

Cadbury Castle: focusing the landscape

Richard Tabor

Cadbury Castle is seen in isolation. Approach the hill from the south, east or north and your first full view of it is from a near Jurassic ridge from which it stands apart; from the west it rises from flatter lowlying Lias clays. On the one hand it is a pivot between upland and lowland, ultimately between chalk downs and the Somerset Levels; on the other, it is at the margin of both topographic zones. The hill's apartness and natural steepness, now accentuated by lynchets and ramparts, means that a decision to climb it incurs special effort.

Effort has been invested unevenly over long periods of time. In recent decades the Arthurian pretext led to excavations which brought Cadbury close to the centre of British archaeology; at present the hill has a central place in advertising the Somerset tourist industry – and David Morgan Evans has put forward a strong case that there was an attempt to create a Camelot “theme park” here in the 17th century (pers comm). On the hill itself the lynchets are tangible signs of a decision to move from low ground to intensive use of slopes, thought to be a consequence of a deteriorating climate in the 14th century (Aston 1977b, 116). Coins found in Scandinavia at once reveal the temporary movement of a politically central industry, the mint, from an insecure base to a defensible hilltop, as well as the circulation of currency further afield (Alcock 1995, 161–2).

Each of these decisions, traced as much through documents as through material from excavations, exemplify different motives for investment: economy of a 20th-century county and of one or two communities in the 14th century; legitimization of an

estate owner's status in the 17th century; security in the face of political and military uncertainty in the 11th century. The traces of all these activities, including excavations, are to be found off the hill in the written record.

The greatest part of the material record of the hill's oscillation from the core to periphery in conceptualised landscapes of the past remains in the ground surrounding it. Even at times when it dominated the landscape the larger population lived on and worked the land outside, leaving traces of field and territorial boundaries, dwelling, industry, identity and belief.

Thanks to Leslie Alcock's excavations there is an exceptional data resource comprising material ranging from the Early Neolithic to the Late Saxon periods (Alcock 1972; 1995). Thus there are good prospects for testing the broad contemporaneity of activity areas surrounding the hill; but a richer narrative can only be achieved if the cultural debris of the past can be set within the landscape as it was conceived by the people who dwelt in it.

The South Cadbury Environs Project

The germ of the project was the realisation of the Glasgow-based team putting together a prehistoric and Romano-British account of Cadbury Castle that there had been no systematic research in the surrounding landscape (Barrett *et al.* 2000). Members of the South East Somerset Archaeological and Historical Society (SESAS) started *ad hoc* field-walking and geophysical survey in 1992, directed by Richard Tabor and Paul Johnson. By the 1994 season results were interesting enough to attract

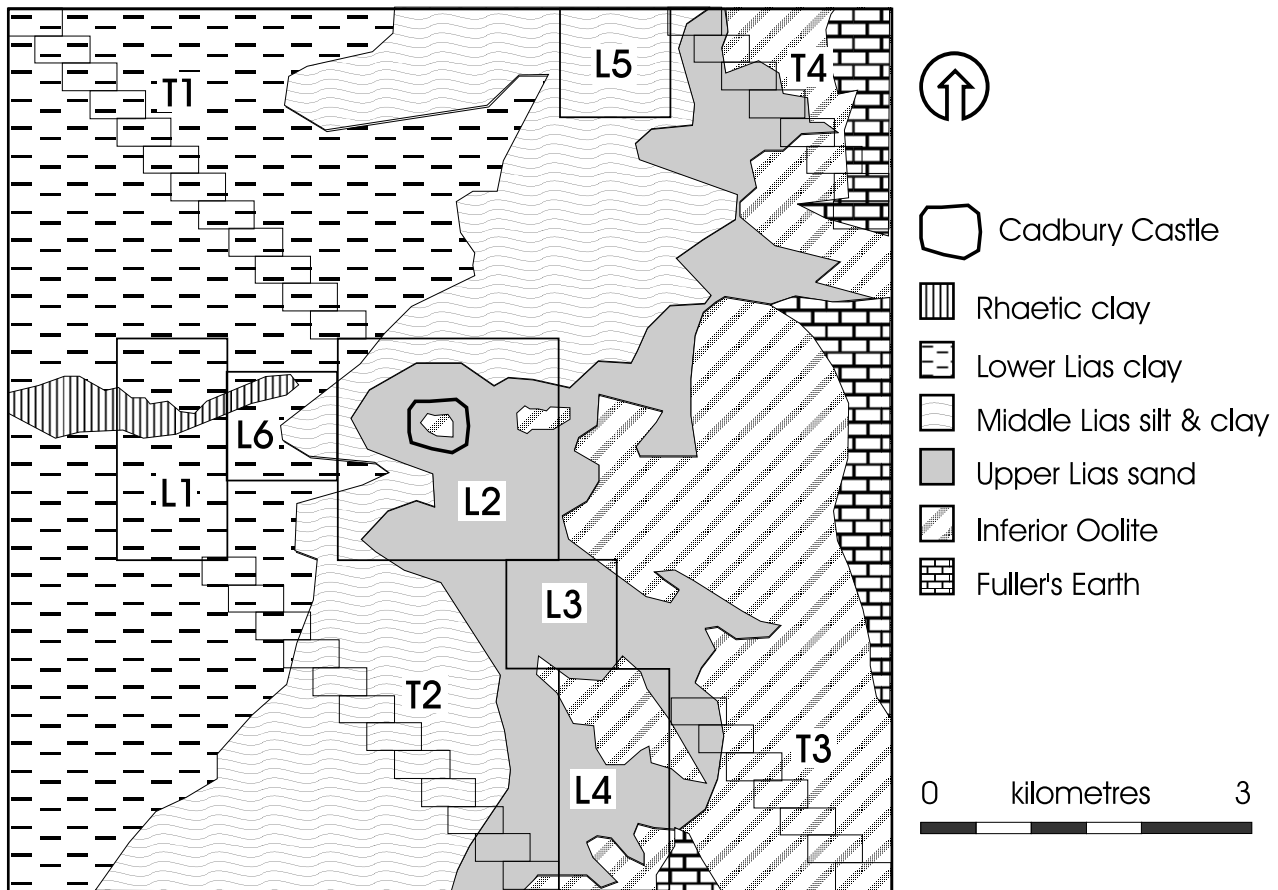


Figure 5.1: *South Cadbury Environs Project area showing geology with sampling localities and transects*

Peter Leach, leading to a series of Birmingham University training excavations.

The survey work cohered as a pilot programme at Sigwells, Charlton Horethorne (Tabor and Johnson 2004; forthcoming), set within a larger two-tiered sampling strategy. An 8 by 8km square centred on Cadbury Castle was selected, dominated by Inferior Oolite capped upland in the south and east, and by Lower Lias clays extending north and west. Within the square, six *localities* (Figure 5.1) of 1 to 4 sq km were selected for their known archaeological interest, and for their representative range of geology, topography and hydrology. Four *transects* set out across the grain of the prevailing geology and topography test the extent to which more general inferences can be made about the Cadbury landscape, derived from the *localities* data.

A first phase of desktop study collated information concerning the whole area from the Somerset Sites and Monuments Record, the existing air photographs and field names (Cooper nd). For fieldwork the *localities* and *transects* were subdivided into segments of 250m by 500m, within which geophys-

ical survey and shovel testing were conducted over a minimum of 4ha, and test pitting over a wider area. University training excavations have tested hypotheses derived from the survey work.

Geophysical survey – renewing boundaries

How can we reconceive the landscapes inhabited by the people of our prehistory? First, we have to glean what we can about the natural and anthropogenic characteristics of the landscape. Very often there is no trace of human modification on the surface and only a few classes of structure survive from any period. We need maps which show a wider range of landscape organisation: tracks that were rerouted; enclosures which were created then dissolved as priorities and needs changed; the nucleation and dispersal of settlement.

The Shapwick Project applied regressive analysis to post-medieval maps as a basis for interpreting the evolution of a village (Aston 1994b, 19–26; Aston



Figure 5.2: *South Cadbury and Sigwells localities gradiometer surveys*

and Gerrard 1999, 3–4). Gradiometry amalgamates boundary features such as ditches, banks and walls in a single map. The larger the area covered, the easier it is to untangle coherent synchronous patterns. An analogous approach based on air photography was applied to 450 sq km around Danebury Hillfort (Palmer 1984). Different forms of feature were identified and classified, building a diagnostic chronology. Unfortunately good interpretation from the air usually requires decades of repeated flying, lacking in the South Cadbury area. However, given appropriate geological conditions gradiometry generates a more highly resolved picture, largely independent of seasonal variables.

The Sigwells pilot study proved remarkably successful. Careful analysis of the alignment and form of magnetic anomalies identified six separate landscape systems which it proved possible to date (Tabor and Johnson 2004; forthcoming), ranging from the bronze-age to early-medieval periods. At present the project is focusing on Locality 2. A gradiometer survey of the hillfort's perimeter is well underway (Figure 5.2), appearing to provide similar datable information.

Placing surface finds

Regional surveys tend to present the distribution of ploughsoil finds on a series of modern topographic maps which present few of the anthropogenic characteristics of the periods to which the artefacts belong. Periods may range from 1000 year to 100 year spans, but in either case the circumstances are rare where a researcher can claim that one concentration of finds truly results from activity contemporary with another. By superimposing distributions on geophysical period “maps” it is sometimes possible at least to show that different concentrations derive from a distinguishable physical system which would have encapsulated particular methods of agricultural production, tenure and settlement patterns.

During the early stages of the project finds were collected by walking across ploughed fields. Our own work and the survey literature shows many flaws in this approach (Gerrard 1995, 7–52; Tabor 1998, 127–34). Results are affected by the weather, by the perceptual skills of the walkers, and by difficulties in defining a rigorous sample. At present SCEP employs shovel testing, sieving 30 litres of soil at every 20m along lines set at 20m intervals. Our pilot study shows that this approach is very good at reflecting the general distribution of Romano-British material, but inadequate for most prehistoric to early-medieval periods. It may well be that a significantly larger soil sample is needed at each test point. The efficacy of this approach also varies according to the depth and geomorphological traits of the soil and how often it has been ploughed. Its reliability is tested by digging a small test pit down to the geological surface in every hectare, so relating surface finds to those in stratified deposits.

One of the most frustrating aspects of many surveys is the tendency to undervalue the material evidence, particularly ceramic. Typically broad band chronologies such as “Bronze Age” and “Iron Age” are used, but the problem occurs amongst Romanists too! Whilst it is true that the analysis of form and decoration of a ploughsoil assemblage has limited worth, due to small sherd size and abraded condition, closer attention to fabric can be very rewarding. Alcock noted this at prehistoric Cadbury (Alcock 1980, 683) and SCEP is building on his work by developing a fabric type-series derived from its excavations at Milsom's Corner, Castle Farm and Sigwells (Leach and Tabor 1997, 89).



Figure 5.3: *Milsom's Corner gradiometer survey (in progress)*

First bones and bits of flesh

Already specific and general claims can be ventured for Cadbury Hill's shifting place in human landscapes. Early- and late-neolithic ritual pits may have sacrilised its summit, and a row of pits along the spine of the Milsom's Corner spur marked as special the way to and from the hill through mostly uncleared woodland. Early-neolithic Hembury style pottery and the abundant remains of a mundane staple food, hazelnuts, belie the presence of a polished axe and a valuable quern which probably ground nuts as well as grain.

By the middle of the second millennium BC open south east to north west swathes on Sigwells provided grazing bounded by long linear ditches, some of which may have acquired a territorial role highlighted by round barrows set over them (Tabor and Johnson 2004). Another barrow may have covered a flexed burial in a slatted, boat-like coffin, on a narrow spur at Milsom's Corner which formed a natural threshold on the western approach to Cadbury hill. The "boat" was aligned on Glastonbury Tor, some 18km to the north west (Tabor 1999).

On the ridge south of Cadbury a similar but partially realigned scheme persisted into the Early Iron Age, but already in the latter second millennium BC isolated subrectilinear ditched enclosures had reserved particular spaces. Two of these enclosures lay on the peripheries of high places. One overlooked the upper part of a steep route to Sigwells, at the point of access to a "V"-shaped promontory separated from the larger plateau by a substantial ditch (Tabor and Johnson forthcoming). The other straddled the Milsom's Corner spur (Figure 5.3, A), its south-east corner slicing through part of the burial. The south and east ditches have been extensively excavated, revealing a sequence of singular bone deposition which carbon dates suggest may have extended from the twelfth to tenth centuries BC, overlapping with dates associated with the late bronze-age Cadbury 4 fabric (Alcock 1980, 663). Other enclosures linked by a long ditch may also belong to this period (Figure 5.3, B).

The sequence ends with the deliberate deposition of a shield, probably in the tenth century BC and possibly associated with Alcock's Cadbury 5 as well as Cadbury 4. Moulds for a minimum of eight weapons of around this date were in a pit on

Sigwells. By this time Cadbury had emerged as a major focus in the landscape, and remained so in the several centuries which elapsed before its ramparts were built. The labour invested in them is reflected in a phase of intensified bounding of the lands, represented by a field system on Sigwells, from which Cadbury would have been seen as a massive yellow sculpture against a green background. Part of the harvest surely moved down into and across the valley to the hillfort's east or north-east gate along a track which on the Sigwells plateau separated the field system from an area which retained its distinctive bronze-age morphology.

To the west of Cadbury ditches arced around a small knoll and the base of the Milsom's Corner spur (Figure 5.3, C) to form a funnel feeding a narrow corridor, already over 200m long before it climbed through the ramparts to the south-west gate. The resulting bulge of hillfort territory would have added several hundred metres to the journey of anyone approaching from the north or south west, at once increasing the required effort while emphasising the focus on, and the power of, the central place.

The peripheral productive areas may have become the loci of power devolved from Cadbury during a perceived hiatus in its occupation in the first century BC, but its centrality was reasserted during the following century. This was manifested in the "shrine" on the plateau and a refurbishing of the defences, south-west gate and the western corridor leading to it. The subsequent destruction of the gate and corridor (gradiometry shows an area of extensive burning; Figure 5.3, D), and the trail of human remains along the route up to the hill brought an emphatic end to a traditional form of British power.

The Romano-British presence from the later first century AD is well attested to the east of the hill. At Sigwells its organisation is better understood through the gradiometer survey, showing that an iron-age scheme determined the post-conquest structure of the landscape, eventually giving way to a rigorously planned system. In contrast at Milsom's Corner a straight ditch cut across the iron-age access to the hillfort, emphasising the separateness of enclosures to its north west (Figure 5.3, E).

Evidence is emerging for some continuity into the early medieval period at Milsom's Corner, but at Sigwells the Romano-British field system decays leaving a much less bounded landscape in which



Figure 5.4: *Paul Johnson conducting the gradiometer survey at Sigwells. (photo: J Eastaugh)*

new but isolated enclosures were created, perhaps indicating an emphasis on stock-rearing rather than arable agriculture.

Conclusion

At its very beginning the project was conceived as a fieldwalking study which took advantage of Paul Johnson's expertise in geophysics to look for structural evidence underlying concentrations of surface finds. Within the first year the scheme was reversed as it dawned on us that geophysical survey was providing far more meaningful multiperiod information. Without any salaried staff progress has seemed painfully slow for those of us working in the field and processing the data between our full-time jobs, yet insight into this distinctive and beautiful landscape has been greatly enhanced. It is surely time for the South Cadbury Environs Project to become a fully-funded programme, joining in debate with researchers from Danebury and Maiden Castle to place hillforts in context.

Acknowledgements

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