ANNUAL REPORT: PENYCLODDIAU 2018 FIELD SCHOOL

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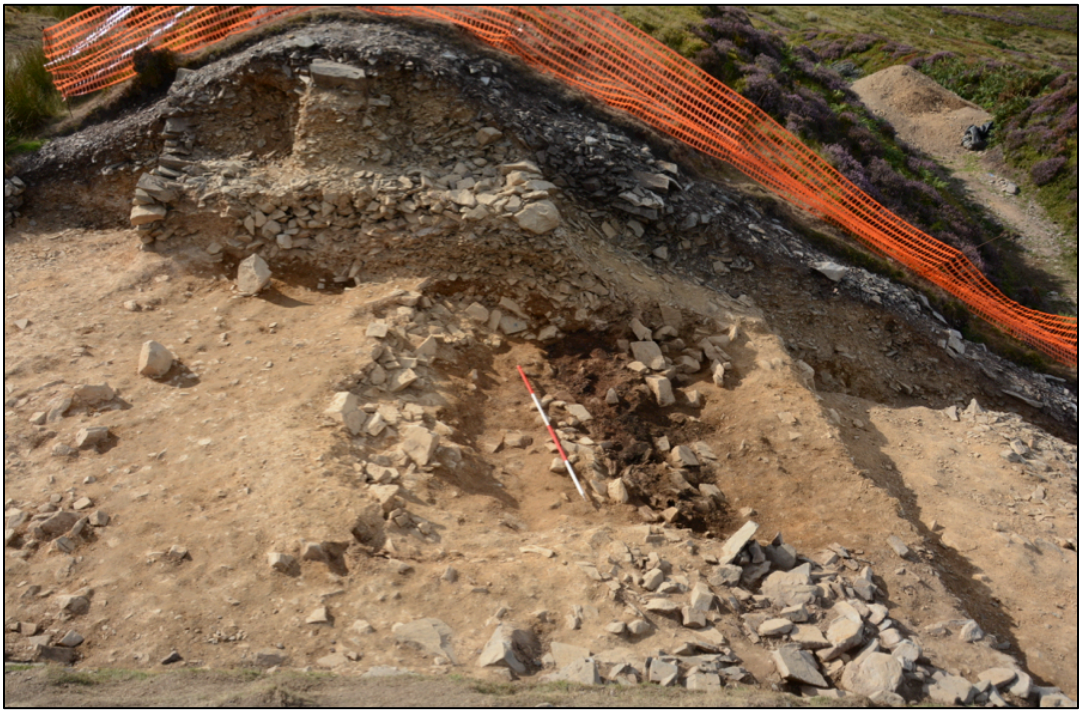

Section through two-phase hillfort rampart revealing Bronze Age carbonized-wattle palisade

The final season of excavations at Penycloddiau hillfort, Flintshire (North Wales) took place between Sunday July 15th and Saturday August 12th 2018. This was the seventh season of excavation at the site, concluding a project used by the Department of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology (University of Liverpool) as the departmental field school (2012-2017).

Our project seeks to characterize the chronology and function of the Clwydian hillforts, via targeted excavation at the previously un-investigated contour-type hillfort of Penycloddiau; and update current understanding of the nature/chronology of later prehistoric settlement in North Wales, in line with current research frameworks both for Wales and the UK as a whole. Our excavation this year consisted of one open-area trench – excavated in plan, and recorded in both single-context plan and in section, according to the British single-context method. Research accomplishments Our 2018 research aims were to excavate the rampart and berm to natural (Area 1), and reconstruct the site to its original condition We achieved full excavation of the hillfort rampart and berm, to natural, and backfilled the site.

Two distinct phases of construction of the hillfort rampart were identified – Phase 2 (1.9 m high) comprised blocky shales. The angle of deposits in the core suggested that this material was won from the interior quarry scoop. This phase included F50 on the exterior face – a re-facing of the Phase 1 inner rampart. The importance here is that this was identified as the middle earthwork running out from the hillfort's eastern entrance. Internally, the re-facing consisted of a series of

long, thin boxes filled with earth. The tranverse element of the boxes was bonded with grey clay – bonding material has not usually been considered an element of prehistoric building practices, making this an important find. Phase 2 was also capped with a lime deposit, for waterproofing. The external walkway (excavated in 2017) running up to the ditch edge was also of this phase.

Forensic excavation of the construction – stratigraphically, on a stone-by-stone basis revealed that construction did not take place as might be imagined –box constructed and filled, next box constructed and filled. Instead, a foundation was laid, transverse walling built, and each box was filled, prior to a second course being constructed, and box filled again. As such, the Iron Age builders built 'in the round' – working their way around the hillfort, building up the new face in layers. The boxes a way of insuring against major collapse – a structurally sound method.

Phase 1 of the inner rampart was just 0.9 m high (i.e. up to the present writer's hip) – as such, not hugely defensive. This was built of glacial boulders – akin to those found at the cut edge of the ditch (2016), as well as a cut into natural for the Phase 1 foundation/levelling activity. What this tells us is that Phase 1 = ditch and rampart; Phase 1a = the counterscarp bank (ditch clearance) and ditch recut; and Phase 2 = re-facing/rebuilding of rampart, excavation of internal quarry scoop, and construction of central rampart, working to aggrandize the eastern entrance.

Prior to Phase 1 was an episode of preparation which include a laying out of boulders for the interior face, followed by a band of stone to level up the surface, alongside levelling of ground in preparation for the exterior face with the construction of stone boxes separated by transverse horizontal timbers (present as voids). This episode had been burned, and a turfline grown prior to the broader Phase 1 construction – revealing time-depth, and pauses in construction.

On removal of the Phase 1 rampart we identified a Late Bronze Age palisade – on a slightly different alignment to the rampart – but apparently not too separated in time. Excavation revealed a preserved, in situ carbonized double-wattle fence – with rods still surviving woven around small uprights. Fully recorded, and sampled, initial analysis by our charcoal specialist revealed the wattle to be fast-grown hazel (10-12 years) and suggestive of coppicing. This complements our environmental coring (2015) which revealed evidence for oak coppicing. This season, our students were able to take part in the excavation of exclusively prehistoric archaeological deposits. Our students are very much at the trowel's edge, working alongside the directors both to elucidate and record the stratigraphic sequence. We teach via a hands-on, in-the-trench method – with the emphasis very much on team effort. We are proud to have trained a total of 44 IFR students on the Penycloddiau excavations.

Following their general on-site and off-site training in the first two weeks, our IFR students performed the role of site assistants. All students took part in the fine excavation and detailed recording of the carbonized palisade – they excelled at their professionalism in this final task.

In addition, students took part in our programme of heritage communication – giving site tours to visitors and guests, a big contribution towards helping the project to sustain what have become very strong links with our project partners, and also with the local farming community.

The excavation had a very strong presence on Twitter. A blog will soon be on the University of Liverpool's departmental webpages, and initial results disseminated to the general public via the BBC's 'Digging for Britain'. Excavation results will be presented to UK experts at the Hillforts Study Group meeting in November (Oxford). Final project dissemination will see publication as a monograph alongside the excavations at Bodfari, with Prof. Gary Lock (University of Oxford).