

Wether Hill and Cheviots Hillforts

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Introduction

It is now more than 30 years since George Jobey produced his magisterial survey of the hillforts of Northumberland (Jobey 1965) but there has been little in the succeeding period to develop his main conclusions. Whilst a substantial amount has been written about Cheviots prehistory in general, there has been little on hillforts. Much recent work has concentrated on areas away from the massif, on the Milfield Plain, for instance, and when researchers have come back to the hills, it is the fields, round-houses and earlier burial monuments which have held their attention. In the post-war period there have been only four 'local' hillfort excavations, Jobey at Brough Law (1971), Hope-Taylor at Yeavinger Bell (1977), Ell's Knowe excavated by Burgess in 1978 but unpublished and Waddington's investigations at Harehaugh (Waddington *et al.* 1998); further afield, on the Fell Sandstones, Smith has excavated a couple of seasons on Dod Law (1990). In wider overviews of the period, the Cheviots continue to receive scant attention. Cunliffe (1991, 279) buries it within a much larger area stretching from the Tees to the Forth and, in the most recent review, Ferrell was moved to comment that 'The Iron Age of north-east England has an extensive, but dull, domestic settlement record' (1997, 228). This is a harsh assessment since in terms of monument survival and morphological variability alone, few other areas in England can match the diversity evident in the Cheviots.

As a number of authors have pointed out (Ferrell, *ibid.*, 230), hillforts, although an ill-defined class of monument, appear to be one of the most common forms of earthwork enclosure in the region. They have long held a fascination for us and today a number have been incorporated in walks and guided tours through the National Park; frequent walkers navigate by them, noting the defences as they move from hilltop to hilltop or along the valleys. In many instances they are prominent landmarks and with the rise in antiquarianism in the last century and into the earlier part of this, they generated a great deal of interest (see MacLauchlan 1867, for example). The earliest hillfort excavations concentrated on entrance-ways and defences in the hope of establishing a complex site chronology. However, this was dictated by the contemporary beliefs surrounding these sites - simply that they were defensive

refuges. This is hardly surprising. Many of those working on the sites had been military personnel at some stage and lived through major conflicts; both Hawkes and Wheeler, two of the most influential of this century's archaeologists, served in both World Wars. In a superficial way, they could look at the defences of a hillfort and make a connection with the walls surrounding Roman forts, Norman mottes and later castles. The association, which is clear and simple - the defences around hillforts, as those around castles, were militaristic devices - continues to the present day (Avery 1993; Waddington 1998).

In this short offering in honour of Keith I will deal mainly with the work being undertaken by the Northumberland Archaeological Group (NAG) at Wether Hill, a site intimately familiar to Keith whose plan of the site is used here (Fig. 1). The real value of the Group's research is that it is a landscape study which attempts to place a number of sites in their respective chronological contexts. Although the nature of NAG's field investigation is very site specific, all elements of the landscape are being assessed. This ranges from palaeo-environmental work to excavation and survey on earlier burial monuments, field systems, cairns, unenclosed settlement, palisaded enclosures and finally the hillfort itself in an attempt to establish specific relationships and wider associations. I want to present a number of different ideas about how people may have viewed themselves and their lives, and how these sites may have 'functioned' within a contemporary social system. We need to go from an analysis of physical remains such as banks and ditches and stone walls through to a glimpse of the lives of those who peopled the Cheviots landscape. Archaeology is, after all, ultimately about the construction of life-stories from the past.

Re-thinking the Iron Age in the Cheviots

Recent critiques of Iron Age studies have suggested that too much attention has been paid to hillforts. It is, of course, hard to disagree with this viewpoint which is especially valid in other areas of the British Isles where hillforts occupy a different chronological horizon and certainly

'look' different from those under discussion here. Keith worked throughout the British Isles but was, and still is, less than enthusiastic about the English lowlands, where the surviving Iron Age landscapes are very much different from those in upland zones. Monument condition is often poor, due largely to the effects of later cultivation, therefore survival depends to a great extent on whether a site now sits in a protected context, allied to the strength of its original scale: i.e. bigger banks and ditches will survive the onslaught of ploughing and other deleterious mechanisms. So hillforts survive but other, slighter, contemporary enclosures disappear. These biases in the archaeological record then become fixed and underpin any discussion of the period in these areas. For instance, there are parts of the Wessex chalkland where large hillforts are common and seem to dominate the record. However, if once the evidence from aerial photographs is included, hillforts can be seen to comprise only 20% of the known prehistoric enclosures, the remainder being small ditched and banked examples (English Heritage, forthcoming). By contrast, unenclosed settlement is virtually invisible and will only survive in those areas which have avoided, particularly, 20th century cultivation. That is the real value of the Cheviots landscape - a lack of recent cultivation and good monument survival. Of course, much of the lower slopes in the Cheviots were ploughed in the medieval and post-medieval periods and so earlier components were destroyed or subsumed within later developments. Linear earthworks and cross-ridge boundaries are often re-incorporated into medieval or later land-use. Settlements and cairn-fields, particularly those below 250m, have been damaged.

I want to move beyond a simple analysis of the physical form of monuments, and construct a view of the Cheviots, in particular, the Wether Hill area in the later prehistoric period, between 1000 BC and the first centuries AD. Much of the morphological analysis has already been carried out. Jobey's work as well as that of Burgess and Topping, to name but two, has provided a database of settlement information hardly paralleled in a British context. The compilation of factual databases are an essential platform for further research. Here, we on one hand anxiously await the publication of the RCHME/English Heritage Cheviots Landscape Project and on the other, applaud the Northumberland National Park's on-going support of current research. This work is moving us beyond the, perhaps more simplistic, morphological analysis and is starting to speculate on life histories of not only the sites in their landscape setting but more importantly, the people who inhabited these hilltops and valleys.

Wether Hill

The hillfort (Fig. 1; Plate 1), which is traditionally known as Corbie Clough (Jobey 1965, 49), covers an area slightly less than 1ha in extent but within it there is a dense and detailed occupation sequence, whose origin certainly pre-dates the construction of the hillfort boundary. The earliest enclosure took the form of a timber palisade no more than 60m in diameter. We can see that this is earlier than the stone

hillfort since in a number of instances the quarry scoop dug to provide rampart material, has cut into the palisade, obliterating its course. A single, east-facing, entrance survives in the palisade circuit and the terminals of the palisade slot consist now of large sub-circular hollows, most likely the remains of a once impressive gateway. The palisaded enclosure is, however, not the earliest recorded activity on this site given that the line of the enclosure cuts through a well-defined ring-groove house, possibly part of an unenclosed phase of settlement here or one set within a second line of enclosure, presumably palisaded, which could underlie the hillfort rampart. The date of the low elongated cairn which occupies the centre of the enclosure and high point of the spur, is debatable but it is probably of considerable antiquity given that a house platform, itself at least contemporary with the hillfort, cuts into it on the south-eastern side. At least one small and stone-built hut overlies the palisade, but this is one of three similar structures, best viewed as a later, possibly post-Roman phase of activity, which additionally overlie the tail of the rampart. The remainder of the interior is closely set with former house positions, the majority of which are of ring-groove form occasionally augmented with slight internal banks. A couple of circular scoops and shallow crescentic scarps, including examples in the quarry scoop, suggest that there were also smaller ancillary structures in association. In a number of places it is possible to show a relative sequence with one ring-groove overlying another.

There is no standard house entrance orientation. Those houses closest to the north-western entrance of the hillfort look out through it. Indeed, upon entering the hillfort through this gate, the first major visual obstacle would have been house X. Elsewhere, where entrances can be identified, ground survey suggests that favoured axes range from north-east through to south-east; the majority are therefore 'easterly', a detail noted on other sites as far south as Cornwall by Oswald (1997). The favoured axis has traditionally been assigned to environmental factors - principally to alleviate the effects of westerly weather systems. The varied orientation of the entrances at Wether Hill, including three houses which face north-west, raises questions about this assumption and points to some other factor(s) as being important in the positioning of doorways and entrances. One of the larger of the houses, I, faces the cairn and lies in such close proximity to it that access must have involved a difficult negotiation around rubble debris. If we can assume that the inhabitants of the site were aware of the cultural significance of the cairn, and there is no reason to doubt this (in other parts of the country, earlier burial mounds have been shown to have been re-used in the Iron Age, cf. Battlesbury, Wiltshire (Cunnington 1924)), the juxtaposition then becomes laden with potential symbolic associations and adds weight to Oswald's assertion that house orientation relates to ritual considerations (1997, 87).

The hillfort defences consist of a single bank and external ditch flanked for almost the entire circuit by a pronounced counterscarp bank. Both banks are substantial constructions and when first built must have presented a very formidable wall, possibly 2-3m high above the ground surface. On the western circuit there are breaks which

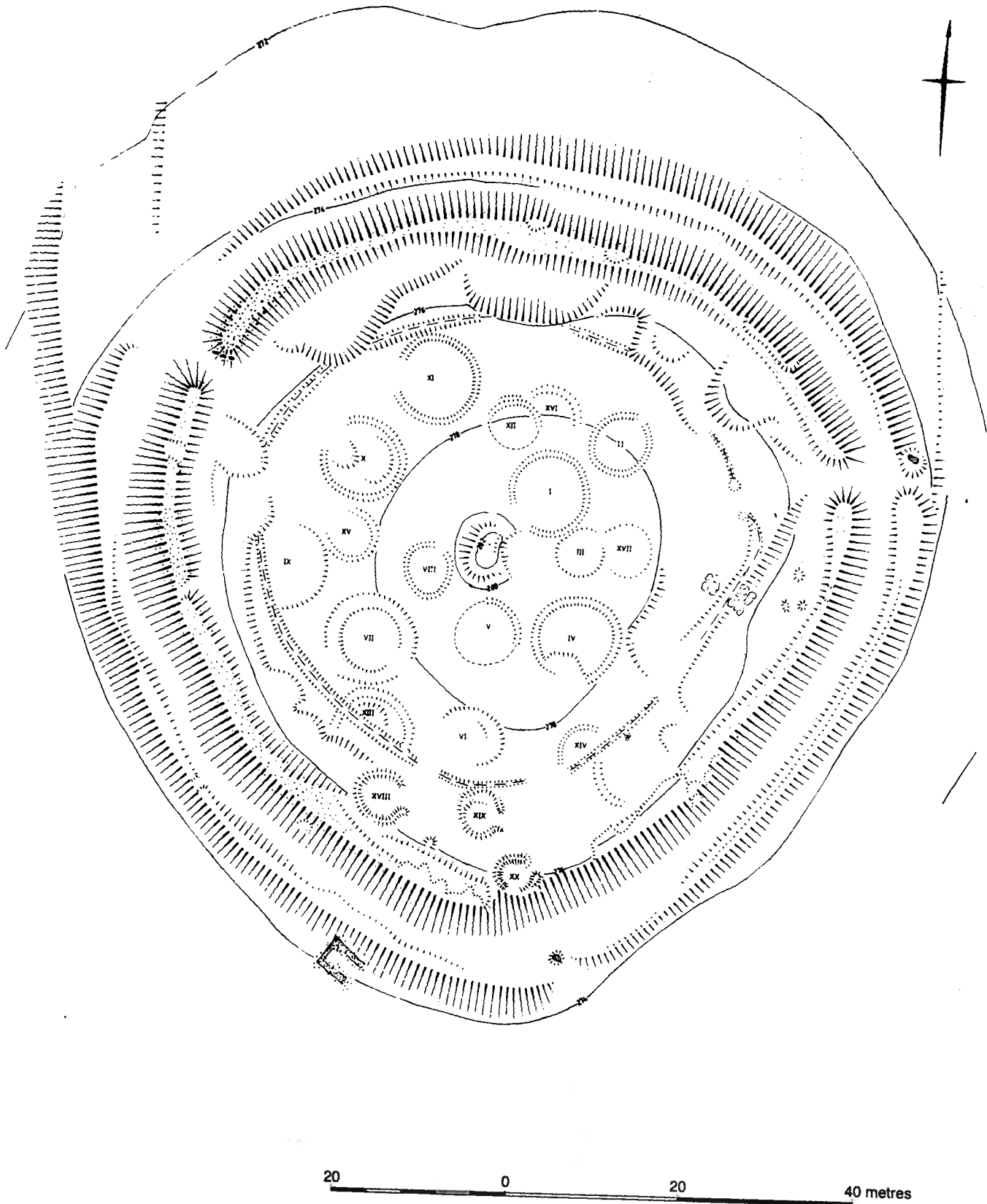


Fig. 1. Plan of Wether Hill hillfort (Crown copyright).

appear to be original, suggesting that the construction may have been episodic or, more likely, incorporated the work of separate teams. Similar constructional detail is evident on the counterscarp which when viewed from outside the fort, appears as a massive obstacle. The addition of a slighter bank along its south-eastern section enhances, subtly, but very convincingly, the visual impact of the counterscarp and makes it look double, and therefore much stronger, at this point. There are two entrances, both also part of the original constructional concept, one east-facing and sharing the same alignment as that of the palisaded enclosure, the other, opposite, looking to the west. The rampart terminals widen and are raised at the entrances but there are no above-ground traces of associated gate structures, although it is assumed that formal gates would have been present. Occasional traces of external stone-facing have been exposed in sheep scrapes, showing that the inner rampart was vertically faced, similar to that noted at Brough Law (Jobey 1971). The large quantity of stone rubble marking out the line of the defences perhaps indicates a rubble core to the wall and it must be assumed that the raw material for this came from the ditch as well as the extensive quarry hollows immediately within the rampart. Other stone may have been dredged up by the plough from the surrounding fields. On the southern ellipse the ditch appears to be absent and this may be due to the difficulty of cutting it through the bedrock which outcrops here.

The hillfort has been built on a locally prominent, low-domed natural eminence lying on a broad spur of land which leads to the north-east for a distance of 1.5km. Here, the natural headland overlooks the broad flat plain of the Ingram Valley. The spur itself consists of a series of gently shelving or stepped plateaux, so that on the northerly approach to the site, along the Ingram Valley, it appears as a prominent point on the horizon, although it is overlooked by Cochrane Pike to the south-west. The spur is defined on the east by steep slopes above Fawdon Dean and to the west by a much more gentle slope down to the Middle Dean Burn. The contrast between the valley approaches and those from the spur is marked. Walking up from the valley, the hillfort defences are invisible until relatively close to the site. This is particularly marked on the Fawdon Dean approach where the appearance of the defences comes as something of a surprise - a revelation. The vertically-faced stone wall greeting the visitor would have been a daunting sight and it must be assumed that this imposing monumental architecture was part of the original design. The fort is most prominent when approached from the south, descending from Cochrane Pike, following the modern Bridle Way (which might, itself, have fossilised earlier routes).

Although there are a number of heavily defended sites in the close vicinity of Wether Hill, few share its outstanding monumentality. Two palisaded enclosures have been uncovered 200m to the north-east of the hillfort during the NAG excavations. Other examples lie on the lower slopes of the spur and at the mouth of the Ingram Valley. A fort and settlement lies approximately 1km to the west overlooking a precipitous drop into the Middle Dean Burn (Plate 2). At present the defences consist of a bivallate circuit of bank and ditch in a position which could hardly

be called defensive. Some of the hillfort boundary may have eroded into the burn gully but, nonetheless, the site is clearly overlooked from a number of positions and is visible from the crest of the Wether Hill ramparts. This location is so unusual that it, too, must have been chosen deliberately in order to increase the visibility of the site; it seems that the builders of both the Wether Hill and the Middle Dean Burn forts chose their sites specifically so that the interior could be viewed from outside.

Looking again in detail at the immediate area of Wether Hill, we have a hillfort and a series of palisaded enclosures set within their fields and tracks. Apart from the example within the fort, the palisaded sites occupy very different locales. The two nearest sit on a level bluff of land defined, on one side only, by a shallow gully; neither placed to ensure maximum visibility nor aid defence, the sites would have 'blended' in with their surroundings.

If defence was paramount, why are there so many sites here with nothing more than a wooden fence (a barrier prone to decay and easily burnt) to protect them? It may be that we are looking at settlement hierarchy or functional differences. Perhaps the hillfort was the settlement while the palisaded enclosures acted as stock corrals or industrial zones. This is certainly not the case on Wether Hill, where excavation has clearly shown there to be settlement within the palisades to the north-east. Alternatively, it may have been that the hillfort served as a communal refuge for the residents of the other sites in times of stress. However, it is difficult to imagine how the evacuation process would have worked in the case of surprise attack. The hillfort could only have defended a small number of people for a short length of time. One plausible answer is that the hillforts were occupied by a higher status (or 'different') social group. The construction and maintenance of the defences would have been time-consuming tasks and may have been performed by a large number of people, perhaps as some form of duty, tithe or ritual obligation. Regardless, the highly visible aspects of the defences, their position and monumentality highlight the significance of display and possibly point to a highly competitive local society. A small number of the hillforts in the Cheviots are multivallate, others are aggrandised by the creation of outworks and this may serve not only a very physical purpose such as cattle corralling, but also add to the visual impact and prominence of the sites and enhance the prestige of the occupants.

Status and Display at Wether Hill

The effect of having large/outsize defences around a small settlement area not only creates a strong focus on the social group which occupies it but also affords these individuals the opportunity of public display. The combination of relatively massive defences in comparison to the small internal settlement area, allied with the high inter-visibility, **intensifies** the viewing and performance experience and permits a close scrutiny of those within the enclosed space. A ground level approach towards a heavily fortified and strongly demarcated space has a similar sort of psychological effect. It communicates on a number of levels. The first of



Plate 1. Air view of Wether Hill taken by Tim Gates for the Northumberland National Park Authority in April 1997. The remains of the fort can be readily compared to the survey in Fig.1. Also visible here are the cross-ridge dyke to the west of the fort, patches of cord rigg to the north, and extensive, presumably medieval, fieldsystems in the lower half, and towards the and top left corner, of the view. A round cairn excavated by the Northumberland Archaeological Group can be seen towards the right hand edge of the photograph, at the upper margin of the visible rigg and furrow. (Copyright Tim Gates: ref.TMG16643/45).

these is the physical: this is a strong barrier, designed to impress. This does not necessarily include active defence since the strength of the barrier would have been deterrent enough in most cases. Waddington's recent discovery of parapet walks and breastworks at Harehaugh Hill is a very rare finding indeed, but his military interpretation of these features as well as the bastions and 'guardrobe' (sic) found at Humbleton Hill (1998, 78) seem rather unconvincing and perhaps better suited to discussions of this area in post-medieval times. A number of the sites are directly overlooked in such a way that they would be susceptible to attack by spears and sling-shot. I do not dispute, however, that the 1st millennium BC was a troubled time and it is significant that one of the ways in which status was signified was through the construction of massive barriers around settlements, assuming, of course, that all of these sites were settlements in the conventional sense. Secondly, the defences also serve to isolate the social group who inhabit the site; the boundary forms a strong symbolic barrier removing the inhabitants from the outside world. Those entering Wether Hill would have experienced a dramatic passing from the world of open fields and tracks as well as other settlements, into a tight, claustrophobic, space, with different sights, sounds and activities. There would be no doubt that you were within a very important space, quite different from others in the immediate area. Colour would also have been important here; the now grey rocks of the rampart, when quarried, would have been brightly coloured, ranging from reddish-brown through to black, and could have formed an additional display element. The use of local rocks here is also significant because in doing so, the builders have given the rampart the appearance of being a 'natural' feature, perhaps resembling other rock outcrops, one of which is incorporated within the line of the hillfort rampart. In mimicking the look of the natural world, the constructors have attempted to present the enclosing barrier as belonging to it, the defences then become part of the immutable, natural, unchanging order of things.

Similar arguments can be advanced for 'scooped settlements', a number of which overlie hillfort defences. These can in no way be regarded as defence-minded constructions since there are no enclosing boundaries in association. Instead, it is the individual houses, with their thick walls, that are given excessive monumentality, perhaps suggesting a further re-definition of focus from a larger group to individual families and households. Again, many of these settlements lie in positions easily overlooked from higher ground, often slighting the defences of associated hillforts thus allowing us to speculate that we are dealing with a family group, descendants of those who built the earlier enclosures or others seeking to reclaim their former rights of tenure; in either case the phenomenon suggests a continued reverence for the importance of the place.

As prominent landmarks hillforts would have formed well-known nodal points. People moving through the area would have been aware of these important places and navigated by way of them even as they do today. In a sense they would have aided an understanding of just how you 'fitted into' the scheme of things. A sense of place would have been easily defined by association not only with

significant prominent natural landmarks such as Cunyan Crag (prominently sited to the north-west of Wether Hill) or other local settlements but also to earlier monuments. This represents a deliberate attempt by the enclosure builders to incorporate earlier sacred sites and thus connect with the ancestors and perhaps, in a sense, through ancestral linkages, to lay claim to the landscape.

Ritual and ceremonial activities would have taken place, although not at purpose built sites like the earlier causewayed enclosures and henges. Instead, ritual seems to have been bound up in everyday social activities. It may be reflected, as suggested earlier, in house orientation, or even in the construction of the hillfort boundaries with east and west facing entrances (cf. Darvill 1997). Other ceremonial activities can only be guessed at, but given the inter-visibility between the sites and other prominent markers, the mind set of the inhabitants involved an acknowledgement of the settlement's place in the landscape. Other ritual activities would doubtless have taken place at crucial moments in the agricultural year, spring and autumn, and for the group to be biologically viable there must have been a connection to a wider gene pool. When and where did the various groups of people gather together? Here, the hillforts may have played some crucial role as arenas for these communal activities. In this sense, the hillforts cease to become solely indicators of status and appear more communally oriented. Here, the defences may represent the power of a wider group of people rather than simply one extended family: the more successful the group, the more prestigious the defences. Hence, these two conflicting(?) views, communal ownership versus high status settlement, may be resolved.

Larger Enclosures

In this world of small-scale settlement, larger sites such as Yeavinger Bell (5.2ha) and Humbleton Hill (3.6ha) clearly stand apart. Both sit in similar locations overlooking and dominating the Milfield Plain from which they are visible. They are complex, multi-period sites and their sheer scale differentiates them from other contemporary constructions. Humbleton sits in a dramatic location defined by a steep gorge on its southern side. Once again, its visibility has been maximised by its careful placement. The earliest component here may have been the outer enclosure which spreads downhill on the north-eastern side; the inner, which sits in the most commanding position, may have a later (ie. post-Roman) genesis. As with so many other sites, the interior of this first-phase hillfort is easily viewed from the slopes leading down to the Plain.

At Yeavinger Bell, the position of the defences so far down the contour permits a significant proportion of the interior to be viewed externally from a wide area. What is most striking here is the twin-domed profile of the hill and the way that the defences have been constructed to enfold and, at the same time, enhance the natural form (see Frodsham, this volume). By building a stone bank around them, they have been given an added focus. The double-summit hilltop with intervening saddle is a natural



Plate 2. Middle Dean hillfort viewed from Wether Hill (Crown copyright).

arrangement similar to others which were a focus for activity as far afield as continental Europe. Enclosures such as the Závist oppidum in the Czech Republic (Audouze and Büchschütz 1989, 236) have similar summits within the interior and these hosted the sites of temples or other religious structures, in imitation, possibly of earlier Aegean sites.

Yeavinger Bell has yet to produce evidence of temples, but perhaps the underlying significance of the hilltops remains the same. There is good evidence for settlement within the interior but with fewer hut platforms on the eastern hillock. On the east summit, there is an internal palisaded enclosure and an earlier cairn, possibly the first monument to be built here. With its distinctive profile and prominent setting, the eye is drawn to the Yeavinger peaks and for travellers in the past it must have been a familiar landmark. Long before the construction of the hillfort, even before the erection of the cairn, these hills would have been imbued with special meaning; possibly sacredness (see Topping 1997), and the building of banks and ditches here 'captures' and taps into this sanctity. The location is also strategic, overlooking the Milfield Plain, which given topographical constraints elsewhere, must itself have hosted the most easily exploited and frequently used avenues of communication. Prominent defences placed above this would have very effectively announced the presence of an important site and so it is worth speculating that some of the larger sites, like Yeavinger Bell (and also the markedly skylined Brough Law in the Ingram Valley), played host to larger social gatherings, and all they entail, than was possible on other sites. A location juxtaposed with the Milfield Plain is highly charged as this area had a concentration of earlier ritual monuments including henges and barrows, as well as formal land divisions such as pit alignments. Burgess (1984) also noted that there is a large number of later prehistoric settlements set on the high ground around the Plain but little evidence for contemporary activity on it. This is a physical dislocation, but the visual and spiritual linkages may have been maintained. Yeavinger Bell sits at a liminal location in a metaphysical as well as topographical sense. On one hand, at the junction of the uplands and the low-lying Plain, on the other, at the break between the world of the living and that of the ancestors. Living in such an elevated spot would have brought with it a number of environmental problems and it is unclear if the hillfort was occupied on a permanent basis. When the extent of later prehistoric land-use on the Milfield Plain has been established, we will have a much better understanding of the social and economic relationship between upland and lowland.

Conclusion

The excessive monumentality of a number of sites and their position in the landscape invites comment but in the past, discussion has focused on environmental stress, conflict and the need for defence. I firmly believe that we should look beyond these important factors and engage with less

physical concerns. Settlements do not develop haphazardly in the landscape. Their placement is governed by factors which relate to contemporary economic concerns but are also determined by social influences, including a clear acknowledgement of the need for public and private ritual. In several instances the location of enclosures was heavily influenced by the need to maximise the display potential of the home environment. Reference to the past was made explicit by deliberately incorporating earlier sites such as cairns and other burial monuments. Visual association was clearly important as suggested by the number of sites placed on the high land around the Milfield Plain, itself the world of the ancestors with its numerous earlier monuments. The enclosed sites here would have been prominent landmarks, their boundaries skylined and highly visible from below.

A sense of place and claims to ancestral linkages as well as a desire for permanency may have been behind the decision to construct massive stone walls and ditches around settlements, since palisaded enclosures are much less of a lasting fixture. The sequence is seen clearly at Wether Hill. By building these massive architectural features and repeatedly maintaining them, the residents were making a strong statement on the high importance of what took place within. This may have been the residence of a higher status family group, or have formed a clearly defined area which was used by a wider community. It may have been a combination of both. The strength of the enclosing boundary brings the internal area into sharp focus and this is accentuated when the interior is visible from without, as is the case for so many sites in the Cheviot Hills. Indeed, the desire to be overlooked seems to have been a primary consideration. With the evolution of different types of site, such as scooped settlements, we can see similar concerns with monumental choreography, architecture and display, often in the same location as hillforts.

It's an exciting time to be working in the Cheviots. Under the careful guidance of the Northumberland National Park Authority, various agencies are identifying new ways of looking at the landscape. The Northumberland Archaeological Group's excavations at Wether Hill together with the work of Newcastle and Durham Universities are all leading to what should be the ultimate aim of our whole business: greater understanding of the lives and minds of those who have, through the ages, peopled past landscapes.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Graeme Kirkham and Carenza Lewis for commenting on this text. Thanks also to Trevor Pearson for his thoughts on Yeavinger Bell. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Peter Topping, not only for allowing access to the NAG archive but also for his enthusiasm and guidance on all things 'Cheviots'.

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