

A New Chronology for the Welsh Hillfort of Dinas Powys

Dinas Powys was excavated by Leslie Alcock in the 1950s. Its rich finds assemblage set a standard for elite sites in post-Roman western Britain and offers rare insight into a region within the former Roman Empire where emergent socio-political structures were unaffected by 'barbarian' incursion. Alcock argued that the main defences belonged to a Norman period castle, but whilst this has been rejected the original dating continues to be wrongly quoted. This paper demonstrates via stratigraphic analysis and new radiocarbon dates that the Norman phase is a misnomer and that the early medieval site was a strongly defended multi-phase fort.

In northern and western Britain, fortified sites dominate our knowledge of the form that central places of power and governance took in the early medieval period (Alcock 2003: 179; Seaman 2016: 37; Noble *et al.* 2019: 57). These sites can be seen within the context of a wider movement towards the (re)occupation of hilltops that can be traced across much of Europe between the third/fourth and seventh centuries AD (Pavlovič and Heinrich-Tamáška 2022). A great diversity of sites relating to a range of political, social, and economic conditions were occupied, but our understanding this European 'Late Antique hillfort phenomenon' is constrained by small numbers of large-scale excavations and a lack of reliable dating evidence. Leslie Alcock's 1953-8 excavations at Dinas Powys recovered what was then, and still remains today, the largest assemblage of post-Roman (fifth to seventh century) material culture from Wales and provides an internationally important case study. Alcock's subsequent publication (1963) established Dinas Powys as a 'type site' for post-Roman western Britain. Indeed, for thirty years until the publication of the Cadbury Congresbury hillfort (Rahtz *et al.* 1992), it was the *only* such site which had been excavated to modern standards and published, and thus defined a view of early medieval 'Celtic' settlement in western Britain for a generation of students and academics. Further wider significance derives from the fact that Dinas Powys provides a model for the emergence of post-Roman society in a rare example of a lowland region of the western Roman Empire that was unaffected by 'barbarian' incursion in the fifth and sixth centuries AD (Wickham 2010). It was also one of the first hillforts to have a substantial proportion of its interior

excavated, an aspect of investigation that still remains rare for early medieval hillfort studies. Alcock's report was influential in his attempt to use Welsh and Irish legal and other texts to reconstruct the site's social and political context in the early medieval period. He saw Dinas Powys as 'the court (*llys*) and hall (*neuadd*) of a chieftain' of the emergent post-Roman kingdom of Glywysing (Alcock 1963: vii). However, Alcock's use of late medieval sources was problematic and several aspects of his interpretation have been challenged (Campbell 1991; Seaman 2013).

Nevertheless, the scale of the excavations and richness of the finds remain of international significance and Dinas Powys continues to feature prominently in historical and archaeological literature in and beyond Wales (e.g. Carver 2019: 189; Charles-Edwards 2013: 223; Davies 1982: 20, 23, 35; Naismith 2021: 169; Wickham 2005: 815). Our understanding of the substantial artefact assemblage has been enhanced by important re-analysis by James Graham-Campbell (1991) and Ewan Campbell (1991), but the significance of the site has been distorted by uncertainties and misunderstandings surrounding its dating and chronology. The 1950s-1960s picture was hindered by the complex and disturbed stratigraphy, a lack of scientific dating, and the excavation techniques of the time. These have been compounded by misreading of Alcock's sequence and wider misconceptions about the form of early medieval fortifications (Alcock 1980). Significant problems with the proposed dating of Dinas Powys were highlighted as early as 1988 (Campbell in Edwards and Lane 1988: 59-61).

In 1991 Ewan Campbell presented a detailed and convincing alternative phasing (re-asserted in 1993 and 2007) and this was subsequently supported by preliminary radiocarbon dating of material from the site archive (Seaman 2013: 5-6). Nevertheless, Alcock's original chronology still appears in specialist and popular literature and even on the National Monuments Record of Wales (RCAHMW 1991: 99-103; Carver 2019: 198-191; Snyder 1998: 190-2; Konstam 2008: 60; Wiles 2008). This article draws together over 30 years of questioning and refining the site chronology, now backed up by a more robust series of absolute dates from a new programme of radiocarbon dating. We set out a new phasing for the most prominent early medieval site known from Wales, with the results having a significant impact on the interpretation of Dinas Powys and wider implications for our

understanding of post-Roman western Britain and the (re)occupation of Late Antique hilltop sites more generally.

Power centres of the 'Celtic West'

Dinas Powys (ST148723), Glamorgan, is a small inland promontory fort of c. 0.35ha that is enclosed by four sets of banks and ditches on its southern side. It occupies the tip of a prominent whaleback ridge, with the ground dropping-off steeply around. The site is now densely wooded, but a recent programme of terrestrial laser scanning provides an excellent visualization of the monumentality of the defences in stark contrast to the small area enclosed (See Figures 1 and 2). Three of the four banks (1, 3, and 4) are at least 6m wide and 4m high from bank top to ditch base and cover an area of 0.25 ha in contrast to the interior of 0.1 ha. The layout of the earthworks suggests that Bank 2 was the earliest and was succeeded by Banks 1 and 3, the latter of which was succeeded by Bank 4. Around 140m to the south lie a second set of earthworks referred to by Alcock as the 'Southern Banks' but officially as the Ty'n-y-Coed earthworks. These consist of two sections of bank and ditch forming the north-west and north-east sides of a partial enclosure with dimensions of at least 60m north-east by 50m south-west.

Dinas Powys was initially considered to be Iron Age, but early on in the excavation Alcock identified sherds of imported post-Roman pottery that were directly comparable to those which Raleigh Radford had recently published from Tintagel, Cornwall (Radford 1956). He also recovered sherds of glass from Merovingian and Anglo-Saxon vessels (Alcock 1956: 247). Post-Roman material was barely known from Wales at the time, but the richness of the assemblage indicated activity of significant status. The exotic and high status material included the pottery and glass, but also ferrous and non-ferrous metalwork, a large quantity of animal bone, and evidence for the production of ornamental metalwork, probably including penannular brooches (see Figures 3 & 4) (Campbell 1991, 434–8). Evidence for internal features was slight, but included several hearths, along with drainage gullies and post-holes that were tentatively interpreted as evidence for two buildings (see Figure 5). Whilst around 30 contemporary hillforts and enclosed settlements can now be recognised in Wales and south-west England (Seaman 2016; forthcoming), Dinas Powys remains one of the richest in terms of the quality and quantity of the assemblage. In contrast to the

promontory fort, the Ty'n-y-Coed earthworks produced little material, but Alcock saw the two sites as at least partly connected.

Alcock's Chronology

Alcock's chronology followed a six phase scheme. Phases 1 and 2 were identified as a pre-Roman settlement including an enclosed phase defined by Ty'n-y-Coed Bank A. Phase 3 was represented by a small number of Romano-British artefacts brought to the site from other occupations in the landscape. In Phase 4 the early medieval occupation took shape within a single bank and ditch (Bank 2). This was split into two sub-phases with a fifth century occupation associated with hearths, a post-built structure, a single infant burial and a possible enclosing palisade. A fifth to seventh century phase (Phase 4b) was associated with the accumulation of rich midden material and two buildings interpreted on the basis of the drainage gullies. The site was then abandoned until the late eleventh or twelfth century. The final two phases were dated to the Norman period and were said to include a native Welsh ringwork castle of the eleventh to twelfth century defined by Bank 1 surmounted by a timber palisade (Phase 5). This was replaced by a multivallate ringwork castle of the late eleventh to twelfth century (Phase 6), built in response to the threat of Norman invasion. This was defined by Banks 3 and 4 and an incomplete outer bailey (Bank 5), and said to have been built whilst the site was under siege from Ty'n-y-Coed Bank B, which Alcock interpreted as a Norman siegework.

Alcock interpreted the phase 4 site as a 'princely household', importing wine and pottery from the Mediterranean and patronising craftsmen to make fine objects of bronze and gold (Alcock 1963: 61). Nevertheless, whilst Alcock thought this settlement was high status, he did not consider it to be a hillfort – rather a weakly enclosed settlement. He explored the possibility that the monumental Banks 1, 3, and 4 belonged to his phase 4, but ultimately ascribed them to the ringwork castle of his phases 5–6 (Alcock 1963: 73-93). In a short, but influential article he generalised that early medieval forts were less than two and a half acres [around one hectare] in area and had 'only puny defences' (Alcock 1962: 52).

A new vision?

Alcock's dating of the multivallation was based on weak evidence, largely five sherds from a single vessel of 'Norman pottery' found in the upper, and much disturbed, layers of Bank 1, which he argued provided a *terminus post quem* for the bank's construction. His reasoning

was influenced by contemporary work on siegeworks and his direct involvement in investigating ringwork castles (King and Alcock 1969; Renn 1959). This included excavations at Penmaen where the defences and position in the landscape display superficial similarities to Dinas Powys (Alcock 1963: 74-81, 1966; J Knight *pers. comm.*). Alcock was aware that multivallate ringworks and the form of the Ty'n-y-Coed Bank B 'siege-work' were unusual (Alcock 1963: 91-93) and he did revisit his interpretations in a later publication aware of a growing critique, but ultimately reasserted his original sequence (Alcock 1987: 20-66; 83-96). RCAHMW also persisted in its allocation of Dinas Powys to the late eleventh or twelfth century in spite of noting its exceptional siting and form (1991: 98).

In the late 1980s a detailed critical analysis of the dating of Alcock's phases 5 and 6 was undertaken (Campbell 1991, 1993, 2007, 97-9). Campbell noted that there were no other native Welsh defensive works in Glamorgan in the immediate pre-Norman period and after the invasion these were confined to upland lordships that remained under Welsh control (Spurgeon 1991). Campbell also noted the lack of secure stratification for the sherds of pottery from upper layers of Bank 1 and moreover, that this type of pottery post-dated the Norman invasion of south Wales (Vince 1983: 712; Papazian 1990: 24). The unusual nature of the 'ringworks' in a Norman context were also noted including the multivallation, the use of stone-revetments, the presence of a palisade and the narrow steep path to the entrance. The defences were noted to be much more characteristic of the local Iron Age/early medieval tradition of hillfort building (RCAHMW 1976). The lack of parallels for the 'siege-work' to the south was also highlighted (e.g. Renn 1959: fig 3). The extreme paucity of Norman period finds at Dinas Powys is also in stark contrast to other sites dating to the initial phase of Norman colonisation of Glamorgan (e.g. Alcock 1966; Charlton *et al.* 1977; Papazian 1990: site 29). The evidence for a Norman period phase at Dinas Powys was found to be extremely limited. In contrast, spatial distribution analyses (Campbell 2007: 88-99) showed that, in the south-east area of the fort at least, the early medieval pottery and glass formed coherent groups of sherds from individual vessels and that in relation to Bank 1 the position of imports adhered to the relative dating of these imports (Figure 6), which precluded Alcock's hypothesis that early medieval material had been 'scraped-up' and redeposited to form the later Norman defences.

New dating evidence

At the time of Campbell's initial critique he noted that radiocarbon dating could be used to test Alcock's dating of phases 5 and 6. However, while stratified carbonised samples were identified in Alcock's archive these were at the time too small to date. More recently the authors, with the assistance of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, identified eight charcoal samples that were suitable for dating with modern AMS techniques (Table 1). These were single entity, short-life samples, from securely stratified contexts. Four samples were dated from the fills of post-holes associated with the 'palisade' that Alcock deemed to be contemporary with or slightly later than Bank 1 and two samples from the midden deposits on the back of Bank 1. Two further samples come from deposits that were apparently sealed by Bank 1, including a post-hole and a metalworking deposit associated with a fragment of a lead die for a penannular brooch mould.

The most important observation is that all of the dates, including the six from Alcock's 'Norman period' phase 5, calibrate to the fifth to seventh centuries AD. There are some cases of probable residuality and intrusion e.g. material from below Bank 1 has slightly later dates than the secondary fills of the postholes (not the posts themselves) that cut it, but there is also no evidence of Norman period activity from any of the dated features. Indeed Bayesian modelling of the dates suggests that the dated activity began in *cal AD 510-600*; 95% probability) and did not stretch beyond the seventh century (end date *cal AD 590-680*; 95% probability), phasing which correlates well with the artefactual evidence (Campbell 1991: 97). While there are only a small number of dates available thus far, the modelling tentatively also suggests a relatively short span of 0-145 years (95% probability) (Figure 7).

Alcock's single cutting through the Ty'n-y-Coed earthworks produced very little evidence and his dating was, by his own admission, speculative, suggesting both a possible Iron Age phase (Bank A) and a Norman period 'siege work' (Bank B). In 2011-14, excavations provided evidence that these Ty'n-y-coed earthworks did not have a Norman phase either (Seaman and Lane 2019). Bank B is Late Iron Age, demonstrated by the presence of a South West Decorated Ware (SWDW) sherd of pottery below the bank and an almost complete vessel within a lower fill of the associated ditch. SWDW was in circulation in south Wales between the late-second century BC and the mid-first century AD. A sherd of mid-second century Samian ware was also recovered from the upper fill of the same ditch. The ditch of Bank A

included charred material dating to the sixth to eighth centuries AD, broadly contemporary, if slightly later than Bank 1 in the interior of Dinas Powys. No conclusive dating material from Bank A itself was recovered, but the finds from an agricultural soil sealed by the bank included two small sherds of SWDW. The radiocarbon dates from the ditch associated with Bank A provide a strong indication that the ditch was not cut before the mid-seventh century AD.

A New Chronology

A new chronology can be proposed for Dinas Powys:

Phase 1 relates to Neolithic/Early Bronze Age activity, perhaps consisting of unenclosed settlement on both the promontory and Ty'n-y-Coed earthworks area.

Understanding of the nature and chronology of the prehistoric material encountered by Alcock has improved significantly since the 1950s, and re-analysis of the material suggests revision is needed to the early part of Alcock's dating scheme. Whilst the quantity of the prehistoric pottery and flint is not large, the character and quantity (169 pieces of flint from the 1953-8 excavation and 11 pieces from 2011-4), is generally consistent with some form of *in situ* Neolithic and early Bronze Age settlement (Butler 2005), and includes primary and secondary flakes, cores and flake debitage, all indicative of a series of individual knapping episodes. Although Neolithic or early Bronze Age occupation features have not been identified, it is possible that the intensive later occupation has truncated or masked features from these earlier periods.

Phase 2 included middle-late Bronze Age/early Iron Age activity on the promontory, potentially associated with some post-holes identified by Alcock and possibly enclosed by Bank 2.

Sherds of prehistoric pottery from the promontory (See Figure 8), that Alcock assigned to his Phase 1 (Iron Age A), can now be broadly assigned to the late Middle to Late Bronze Age (Jody Deacon in litt.). Sherds from the make-up of Banks 1 and 3, have a slightly later character, being much thinner walled and displaying the finger-tip decoration characteristic of the Early Iron Age. Much of this material was recovered from early medieval contexts, so it is difficult to determine the nature of activity. Nevertheless, a small amount of animal

bone was recovered from pre-rampart deposits, and it possible that postholes in the south-east part of the promontory and below Bank 3 were associated with this phase. Both Alcock (1963: 27) and Campbell (1991: 55, 2007) discussed the possibility that Bank 2, which is of a very different character to Banks 1, 3, and 4, was prehistoric in date, but ultimately favoured construction in the fifth or sixth century AD. The dating evidence for Bank 2 should not be overstated however, and whilst it is true that the distribution of prehistoric sherds extended either side of the bank, suggesting that occupation was not constrained by it, only two small sherds were recovered from below it. Indeed, when discussing a single sherd of early medieval import ware which was also found below the bank, Alcock (1963: 27) noted that the area was much disturbed by animal burrows. Overall the date of Bank 2 is at present unresolved, and whilst Alcock argued that the focus of prehistoric settlement probably lay outside of the excavated area (Alcock 1963: 18–9) it remains a possibility that Bank 2 was associated with occupation on the north end of the promontory between the Middle Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

Phase 3 consists of a late Iron Age/early Roman settlement ‘enclosure’ (Ty’n-y-Coed Bank B), which was probably associated with the formation of an agricultural soil sealed by Ty’n-y-Coed Bank A. This appears to have been abandoned by the early Roman period, after which there is little evidence for activity here until the early medieval period.

Phase 4a saw intensive development from the fifth century AD onwards, beginning with high-status settlement on the promontory within the area enclosed by Bank 2. This settlement was associated with metalworking evidence and Mediterranean imports.

Phase 4b was a developed promontory fort of the sixth-seventh centuries AD. High status occupation continued with Continental imports (E ware) and Bank 1 was constructed. Banks 3 and 4 are most likely of this phase too. Construction of Ty’n-y-Coed Bank A, potentially an unfinished enclosure associated with unrealised re-occupation of the late Iron Age Bank B enclosure, may also to belong to this or feasibly the following phase.

Phase 5 saw abandonment of the hill in the later seventh century or eighth century.

Phase 6 is represented by small quantities of late- and post-medieval pottery most likely derived from casual visiting and low-level agricultural activity.

Discussion

Our proposed chronology for Dinas Powys departs significantly from that put forward by Alcock and followed in multiple sources for decades since. With regards the early evidence we suggest that the prehistoric activity was more persistent and prolonged than has hitherto been appreciated. Phase 1 activity is comparable to other hilltop flint scatters in the region, which appear to relate to temporary occupation exploiting areas of high ground. In terms of the later and most important phase, the programme of radiocarbon dating suggests that post-Roman activity on the promontory may not have commenced until around AD 500, with the major part of Alcock's Norman period ringwork castle, Bank 1, now confirmed to be of early medieval date as Campbell suspected, and most likely constructed sometime in the late sixth or seventh century AD. Moreover, the early medieval midden deposits identified on the back of Bank 1 can be confirmed as *in situ* (See Campbell 2007: 88-99, and fig 69 for detailed spatial distributions of artefacts and reconstruction of activity areas). The new evidence strongly suggests that the defences of the early medieval fort were far from 'puny', and in contrast were greatly out of proportion to the area enclosed – an example of conspicuous consumption undoubtedly for display as well as defence (Seaman 2013: 10-11). The monumentality of the defences now aligns much more with the richness and exceptional character of the artefact assemblage.

The identification from charter evidence of a small, short-lived kingdom in the Cardiff area in the seventh/eighth centuries provides a possible socio-political context for this fortified power centre (Campbell 1991: 225; Davies 1978, 94, 1982, fig 38). An important early ecclesiastical centre at Llandough lies c. 2km to the east of Dinas Powys and the two sites probably form parts of a polyfocal central zone for the territory (Seaman 2013: 12-15). Alcock argued for a relationship between the apparent small size of forts like Dinas Powys and the nature of warfare and social structure in post-Roman western Britain (Alcock 1971: 347). These ideas continue to be influential (i.e. Wickham 2005: 326-30), but must now be questioned. Dinas Powys may be exceptional, but its wealth and monumentality contrasts with interpretations that see society in post-Roman western Britain as small-scale and economically under-developed.

Forts with close similarities to Dinas Powys in the south Wales region include Llanvithyn (ST054718), Parkmill (SS548892), and North Hill Tor (SS453938). The RCAHMW dated North Hill Tor to the Norman period on the basis of its similarities to Dinas Powys, and whilst they noted that Llanvithyn and Parkmill are comparable to Dinas Powys in terms of size and morphology their similarity was dismissed on the basis of Alcock's phasing of Dinas Powys (RCAHMW 1976: 14, 46, 117-9). All three of these sites are located close to significant evidence for early medieval activity and the dating evidence presented here indicates that an early medieval date is plausible for these sites, which are undoubtedly worthy of further investigation (Campbell 1991: 228; Seaman and Sucharyna Thomas 2020: 13-4).

The radiocarbon dates from Dinas Powys also suggest that early medieval activity was comparatively short-lived and the promontory fort appears to have been abandoned by the later seventh century. Analysis of dates from all broadly comparable sites in Wales and south-west England indicates that there was a widespread move away from hillforts in the late-sixth/early-seventh century, pointing to a period of significant socio-political and economic change. The effects of the Justinianic Plague could be significant for the decline of hillforts alongside other factors including the consolidation of political units and the growth of the Christian Church (Campbell 2007: 132; Comeau *et al.* in press). The evidence from the south contrasts with that from northern Britain where later first millennium AD use of defended sites is increasingly attested (Noble 2016: 30-1). Nevertheless, recent dating on some sites in Scotland have shown, that certain sites, like Dinas Powys, were also of relatively short duration, constructed and destroyed within a few generations at most (Noble *et al.* In press). The use of fortified sites and their abandonment appears to have been deeply implicated in the rise (and fall) of particular elite lineages in the early medieval north and west of Britain.

While the new dating from Dinas Powys is important we have much yet to learn about this and other early medieval power centres in western Britain. Aspects of our re-interpretation of Dinas Powys remain tentative and new programmes of fieldwork and dating would greatly benefit our knowledge of such a key site. Further dating evidence for all of the ramparts, along with reassessment of the existing material assemblages, which were only partially published by Alcock (Campbell 1991: app 8), would be welcome. For example, whilst the Dinas Powys animal bone assemblage is the largest from western Britain, biases

introduced through Alcock's sampling strategy and misunderstandings of the stratigraphy have inhibited renewed analysis. The research potential of Dinas Powys should be seen in the light of recent research-driven excavations of elite sites in other parts of Britain and Ireland, which have brought about step changes in knowledge and understanding (eg. O'Brien and Hogan 2021; Noble *et al.* 2019; Scull and Thomas 2020). Comparable projects have not been undertaken in Wales and the hilltop location of elite sites of this period means that few are likely to be encountered through development-led excavation. Given its known research potential and the problems outlined above, a pressing case can be made for further excavation and further analysis of the archive material at Dinas Powys. For now, this reassessment, albeit limited in its scope and scale, provides the best understood and dated sequence for an early medieval fort in Wales.

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Tables

Code	Years BP	95% Cal AD	Material	Context	Alcock Phase	Revised Phase
OxA-25738	1456 ± 25	573-648	<i>Corylus cf. avellana</i>	XII(4), Pre-Bank 1 deposit associated with metal working evidence	4a/b	4a

SUERC-82884	1444 ± 24	584-651	<i>Corylus cf. avellana</i> (roundwood 5 growth rings)	XII24, small post-hole sealed by Bank 1	Pre-5	4a
SUERC-84662	1539 ± 34	432-599	<i>Salix sp</i> (roundwood < 20 growth rings)	XII22, post-hole, inner line	5	4b
SUERC-82885	1531 ± 24	436-602	<i>Maloideae</i> (roundwood < 20 growth rings)	XII23, post-hole, inner line	5	4b
SUERC-82889	1478 ± 21	562-641	<i>Corylus cf. avellana</i> (roundwood < 20 growth rings)	XV(6), midden deposit on rear of Bank 1	5	4b
OxA-25739	1472 ± 25	560-645	<i>Quercus sp.</i> (cf. sapwood)	XII25, post-hole, outer line	5	4b
SUERC-84660	1455 ± 34	564 - 652	<i>Corylus cf. avellana</i> (roundwood 7 growth rings)	IV12BC, midden deposit on rear of Bank 1	5	4b
SUERC-84661	1405 ± 34	590 - 670	<i>Salix sp.</i> (roundwood < 20 growth rings)	XII21, post-hole, inner line	5	4b

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates associated with Bank 1, calibrated in OxCal 4.4 using the IntCal 20 curve.

Figure Captions



Figure 1: Laser scan of the promontory fort earthworks.

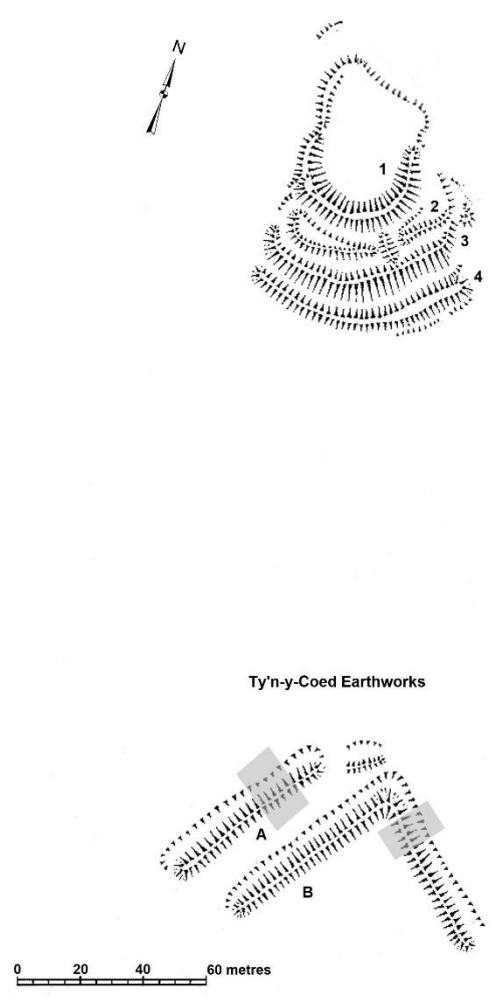


Figure 2: Dinas Powys and Ty'n-y-coed earthworks. 2011-14 trenches shaded. Adapted from RCAHMW image 118383 (© Crown copyright: RCAHMW).



Figure 3: Reconstruction of penannular brooch, based on a fragment of a mould die (© Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales).



Figure 4: Selection of artefacts, clockwise from right: Phocian red slipware; fragment of lead mould die; copper-alloy mount; millefiori glass rod; crucible; Atlantic and Anglo-Saxon tradition glass (© Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales).

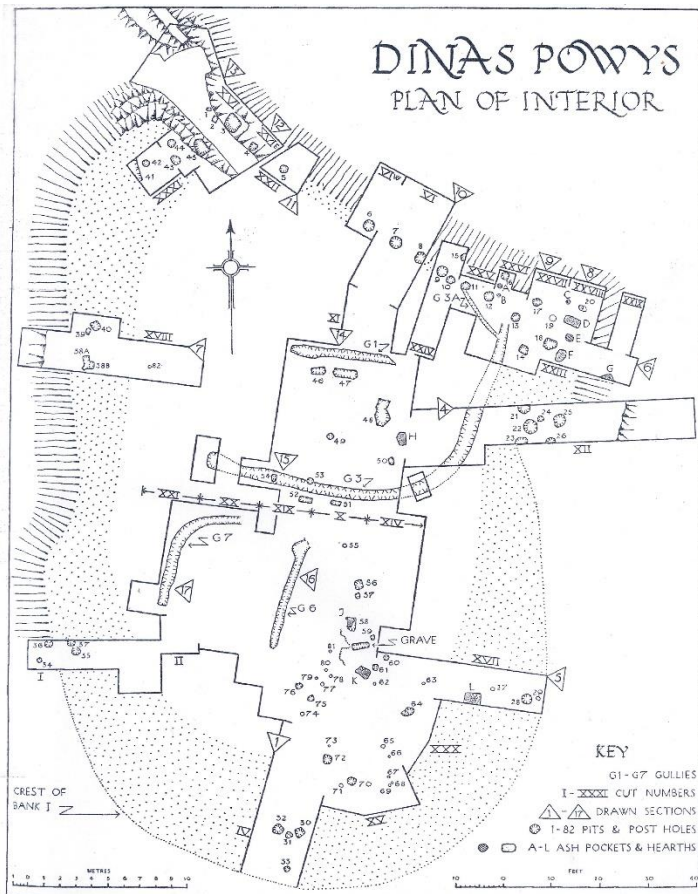


Figure 5: Excavated features (reproduced with the permission of the University of Wales Press).

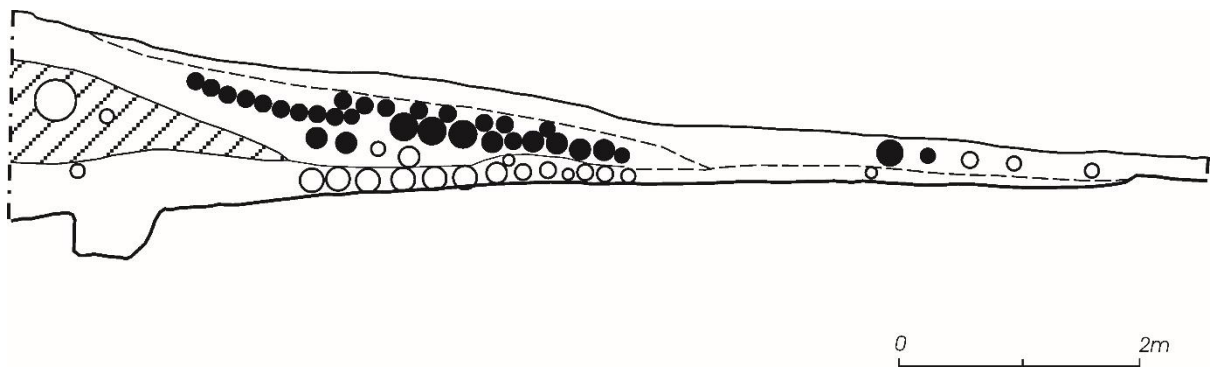


Figure 6: Schematic section of cut XVII with individual imported vessels, showing stratigraphic differentiation between Mediterranean (open circles) and Continental (solid circles) imports (Image by Ewan Campbell).

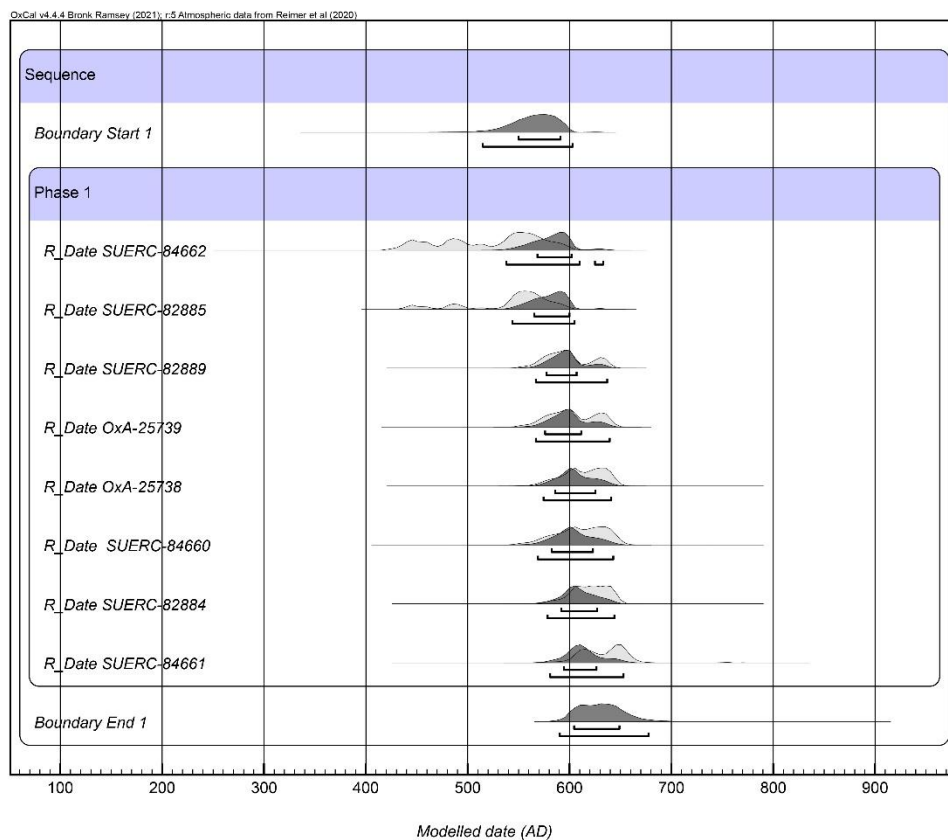


Figure 7: Single phase model for radiocarbon dates associated with Bank 1. Modelled in OxCal 4.4 using the IntCal 20 curve (Bronk Ramsey 2009; Reimer *et al.* 2020).

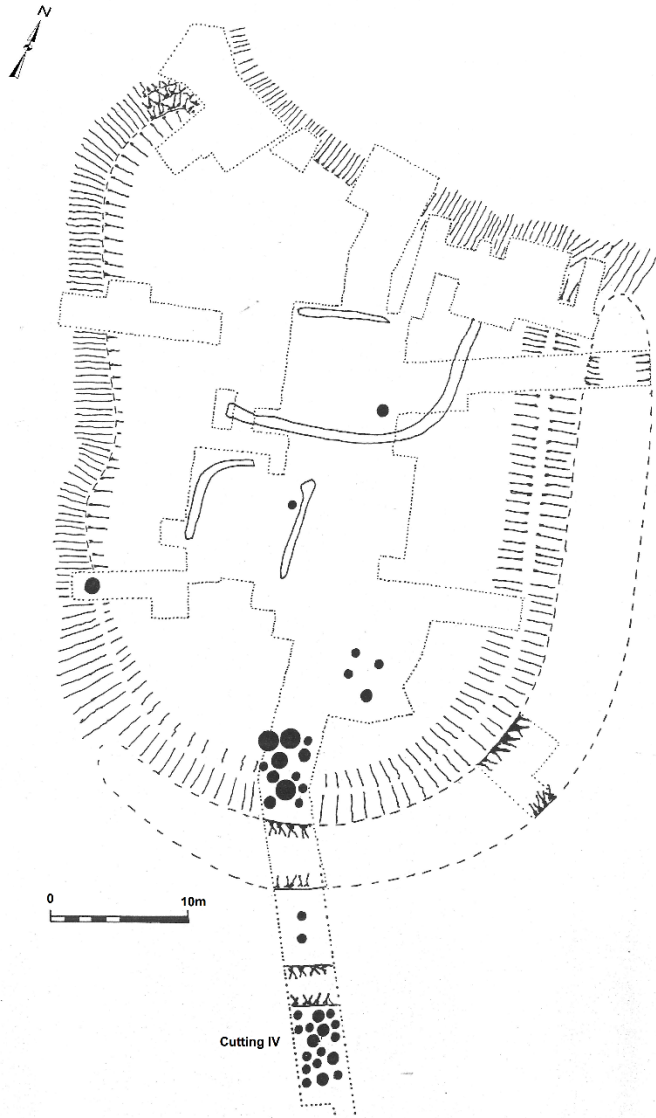


Figure 8: Distribution of prehistoric pottery, excluding sherds which are certainly in redeposited contexts (Image by Ewan Campbell).