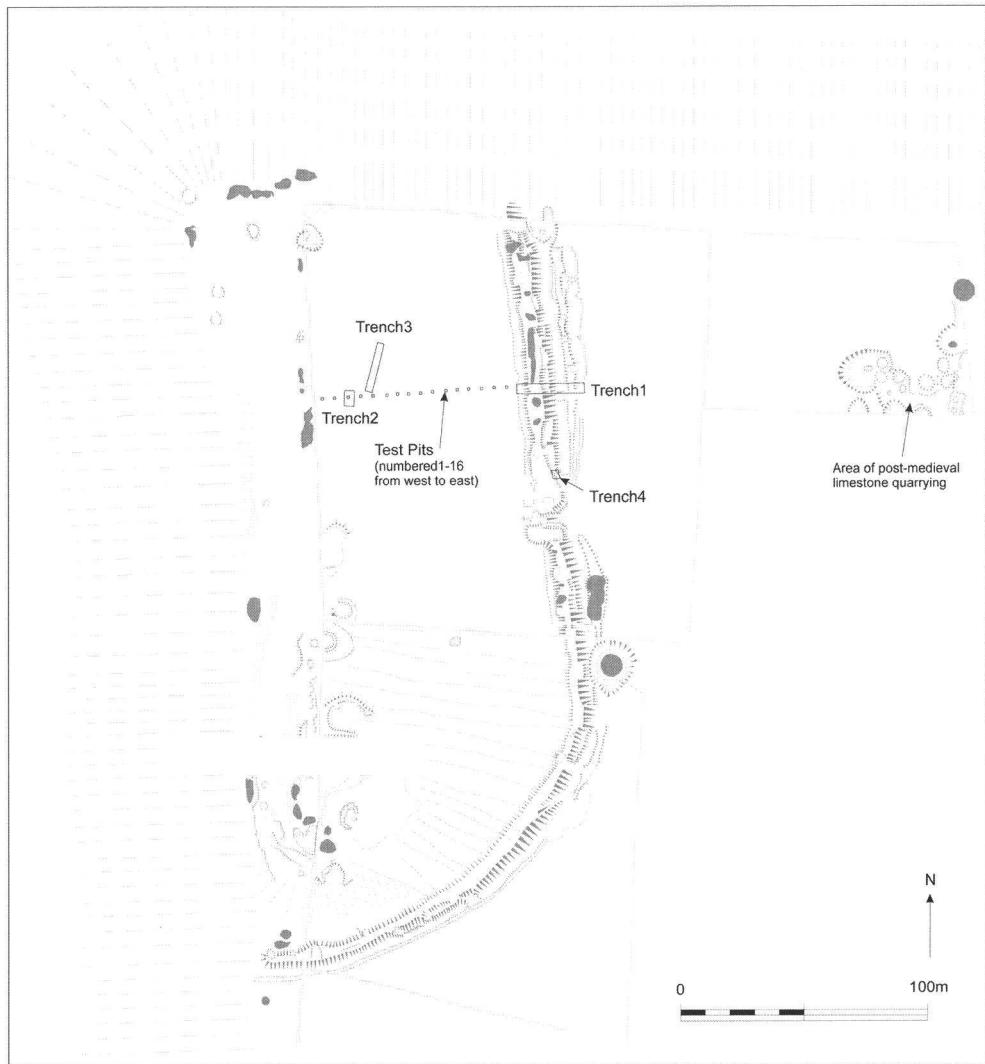


Fig. 1: Fin Cop: earthwork survey plan and location of excavations.

The test pit transect ran in an east-west direction with the aim of establishing:

1. the soil character and depth across the hilltop and the depth at which bedrock was encountered
2. whether artefacts survived in the soil horizons and if so what type and their broad date range

The test pits were surprisingly productive yielding over 1700 chipped stone artefacts, most of which were made from the locally available chert, and which belong to the Mesolithic. Most result from the primary stage of the core reduction sequence and

testify to the acquisition of chert from the site and its preliminary working before being taken elsewhere for use as tools. This was a totally unexpected discovery and adds a new dimension and longer time depth to the human activity known on Fin Cop. In addition to the lithics a notable assemblage of late prehistoric pottery was also found. One of the pits, TP3, produced prehistoric pottery and so this pit was extended out to form a small trench (Trench 2) measuring 6m by 4m. After being completely excavated down to bedrock this trench, including the initial test pit, produced 227 pottery fragments of Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age type together with several pit features cut into the bedrock. Two statistically consistent radiocarbon dates from residues on separate pottery sherds have provided dates in the period 810-550 cal BC (Table 1).

Another small trench (Trench 4), measuring 3.15m by 4.1m at its maximum extent, was placed over an area of disturbed stone rampart that was under active erosion as a sheep scrape. After the turf and topsoil was removed an area of slumped rampart face was exposed. The stones were roughly dressed and some showed the marks of where they had been quarried. All of the material was limestone and it included some very substantial-sized blocks that had formed the basal courses of the rampart face in this section of wall. The material had all slumped forward with some of the facing stones having slid over the underlying course so that they were pitched forward. The exposed material was planned and photographed and the soil and turf reinstated and fenced off to allow for the turf cover to grow back.

Trench 1 was the most rewarding trench in that it revealed the form of the main rampart and ditch as well as yielding the unexpected remains of a human skeleton. The trench, measuring 33m by 4m was laid out across the rampart and the overlying turf removed by hand. This exposed a rock-cut ditch terminal outside the rampart which had a vertical face on the rampart-side of the ditch making it a formidable defence (Plate 1). It had a flat base and the ditch measured up to 2.2m deep below the pre-rampart ground surface. The ditch contained a primary silt from which two radiocarbon dates have been retrieved dating to final centuries of the 3rd millennium cal BC. This indicates that the dates could be residual from some earlier Beaker period activity or that a ditched feature of this date was built on the site that was later incorporated into the hillfort rampart circuit. Some small fragments of animal bone were recovered from above the primary fill including the remains of cattle, pig, sheep and possibly goat. The rest of the ditch fill comprised the stone rampart material that had evidently been thrown into the ditch as part of what appears to be the deliberate destruction of the hillfort defences. In amongst this tumble was the prone skeleton of a young woman between 20 and 30 years of age who had been around 5 feet tall in life. Radiocarbon dates from her long bones indicate that she most likely dates to the 3rd century cal BC. Her cause of death is not yet known but she appears to have been flung into the ditch as the rampart material was thrown over her. She was found with her body twisted, her arms outstretched and her legs bunched, indicating that she had been buried without ceremony. The scapula of a neonate was also found with her bones suggesting that a baby was thrown in with her or that perhaps she was heavily pregnant at the time.

The rampart consists of a stone-faced wall constructed primarily from the limestone won from the excavation of the defensive ditch. Some blocks of other rock types were also found but these were rare and consisted of other locally available material. The rampart, in this section at least, had been formed with an outer face of dressed stones



Plate 1: Fin Cop: Trench 1 looking west.

Laboratory Number	Sample Number	Material & context	Radiocarbon Age (BP)	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰)	$\delta^{15}\text{N}$ (‰)	C:N ratio	Weighted mean	Calibrated date range (95% confidence)
OxA-21387	FIN09 [1004B]	Human bone, femur; from articulated skeleton within the destruction layer formed by the pushing of the rampart into the ditch (1004).	2198±27	-20.2	10.0	3.0	2231±22 BP ($T^* = 3.9$; $v=1$; $T^*(5\%) = 3.8$;	390-200 cal BC
SUERC-26419	FIN09 [1004B]; As OxA-21387		2285±35	-20.5	9.6	3.5		
SUERC-26420	[2002] 2128	Carbonised residue on pot sherd	2560±35	-28.9				810-550 cal BC
SUERC-26421	[2002] 2200	Carbonised residue on pot sherd	2600±35	-26.1				820-670 cal BC
SUERC-26466	1012A	Charred wood, <i>Corylus</i> sp.	3800±35	-25.8				2350-2130 cal BC
OxA-21846	1012B	Charred wood, <i>cf. Maloideae</i>	3748±26	-26.5				2280-2040 cal BC

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates from Fin Cop.

with the facing stones keyed back into the body of the rampart that consisted of a rubble dump. There was no obvious evidence for a rear retaining wall and given the grading down of the stone rampart in this direction, it seems that the rampart may have sloped up from the land surface on its inner side. This would have provided a fighting platform, with or without a timber breastwork, which the residents of the fort could have simply run up if danger approached.

Other findings to note at this stage include the discovery of a fragment from a Neolithic polished stone axe head in the topsoil of Trench 2 that has been recycled by subsequent chipping. There may also be a few sherds of Neolithic pottery amongst the current ceramic assemblage. An Early Bronze Age scraper was found as residual material in an Iron Age deposit in Trench 1. It is therefore clear that the construction of the hillfort must itself have had an impact on already ancient archaeological remains on the site.

There is much still to learn about the site and on-going analyses and further fieldwork will no doubt shed more light on the monument and its inhabitants. At this stage the working interpretation is that the monument is defensive in form and thus there is justification for the term 'hillfort'. The dates so far available for the site abandonment place it in the mid Iron Age which means the monument is likely to have been constructed during this same period. The presence of late prehistoric ceramics within the interior of the site are consistent with, but not yet proof positive of, occupation within the fort. Although only preliminary, this article is intended only as a very brief update but we look forward to full publication as the project progresses. The archive reports to date can be downloaded from the following website: www.archaeologicalresearchservices.com/projects/fincop.html.

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