

Excavations at Meillionydd 2010

Characterising the Double Ringwork Enclosures on the Llŷn Peninsula



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Cover image: The first find, a spindlewhorl, shortly after having been discovered (Photo: R. Karl)

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Introduction

Research context

This excavation project is designed to explore a ‘double ringwork’ hilltop enclosure at *Meillionydd*, Rhiw (fig 1).¹ The fieldwork is related to research being carried out as part of the ‘Early Celtic Societies in North Wales’ project, which is investigating the settlements and hillforts of north-west Wales from the Late Bronze Age to the end of the Early Medieval period (c. 1150 BC – AD 1150). Despite producing the most well preserved, abundant and comprehensively surveyed settlements in Wales (Smith 2001), the archaeology of northwest Wales remains under-researched and poorly understood. Limited modern excavations have been carried out; chronologies are not well defined; sites are unproductive in terms of dateable finds; and environmental assemblages are rare. The emergence and development of monumental foci, such as the hillforts, ringworks and hilltop enclosures, remain particularly enigmatic (although see Crew 1985 for the results of extensive excavations carried out at the hillfort site of *Bryn y Castell*, Gwynedd).

The development of settlement monumentality in the first half of the first millennium BC represents a fundamental re-orientation of some community’s identities, beliefs and values. The monuments are frequently interpreted as representing economic intensification, when the power bases, previously centred on the manipulation of bronze exchange networks, were re-orientated towards the control of agricultural production and the land. While important, this view has oversimplified social practice and has effectively led to a homogenised perspective of ways of life, innovation and change during this crucial period of transition.

Unusual characteristics of the north Welsh evidence are the occurrence of early phases of hillfort construction in the latter part of the Late Bronze Age (c. ninth – eighth century BC), such as *The Breiddin* in Powys (Musson 1991), *Moel y Gaer Rhosesmor* in Clwyd (Guilbert 1975) and *Castell Odo* in Gwynedd (Alcock 1960). *Castell Odo* is an extremely important site and belongs to a poorly understood group of monuments concentrated in Anglesey and the Llŷn Peninsula, termed ‘weak double ringworks’ (RCAHMW 1964).² Initial occupation at this site consists of a timber palisaded enclosed settlement associated with dark earth artefact-rich deposits, which were sealed beneath the earlier Iron Age bank.³ The dark earth deposits may possess some parallels with contemporary dark earth occupation deposits or ephemeral midden accumulations, concentrated underneath or against the banks of hilltop enclosures in southern Britain (Waddington 2009).⁴ The potential occurrence of this type of deposit in North Wales is a phenomenon that requires further consideration. In the Early Iron Age, the site was developed through the construction of two circular

¹ Double ringworks are focussed upon low hilltops and consist of circular concentric double ramparts with internal roundhouses. The enclosures have parallels with the artefact-rich Late Bronze Age ringwork enclosures of eastern England, such as *Mucking North Ring* and *Springfield Lyons*.

² To date, only one site has been explored through excavation, that of *Castell Odo* (Alcock 1960). The majority of these sites have been badly affected by ploughing, and their upstanding remains are quite slight.

³ This multi-phase site originated in the Late Bronze Age/Earliest Iron Age transition (c. 800-600 BC) as a settlement of two roundhouses (Phase I), enclosed by a timber palisade and associated with a dark earth soil accumulation which was sealed beneath the Phase II external bank and produced pottery, animal bones and artefacts. Provisional radiocarbon dates places this early occupation in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age transition (c. ninth to seventh centuries cal. BC; Kelly 1988, 145). In the earlier Iron Age, the site was enhanced through the construction of two circular concentric stone banks (Phases II and III) which enclosed eight stone roundhouses (Alcock 1960, 90-98).

⁴ Such as *Balksbury Camp*, *Winklebury* and *Meon Hill* in Hampshire.

concentric stone banks which enclosed eight stone roundhouses. The double ringwork sites offer a unique and as yet largely untapped resource for creating refined chronologies and for studying the origins and development of settlement monumentality in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age transition.

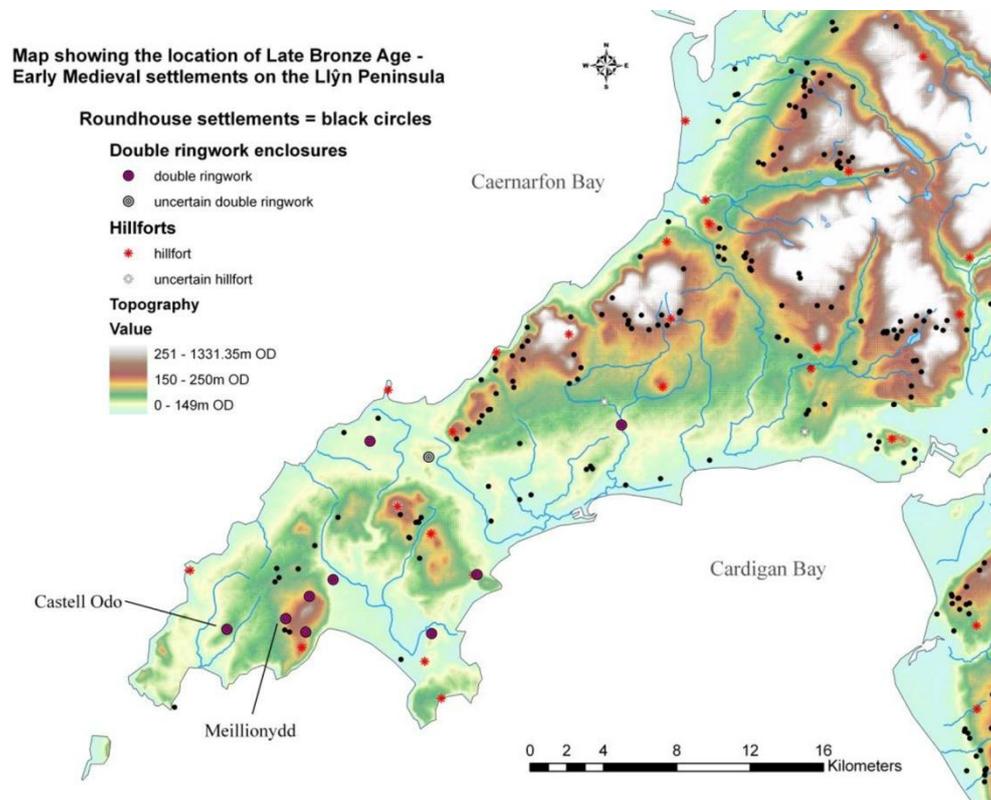


Figure 1: Map of the Llŷn Peninsula, showing the location of the site as well as all other later prehistoric hillfort and settlement sites in the area (image: author)

Research objectives

The double ring-work site of *Meillionydd*, on the Llŷn Peninsula, was recently the focus of investigation through geophysical survey by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (Smith and Hopewell 2007).⁵ The work has further enhanced the significance of these site types, which appear to be focussed largely on the Llŷn Peninsula and Anglesey and represent a fairly distinct regional tradition. The necessary interpretation and dating of these sites must now be provided by excavation.

Meillionydd has been targeted due to the excellent results of the geophysical survey (Smith and Hopewell 2007). As well as confirming the presence of a circular concentric bivallate hilltop enclosure, about 105m by 85m, the survey was notable for the strength of anomalies encountered. The inner rampart is about 4m wide and is partly defined by a band of intense activity within the enclosure that includes at least three roundhouses (Figures 2 and 3). The magnetic readings encountered appear to be associated with occupation deposits and burning activities. This is supported by a series of test soil pits which demonstrated the presence of dark earth silts with burnt stones in the areas of the magnetic enhancement (Pits 11, 16 and 17; see fig 2).⁶ The excavation aims

⁵ Furthermore, the curvilinear shapes of the enclosures are similar to other dated sites on the Llŷn and suggest that some may even belong to the end of the second millennium BC (Smith and Hopewell 2007).

⁶ The test soil pits sought to examine the topsoil depths across this heavily ploughed site (Smith and Hopewell 2007).

to test whether *Meillionydd* has Late Bronze Age origins and is associated with occupation deposits, similar to those recovered from *Castell Odo*, as well as to:

- i. gather data on the construction and phasing of the banks and ditches;
- ii. assess the stratigraphic relationship between the earthworks and internal deposits and structural features;
- iii. produce dateable materials and provide a chronological sequence for the site;
- iv. characterise the nature of the dark earth deposits;
- v. assess the site's potential for a further programme of fieldwork.

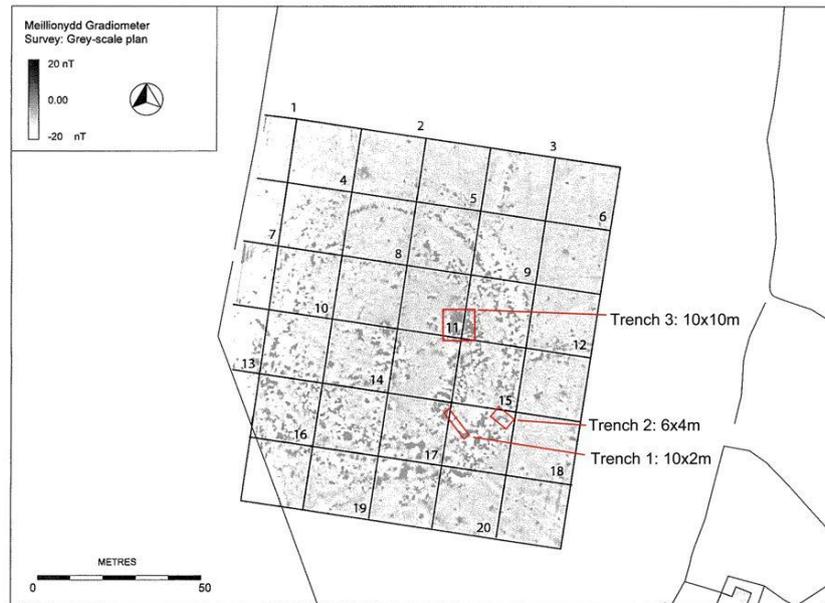


Figure 2: Geophysical survey of *Meillionydd*, Rhiw, showing location of the soil test pits investigated (shown in numbers), and the position of the trial trenches (adapted from Smith and Hopewell 2005, Figure 10).

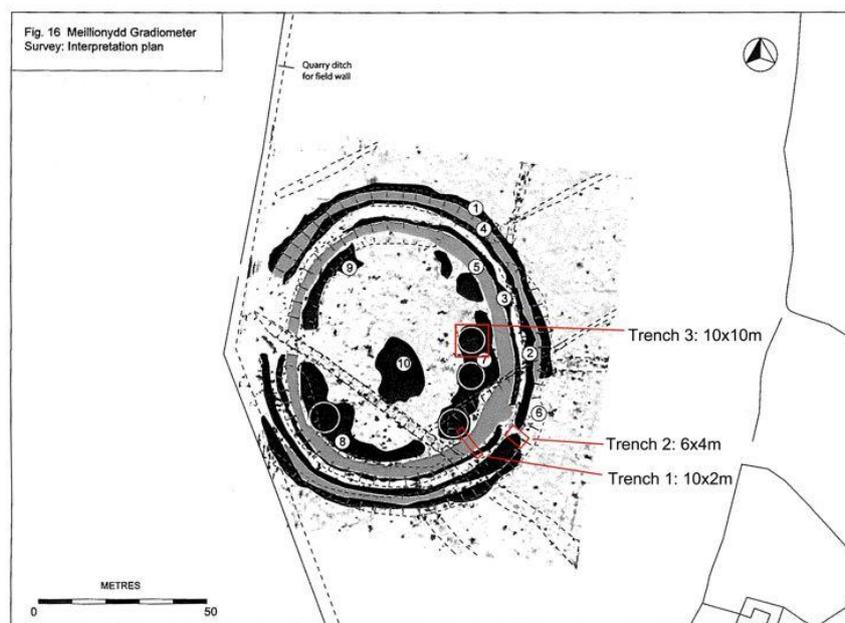


Figure 3: Interpretative plan of the geophysical survey of *Meillionydd*, Rhiw (banks are indicated in grey; ditches and occupation deposits in black; Smith and Hopewell 2007).

Research programme and methodology

The aims of the trial excavations are to examine three trenches in order to characterise different zones in the site (fig 2).

1. Trench 1 (10m by 2m) will examine a narrow slot through the inner bank and ditch in the south-eastern part of the enclosure in order to examine the boundaries and their relationship with an area of magnetically enhanced soils, which may also coincide with a possible roundhouse.
2. Trench 2 (6m by 4m) will investigate a slot through the terminal of one of the outer two ditches along the south-eastern part of the site. This trench will assess whether an entrance to the site exists here, if the ditch is contemporary with the internal ditch and bank in Trench 1, and whether structured entrance-marking deposits, typical of boundary terminals, are present.
3. Trench 3 (10m by 10m) will be opened to explore an area of magnetic enhancement within the eastern part of the interior, in the vicinity of another possible roundhouse.⁷

The three-week excavations took place between Sunday 27 June and Saturday 17 July 2010 and the team consisted of four archaeology students from Bangor University, four archaeology students from Cardiff University, and nine archaeology and Celtic Studies students from the University of Vienna, who were all trained in excavation, survey and recording skills.

The excavations: preliminary results

Trench 1

In Trench 1, the remains of the inner bank and ditch were investigated, alongside at least two roundhouses, identified just inside the bank at the northwest end of the trench. The earlier roundhouse was constructed of timber and a later roundhouse was found to be constructed of stone.

The inner bank, located within the north-western part of the trench, was very slight, consisting of a low mound of earth and rubble. The bank had evidently been slighted and robbed out, and a large proportion of the material had been deliberately deposited within the interior of the adjacent stone roundhouse. Quantities of burnt stone were identified within the disturbed bank deposits, suggesting that the residues from feasts and other events were sometimes deposited along the boundary. The bank was partially set within a shallow linear trench which contained an alignment of deliberately placed large boulders (fig 4). This feature may either indicate the original delineation of the inner boundary to the settlement, or a foundation trench for a wall, with the boulders perhaps indicating the lower inner facing stones of the original bank wall. No evidence for an early timber palisade was discovered underneath the bank. A single posthole was identified in the central area of the trench – but given the narrow width of the trench (which was 2m wide), it is impossible at present to determine whether the feature originally formed part of a palisade structure or a roundhouse.

At the southeast end of the trench, a narrow V-shaped ditch was identified – the shape of the ditch is typically Iron Age in date (fig 5). This appears to have been recut once through the creation of a wide flat-bottomed ditch. Both the ditches formed the inner ditch of the enclosure boundary, being situated immediately inside and to the west of the outer bank.

⁷ The adjacent test pit (Pit 11) revealed a dark brown gravelly silt with much burnt stone, suggesting that in situ occupation dark earth occupation deposits are located here as well.



Figure 4: Shot of the stone roundhouse wall in Trench 1, behind which can be seen a short stretch of walling, which is contemporary as both the walls sit on top of the same soil horizon. The linear arrangements of stones, forming part of the bank structure, can be seen behind these structures, to the east.



Figure 5: Shot of the north facing section through the south side of Trench 1, showing the original V-shaped ditch, which was recut by the flat-bottomed ditch and infilled with rubble.

Following some initial silting, the later ditch had been infilled with rubble, which presumably derived from the deliberate destruction or accidental slumping of the adjacent outer bank. Despite extending the trench by 3m, the eastern edge of the ditch was not exposed, suggesting that the feature is at least 4.5m wide, if not wider. The digging and re-cutting and backfilling of ditches is a common practice in the Iron Age period, demonstrating the importance to the inhabitants of continually redefining and renegotiating the important boundaries which defined the settlement space.

The stone-walled roundhouse at the north-western end of the trench was constructed within a cut and contained a number of occupation features, including postholes and gullies, some of which were sealed by the wall. The roundhouse wall appears to have been contemporary with a short stretch of walling, orientated east-west, which may have provided a support wall between the roundhouse and the bank (see Figure 4). Two postholes and two gullies were sealed by the roundhouse wall, and

another two postholes were sealed by the other wall, implying the presence of one or two earlier timber roundhouses. Moreover, a large number of postholes were also identified within the roundhouse interior, and given the small area exposed, this suggests that possibly another two roundhouses had been constructed in this area prior to the creation of the stone roundhouse. Following the abandonment of the stone roundhouse, the building had been deliberately infilled with rubble from the adjacent stone bank, possibly reflecting the presence of an elaborate closing rite on the site.

An aim for a future excavation season will be to extend both the northwest and northeast areas of this trench in order to reconstruct the sequence of roundhouse construction and to complete the excavation of the ditch and assess the relationship between the inner ditch and the adjacent outer bank.

Trench 2

In trench 2, we investigated the outer bank of the enclosure, which was constructed from a simple dump of earth and stone, with possible evidence for internal facing stones in the form of large blocks situated at its north-western end. Once again, this structure had been deliberately destroyed or robbed out. Stone rubble was found infilling the flat-bottomed ditch in the adjacent Trench 1, suggesting that the bank had been slighted or at least had slumped in to the ditch during a later phase of occupation on the site. Interestingly, the banks either side of the entranceway at *Castell Odo* were also deliberately slighted towards the end of the occupation, possibly reflecting the presence of a similar practice.



Figure 6: Shot of walling and unexcavated postholes (dark fills are visible) in the south-western corner of Trench 2 – the wall sites immediately in front of the stony bank, and both overlie the posthole.

During the final day of excavation, some interesting features were identified just in front of the bank in the south-western corner of the trench. In this area we exposed a curvilinear arrangement of well-

laid stones, consisting of a single course, which may represent the original facing stones of the bank, or possibly a roundhouse wall (the latter interpretation seems unlikely at present due to the absence of a cut for the wall, which is sitting directly on top of the natural subsoil). We also uncovered two postholes in this area, one of which was sealed by the bank, and these may either have been associated with the bank structure or possibly reflect the presence of an early timber boundary, such as a palisade (fig 6).

We had also hoped to uncover the terminal of the outer ditch in the south-eastern end of the trench, as suggested by the geophysical survey. Unfortunately, however, despite extending the trench by 1.5m to the east, the ditch was confirmed to be absent from this area. It is possible that the ditch is situated immediately to the south of the trench.

A future excavation season will aim to reopen and extend this area in order to investigate the nature of the bank structure, which on present evidence appears to be turning inwards to form an elaborate entranceway nearby. A new trench will also be positioned nearby in order to investigate whether an outer ditch is present.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was excavated in four quadrants – 3A – D. The archaeology in Trench 3D was merely exposed and recorded, but time restrictions did not permit any further excavation in this area. In Trench 3A and 3D we uncovered the remains of the inner stone bank, which had once again been levelled and robbed out, and the trench as a whole produced evidence for at least four or possibly five phases of roundhouses. The levelled bank deposits contained quantities of burnt stones, which presumably created the high magnetic readings identified by the magnetometer survey in this area. Unfortunately, no dark earth artefact-rich deposits, similar to that identified at *Castell Odo*, were recovered in this area, as had originally been hypothesised. Nevertheless, the frequency of burnt stones is interesting and suggests the presence of communal feasts, with the stone pot boilers possibly being mounded on to the banks to further enhance this boundary during the occupation of the site.

The first phase of roundhouse construction was represented by an arc of timber postholes, visible in Trenches 3A and 3C, overlying which were the remains of two stone roundhouses. The first timber roundhouse contained a central hearth pit in 3B, which was very well preserved and partially sealed beneath the well constructed stone wall of the third roundhouse (fig 7). A number of other postholes were identified within Trench 3A and 3C, and may indicate the presence of yet another timber roundhouse in this area, although the plan of this structure has not yet been established.

The second roundhouse was constructed from stone and was partially situated within a hollow on the northwestern side of Trenches 3B and 3C. The hollow had evidently been dug into the hillslope to create a flat platform or terrace, into which the building had been constructed. The wall of this structure was badly preserved, as it had been truncated by the construction of the third roundhouse, which evidently cut through this wall in Trench 3B (fig 8).

The third stone roundhouse was exceptionally well preserved along the northwestern side of the building in Trench 3B, presumably due to its position inside the terrace cut, which had protected the wall from any later disturbance. The building was created from a thick stone-faced wall with an earthen core, with an entranceway in the southwest. The stone-facing on the inside of the building was exceptionally well constructed (fig 7). The building also contained a large stone-lined pit, presumably for storage, on top of which a possible quernstone was recovered (fig 9). Two stone

spindlewhorls were also recovered from disturbed occupation/abandonment deposits within this roundhouse. One of the objects was only partially finished, suggesting that artefact-creation was occasionally undertaken on the site. Following abandonment, the roundhouse had been deliberately infilled with a thick layer of rubble, similar to the roundhouse uncovered in Trench 1. It seems likely that this material derived from the destruction of the adjacent inner bank, once again reflecting the presence of an elaborate closing rite on the site.



Figure 7: *Top*; shot of the inner facing of the third roundhouse wall, which seals the central hearth of the earlier timber roundhouse. *Bottom*; shot of the upper filling of the central hearth pit associated with the timber roundhouse, which was shown to be sealed by the later roundhouse wall, following its removal (the inner and outer facing stones and wall core are visible in the section).



Figure 8: Shot of the second stone wall (foreground) which was truncated by the third stone wall in Trench 3B.

Another cut for a roundhouse wall was identified along the southern side of Trench 3C, indicating the presence of yet another roundhouse in this area. We were unable to complete the excavations in this area and a future excavation season will aim to reopen and extend the trench in order to fully expose the roundhouses and to assess a larger area of the inner bank structure.



Figure 9: Shot of the stone-lined pit in Trench 3B, with upper fills removed.

Conclusions

The excavations were extremely successful and confirmed the results of the geophysical surveys undertaken by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, demonstrating the presence of a circular double ringwork enclosure, constructed from ditches and stone and earth banks, with evidence for occupation in the interior, in the form of roundhouses. The intensity of occupation within the internal areas examined reveal a long and complex sequence of occupation on the site, as well as timber and later stone phases, which have been established on other circular / ringditch enclosed settlements of this date in Gwynedd. Based on the evidence from other sites in the area, the early timber phase of occupation may belong to the ninth – seventh centuries BC. The later stone roundhouses were possibly created in the sixth – fifth centuries BC, and occupation may have continued in to the later Iron Age period, possibly the second or first century BC. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal samples taken from these features may help to further define these chronologies, which are at present rather tentative. The practice of continually occupying this monumental enclosure, over a long period, reflects the importance of this place to contemporary communities. Furthermore, repeatedly rebuilding roundhouses on the same spot implies a desire to maintain an ongoing link with the past, further helping to create a special sense of place and history on the site.

At present, no evidence for an early timber palisade, similar to the one identified at *Castell Odo*, has been identified. Future work will aim to investigate other areas of the banks across the enclosure in order to prove or disprove that the enclosure was originally defined by a timber palisade.

A number of stone artefacts were recovered from the site, including a possible quernstone, as well as a collection of stone hammers, pounders, grinders, polishing/smoothing stones, two Iron Age spindlewhorls, and two stone counters or gaming pieces. One of the hammerstones was crafted from Mynydd Rhiw stone, which had potentially been extracted from the site of the Neolithic axe factory, or at least from the area surrounding it, and several other chippings and flakes of this material were recovered from the site. A small corroded fragment of an iron object was also recovered from a bank context in Trench 2. Due to the absence of dateable artefacts (the Iron Age in this region is aceramic and so dateable pottery fragments are rarely recovered from sites), it is difficult at present to suggest a date for the enclosure, other than to confirm that it belongs to a tradition of monumental settlements which belong to the Iron Age period at least (although a Late Bronze Age date for early occupation on the site is quite possible). A large number of good quality charcoal samples were recovered from secure archaeological contexts and provide the possibility for the production of calibrated radiocarbon dates, which will hopefully shed some additional light on the chronological sequence of this settlement.

Future work will complete the post-excavation work from the 2010 excavations and an interim report will be written by September 2010. A second excavation season is being provisionally planned for summer 2011.

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