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BOOK REVIEW

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Atlas of the Hillforts of Britain and Ireland. Gary Lock and Ian Ralston. Edinburgh University Press. 2022 — 488 pp.

Knowledge of and research into Europe's ancient fortifications — hillforts — have been neglected for some time. However, the appearance of new publications is evidence of renewed research. Although this is most evident in the growth of printed works, other forms of dissemination of research results have also been used. The book discussed below is a good example of this.

Two of the UK's senior researchers, Gary Lock and Ian Ralston, together with a large team of contributors (listed on pp. III and XVI), have published a substantial book on the hillforts of Britain and Ireland (hereafter referred to as the Isles for the sake of conciseness). Both authors are well known in fields of study beyond hillforts: Gary Lock is a specialist in landscape archaeology and Geographical Information Systems, and Ian Ralston is a renowned Scottish archaeologist working on a wide range of prehistoric topics.

The *Atlas of the Hillforts of Britain and Ireland* (hereafter the Atlas) results from a project that ran from 2012 to 2016. Publications directly related to the project are listed in Appendix 1 (pp. 427–428). The most important of these is the book published in 2019 (*Hillforts: Britain, Ireland and the Nearer Continent*. Oxford, 2019). It contains nine articles based on papers that were presented at the project's 2017 conference. The project was very much focused on the digitisation and online hosting of data relating to hillforts in Britain and Ireland. Without going into the technological aspects of the latter, it is necessary to give a brief introduction to the kind of information available on the online version of the Atlas, as it is closely related to the book under review.

Data on the hillforts are available on the website https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk (accessed 15 September 2024). Here, each hillfort is described according to a standardised template. A hillfort was picked at random from the list to see what the description contained. The entry for the hillfort listed as EN3021 Borough Hill, Essex (here and below the name of the hillfort is accompanied by the number used in the Atlas Register description)includes the location (with coordinates), a textual description of the site (internal surface area, orientation, measurements of fortifications, damage, investigations and their results), a LiDAR image (in some cases an aerial photograph is included instead) (without highlighting the hillfort itself), and literature and web references. As the database is computer-based, much of the data has been adapted for computer-based generalisation. For example, the chronology is divided into eight groups, the current use into 12 groups, and so on. In addition to the sometimes quite detailed information on the hillfort itself (e.g. the ramparts,

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for which the form, number, structure and location of the gates are given), data is also provided on the location of the site in relation to water bodies and the assessment of water sources. The computer-based database forms the backbone of the book reviewed below. It is immediately apparent that the book is packed with figures, percentages and comparisons between the British and Irish regions (six in total, four of which are the most frequently referred to). The wealth of data is supported by numerous tables (76 in total) and even more graphic illustrations and maps (159 in total). Illustrations convey a range of data, including the natural geographical setting, size, fortifications, structure of the internal area and dating of the hillforts (which is also the subject of chapters 3 to 7 of the book). For example, we can learn that in Scotland there are 29 univallate hillforts of which the internal area measures 0.5–0.99 ha and that they account for 2% of the Scottish hillforts (p. 140, Table 4.9). In Wales, there are 18 sites (3.5%) with overlapping entrances (p. 226). We will not dwell on this information further but will mention only separate aspects that characterise the hillforts of the Isles as a whole. They are divided into six types: contour, promontory, hillslope, level terrain, marsh and combined (p. 79, Fig. 3.5). The internal surface area of hillforts is relatively large, with an average of 1.75 ha (p. 112). Individual sites range in size from less than 1 ha (2280 hillforts) up to 130 ha (p. 11, Fig. 4.5) (note: EN3582 Bindon Hill, Dorset, is recorded as 114 ha; however, no hillfort of this size could be found in the Atlas). The number of fortifications per site ranges up to eight (such as in the case of the hillfort marked as EN0656 Trevelgue Head, Cornwall) (p. 142). Hillforts on the Isles existed from ca. 1435–1320 BC (EN3184 Helsby Hill Camp, Cheshire) (p. 319) to ca. 878–1017 AD (IOM3340 Hango Broogh, Rushen) or even later (EN0142 Sinodun Hill Camp, Berkshire) (p. 338), but most date to between ca. 800 BC to ca. 400 AD (p. 317, Fig. 7.2). The wealth of statistical information is very useful for comparing the hillforts of the Isles, different parts of it or whole regions, with those of other countries, and for looking for common features in the development of European fortifications. But how reliable is it?

This issue becomes clearer when considering the history of research into the hillforts of the Isles. In Britain, studies commenced with the 1793 publication on Roman military antiquities in which General William Roy (1726–1790) included several surveys of hillforts (p. 8). By the start of the 19th century, 10 hillforts had been excavated (p. 53, Fig. 2.13). The number of hillforts recorded increased rapidly thereafter, and by the end of the 19th century, there were 1079 known forts in Scotland alone (p. 10). Of course, only a fraction of these were actual hillforts, but the early and active research into prehistoric fortifications is evident. This continued during the 20th century with the production and publication of further results of research and maps (e.g. Ordnance Survey) for more specific areas and chronological periods, and of course with excavations (discussed below). Major works on hillforts in Britain were published in the 1970s by James Forde-Johnston (1927–2001) and Alexander Hubert Arthur Hogg (1908–89), and in Ireland by Barry Raftery (1944–2010). Over the course of more than two hundred years of research into hillforts, a wide range of data has been gathered by many people who studied, were interested in, or were in other ways associated with the hillforts. All of these studies are used as the backbone for the Atlas under discussion. Understandably, it is not possible to speak of the consistency or reliability of this information. The difficulty of dealing with this wealth of information is reflected in the chapter on the history of the finding, cataloguing and mapping of hillforts (pp. 6–28). It should be noted that this chapter does not contain the history of fieldwork; only the background is described using statistical data in the chapter on methodology (pp. 43–54). The key problem of defining what is meant by 'hillfort' has remained from previous studies, and without a definition, it is impossible to produce an atlas of hillforts as such. The authors are well aware of this problem and devote an entire chapter to it (Chapter 2, pp. 27–54). The solution is complicated by the fact that, as mentioned above, the Atlas is based on data previously collected by other researchers, as well as data collected as part of the 'Citizen Science' project (the aim of which was to encourage members of the public to complete surveys describing hillforts across the country; a total of 305 surveys were received in response to this project) (p. 38). In the absence of an established definition of what a 'hillfort' is, even within the research community, it is impossible to expect accuracy or thoroughness in the descriptions made by various individuals. To 'feed' this kind of information into a computer-based database, the authors of the Atlas had to introduce the statuses of 'confirmed' and 'unconfirmed' hillforts. Confirmed hillforts are defined as fortifications that meet three criteria: a dominant topographical position, the presence of enclosing works and an internal area of more than 0.15 ha in size (pp. 30–31). The total number of both types of hillforts in the Atlas database is 4147, of which 3354 are confirmed. The confirmed hillforts are used as the basis for most of the conclusions presented in the book under review.

The author of this review has first-hand experience with the tricky process of producing an atlas based on data provided by others. During the preparation of a similar atlas of Lithuanian hillforts (*Lietuvos piliakalniai. Atlasas.* Vilnius, 2005, vols. I–III; expanded edition covering the years 2006–2017 (Vol. IV, Vilnius, 2017)), it was initially attempted to follow the same route, until it was realised that the data collected in this way were inaccurate or, in a considerable number of cases, even erroneous. As a result, it was necessary to visit all the Lithuanian hillforts and to

revise the known data or even to describe them on the spot, as well as to collect other data necessary for the atlas. Even after completing the site visits and revising the data, 187 sites were excluded from the list of hillforts (*Lietuvos piliakalniai. Atlasas.*Vilnius, 2017, Vol. IV, pp. 196–216), which is almost 20% of the total number of known hillforts in Lithuania. Interestingly, almost the same percentage of unconfirmed hillforts can be found on the Isles. The reliability of the conclusions drawn on the basis of the confirmed hillforts in Britain and Ireland is greater only because the total number of hillforts is many times higher than in Lithuania.

The part of the Atlas that summarises the background of the fieldwork is the most reliable. Investigations have been carried out since the end of the 18th century, and the dynamics of fieldwork in individual regions are analysed in detail by decade up to 2010 (pp. 47–54). The investigations are divided into excavations of interiors and their enclosures (522 cases), enclosures only (140 cases) and interiors only (53 cases) (p. 45). These figures add up to 715 excavated hillforts, over 21% of which are 'confirmed'. The number of investigated hillforts is very uneven across the regions: the majority of excavations were carried out in England and Scotland starting from the late 18th century onwards, while the first two in Ireland were excavated only in the 1930s (p. 51, Fig. 2.10). The most intensive time for fieldwork was the 1960s, when 154 hillforts were excavated. The number of excavations began to decline in the 1990s (p. 53, Fig. 2.13). Unfortunately, the Atlas does not provide data on the extent of these excavations, which is important in the context of large hillforts. The scale of investigations is illustrated by the most extensively researched hillfort in England: Danebury Hill Camp (EN3828, Hampshire). Barry Cunliffe (b. 1939) excavated approximately 60% of the 5 ha interior between 1969 and 1988. The results of these excavations were published in five volumes between 1984 and 1995 (volume 3 is devoted to the analysis of aerial photographs) in *Danebury: An Iron Age Hillfort in Hampshire*. However, the extent of the excavations is not given in the description of this hillfort either.

In any case, an atlas based on data collected by numerous different people cannot be uniform and comprehensive, even if the data are adapted to computer processing. The descriptions of the hillforts do not include plans, current or old views, the height of the natural slopes, the width of the ramparts at the base, the width of the ditches at the top, a more detailed description of the material remains discovered during excavations of the hillforts, or at least the simplest statistics, which are otherwise abundant in the book. This is not even the case for the aforementioned Danebury Hill Camp hillfort, for which a wealth of information is available. It seems that the importance of this type of information was not considered by the authors of the Atlas, or it was rarely found in the descriptions; otherwise, it would have been taken into account in the analysis of, for example, the defensive structures of hillforts. The only element analysed in the Atlas is the altitude of the hillforts (pp. 64–68), which can be taken from maps and is particularly important for understanding the settlement system but not the hillfort.

Focusing solely on the book, it must be noted that in addition to the research, there are three appendices: the above-mentioned list of publications directly related to the project, a case study of Scottish vitrified forts and an overview of hillforts in association to the historical counties of Britain and Ireland. Befitting a scholarly publication, it also includes a substantial bibliography (pp. 451–470), an index of subjects and a common index for places, people and organisations. Perhaps the only slightly misleading feature is the word 'atlas' in the title of the book. An atlas usually refers to a systematic collection of information on a particular subject, usually in book form and always including maps. The book in question consists of a text for the analysis of hillforts and 104 small-scale maps (each map taking up no more than one page of the book). Due to the large geographical area covered and the specific nature of the textual information, such maps cannot convey all the information gathered, so most of it has been put online as part of the descriptions of the hillforts. In the absence of such descriptions in the book (which, notably, does not contain a printed list of hillforts), it is not entirely accurate to refer to the book as an atlas (perhaps it could be called 'an introduction to the atlas', or 'features of the hillforts of Britain and Ireland'?). Probably because of the scale and number of hillforts, the maps published in the book show them as dots without descriptions (which are very condensed in places). On page 41, we find Figure 2.2 showing all 4147 hillforts in the atlas. This is an impressive illustration, but it is not possible to identify specific hillforts from it or other similar maps. The names of the hillforts listed in the Excel file 'EUP website Table 2.2' on the Edinburgh University Press website are of little help here, as their locations are given only by historic counties. However, the boundaries of the historic counties are not shown in Figure 2.2 or any other map in the book (a separate map with markings for all the hillforts within the counties would have been a good idea). A reader, especially a foreign reader, may not be familiar with the historical geography of the Isles and would need a relevant map to read such a list. The numbering of the hillforts in the Excel files is based only on the number of hillforts, and there are no maps indicating the locations of the hillforts, which are marked as dots in Figure 2.2. If it is not possible to produce a general map showing the location of the hillforts of the Isles, it seems appropriate to at least include the coordinates of the hillforts on the list in the Excel file Another minor shortcoming which will be encountered

by foreign readers is the lack of explanation of some of the abbreviations used in the text. Only abbreviations identifying regions (p. 3, Table I.1) and groups (p. 38, Table 2.4) are explained, while abbreviations such as AHRC or EUP are left to the reader to work out for themselves.

The project for an atlas of hillforts in Britain and Ireland began a decade before the book was published. The idea for it was born even earlier. In that time, computer technology and web development have evolved and improved considerably, and the book's online companion site (which constitutes most of the information) has to be considered from the perspective of that time. The authors clearly state that the database was completed in October 2016, and has not been updated since (p. 1). This is an axiom for books — the date of their publication, or slightly earlier, is the end of the study of the subject. For the web, it is slightly different. A web page still needs to be maintained, even if it is not updated.

This review touches on only a small part of the issues raised and addressed by the book. Such a large number of hillforts requires not just one but at least ten books of similar size to do justice to them. Comparing this book with all previous works on Britain and Ireland's hillforts, we can expect this atlas to be the main resource on the subject for at least several decades.