Late Iron Age Oppida

A review of recent and current research into Late Iron Age British towns and their landscapes

A conference in which we will review the current understanding of British Late Iron Age oppida.
Iron Age Oppida Conference
A review of recent and current research

Programme

9-9.30am Arrival and Registration, Tea / Coffee, Henley Business School

9.30am Introduction Michael Fulford, University of Reading

Session 1: Chaired by Richard Bradley

9.45am The rise and fall of a capital? Research and excavations on the Late Iron Age ‘oppidum’ at Bagendon, Gloucestershire Tom Moore, Durham University

10.25am The Late Iron Age royal site at Stanwick, North Yorkshire, in its wider context Colin Haselgrove, Leicester University

11.05 - 11.35am Tea / Coffee

11.35am The evolution and landscape of a Late Iron Age oppidum: The Silchester Environs Project Catherine Barnett, University of Reading

12.05pm A tale of two oppida – The Late Iron Age and Early Roman landscape around Arundel, West Sussex David McOmish, Historic England, Gordon Hayden, Worthing Archaeological Society

12.45-1.45pm Lunch

Session 2: Chaired by Colin Haselgrove

1.45pm The Catuvellauni and the Trinovantes at Camulodunum or not, and more…. Philip Crummy Colchester Archaeological Trust

2.25pm Roles, definitions and the impact of new culture and technology: recent research on oppida in Hertfordshire Stewart Bryant, CfA

3.05pm Ham Hill. On the edge of worlds: Developed hillforts and oppida on the Somerset Levels Niall Sharples, Cardiff University & Marcus Brittain, Cambridge Archaeological Unit

3.45- 4.15pm Tea / Coffee

4.15pm Late Iron Age Calleva Professor Michael Fulford, University of Reading

4.55pm Discussion

5.15pm Conclusions Barry Cunliffe, Oxford University

5.30pm Finish

5.30-7.00pm Drinks reception, Department of Archaeology Atrium

| 22nd April 2017 |
Speakers Abstracts:

Session 1

The rise and fall of a capital? Research and excavations on the Late Iron Age ‘oppidum’ at Bagendon, Gloucestershire

Tom Moore, Durham University

The development and role of Late Iron Age social centres known as ‘oppida’ or ‘royal sites’ remains one of the enduring problems for understanding change at the end of the 1st millennium BC. Were they constructed in areas of the landscape which were previously empty or had ritual significance? Did they perform proto-urban functions? What role did they play in the articulation of new forms of power? Through examining the results of a recent campaign of survey and excavation at one of the lesser-known ‘oppida’ in Britain (Bagendon, Gloucestershire) this paper seeks to address these issues. It will examine the origins of the Late Iron Age centre, and suggest that the existing landscape location and settlement directly related to its transformation in the 1st century AD. The paper will also explore the complex’s role in the 1st century AD, not as urban centre but as ‘powerscape’, and demonstrate how it remained a centre of social power in the Early Roman province. This paper will suggest that research at Bagendon challenges simple narratives on the development and role of oppida, shedding light on the complex and changing ways in which power was manifest at the end of the Iron Age.

The late Iron Age royal site at Stanwick, North Yorkshire, in its wider context

Colin Haselgrove, Leicester University

The earthwork complex at Stanwick, enclosing nearly 3 km² in the middle Tees valley west of Darlington, is one of the largest prehistoric fortifications in Europe. The first occupation dates to around c 80 BC and the settlement soon developed into a regional centre, characterised by its monumental timber buildings and far-flung contacts. In the mid-1st century AD, the 7km-long perimeter earthwork was constructed, which along with the exceptional Roman imports from this phase, indicates that the complex was probably the seat of Cartimandua, the client ruler of the Brigantes in the period between the Claudian invasion and just before the Roman military occupation of northern England. In seeking to explain the emergence of Stanwick as a major centre, the lecture will examine how developments there compare with late Iron Age focal sites in other parts of Britain and beyond, also taking account of the results of new fieldwork over the last 20 years in the Stanwick environs, which is starting to suggest a radically different picture of the real nature of the extended settlement complex.
The Evolution and Landscape of a Late Iron Age Oppidum: The Silchester Environs Project

Catherine Barnett, University of Reading

The landscape contemporary with the oppidum and overlying Roman town at Silchester has long been perceived as a rather empty one, devoid of significant or widespread human activity. The reasons for establishment of the town have therefore been something of an enigma. The Silchester Environs project is attempting to address this by examining the evolution of that landscape through large-scale application of aerial and lidar interpretation and prospection using geophysical survey, supported by excavation and palaeoenvironmental analyses at key sites. A great number of previously unknown prehistoric and historic sites have been identified within the c.140km$^2$ study area, several of which have already proved to be of Iron Age date. These include Early-Late Iron Age enclosures and linear monuments of Middle-Late Iron Age date that show more substantial use or modification in the 1$^{st}$ Century BC, contemporary with establishment of the oppidum. It has become apparent that the seeming lack of activity in the area relates more to methodological problems of visibility and prospection across the Silchester gravels and London Clay which can, at least in part, be overcome by adaptation of the techniques used and a systematic approach. A picture of a busy rural landscape with the inclusion of high status sites as part of the wider oppidum complex is beginning to emerge, as are themes of long term reuse and persistence of significant sites. Evidence for the structuring and organisation of this landscape and human-environment relationships within it is also growing.

A Tale of Two Oppida – The Late Iron Age and Early Roman Landscape around Arundel, West Sussex

David McOmish, Historic England, Gordon Hayden, Worthing Archaeological Society

Archaeological survey in Rewell Wood, west of Arundel, West Sussex, has highlighted a complex of well-preserved earthworks which have profound implications for our understanding of the Sussex coastal plain in the later 1$^{st}$ millennium BC. These earthworks were thought to be medieval in date but new fieldwork has clearly established that they are intimately connected to a wider network of enclosures, linear boundaries and spreads of occupation debris that are of Late Iron Age and Early Roman date. Further work has focussed on the War Dyke, a major linear earthwork bounding the concentration of enclosure earthworks.

The War Dyke and associated earthworks have been seen as a western extension of the Chichester Dykes, part of a long-lived system of enclosure that occupies much of this coastal plain and often cited as the locus of the ‘missing’ oppidum of the Atrebates. The recent landscape analysis around Arundel raises the possibility, however, of a contemporary focus of activity bounded by the War Dyke to the north and west and the navigable River Arun, known to the Romans as Trisantonis, to the east. Underpinning this, however, is the widespread realisation that the term ‘oppida’ is over-used and ill-defined and that this work will contribute to a debate about the usefulness of the classification. Regardless, the wide array of archaeological evidence in this area suggests a landscape extensively exploited during the later 1$^{st}$ millennium BC and following centuries but one which witnessed a dramatic intensification in the final decades before the Claudian conquest.
Session 2

The Catuellauni and the Trinovantes at Camulodunum or not, and more...  Philip Crummy
Colchester Archaeological Trust

This presentation will consist of a brief overview of the work on the site of Camulodunum since the publication in 1995 of Camulodunum 2 by CFC Hawkes and Philip Crummy. Much has happened since then with the excavation of a string of relevant sites in the area. These mainly consist of:

a) a group of Iron Age and Roman enclosures at Stanway (since fully published as a Britannia monograph),
b) field systems and dyke at the substantial Colchester Garrison site,
c) the Late Iron Age and Roman farmstead at Abbotsford on the fringes of the oppidum,
d) the central part of Gosbecks (now the Gosbecks Archaeological Park),
e) enclosures and roundhouses on the site of part of the Fiveways Fruit Farm,
f) the eastern side of the Sheenep site which turns out to be dominated by Claudio-Neronian occupation but with indications of activities as early as the latter part of 1st century BC.

Issues considered will include:

a) the nature and date of the origin of the oppidum and its relationship, if any, to the few Middle Iron Age roundhouses which have been recognised recently over a wide area,
b) the relationship between the Catuellauni, the Trinovantes, and Camulodunum,
c) Camulodunum in the Roman period.

Roles, definitions and the impact of new culture and technology: recent research on oppida in Hertfordshire  Stewart Bryant, CIfA

Five settlements that can be described as ‘oppida’ are known from the small county of Hertfordshire (c1600km²) located between London and the Icknield Way, and east of the River Lea. As a group, the oppida appear to be diverse in terms of their archaeological characteristics and roles. There are however clear patterns that make the oppida - and the later Iron Age more generally - of the county seem quite distinctive: in terms of the earlier Iron Age background; the preponderance of archaeologically productive votive sites; the evidence of cross-channel contacts in the 1st century BC and the evidence of industrial production in the 1st century AD.

The paper will review recent research and fieldwork including the earlier Iron Age evidence, the role of special places in the location of the oppida, the accumulating evidence of their large geographical scale within the landscape, and evidence of industry in terms of developments in the mode of production and the use of new technology.
Ham Hill. On the Edge of Worlds: Developed Hillforts and Oppida on the Somerset Levels
Niall Sharples, Cardiff University & Marcus Brittain, Cambridge Archaeological Unit

This paper will consider the relationship of developed hillforts and oppida by examining the character and significance of the hillfort at Ham Hill, Somerset. This enormous hillfort is larger than many European oppida and recent fieldwork indicates it has a dense and carefully structured occupation which exhibits many peculiarities that distinguish it from comparable hillforts in the Wessex chalklands. The paper will provide a brief comparative analysis of the settlements in the region and the locality highlighting the contrasts between Ham Hill and the nearby hillfort of South Cadbury and what has been referred to as a low-lying oppida at Ilchester immediately below the hillfort. We will then consider the nature of the hillfort and its occupation as revealed by recent earthwork and geophysical surveys. The excavations clarify the chronology of the occupation and provided some important information on the enclosures across the hilltop, which are a striking feature of the geophysical survey. The presence and treatment of significant quantities of human remains clearly indicates that these enclosures had a special function. The creation of special places forces a reconsideration of the role of hillforts in the final two centuries of the first millennium. The population densities of a site the size of Ham Hill and the significance of the ceremonial enclosures inside the hillfort suggests that we are dealing with a major political centre and yet, located upon a notable geographic boundary, the material culture does not indicate access to the continental networks so important to the oppida of eastern England.

Late Iron Age Calleva Professor Michael Fulford, University of Reading

With the completion of the excavation at Insula IX, a little over 10 per cent of the interior of the 32.5ha defended core of the territorial oppidum at Calleva has now been sampled. What has the large area excavation of Insula IX added to our knowledge of late Iron Age Calleva and how has it changed our overall characterisation of the oppidum? This contribution will review the new evidence and the light it sheds on a number of topics, including chronology and the development of spatial arrangements inside the defended enclosure, the architecture, the inhabitants and their social organisation, their lifeways and economic activity at Calleva. The paper will conclude with a consideration of how these findings contribute to our wider understanding of Late Iron Age territorial oppida in SE England.

Student Bursaries

Please note that the attendance of 10 of our student delegates has been made possible by the kind donation of 10 student bursaries by the Prehistoric Society.