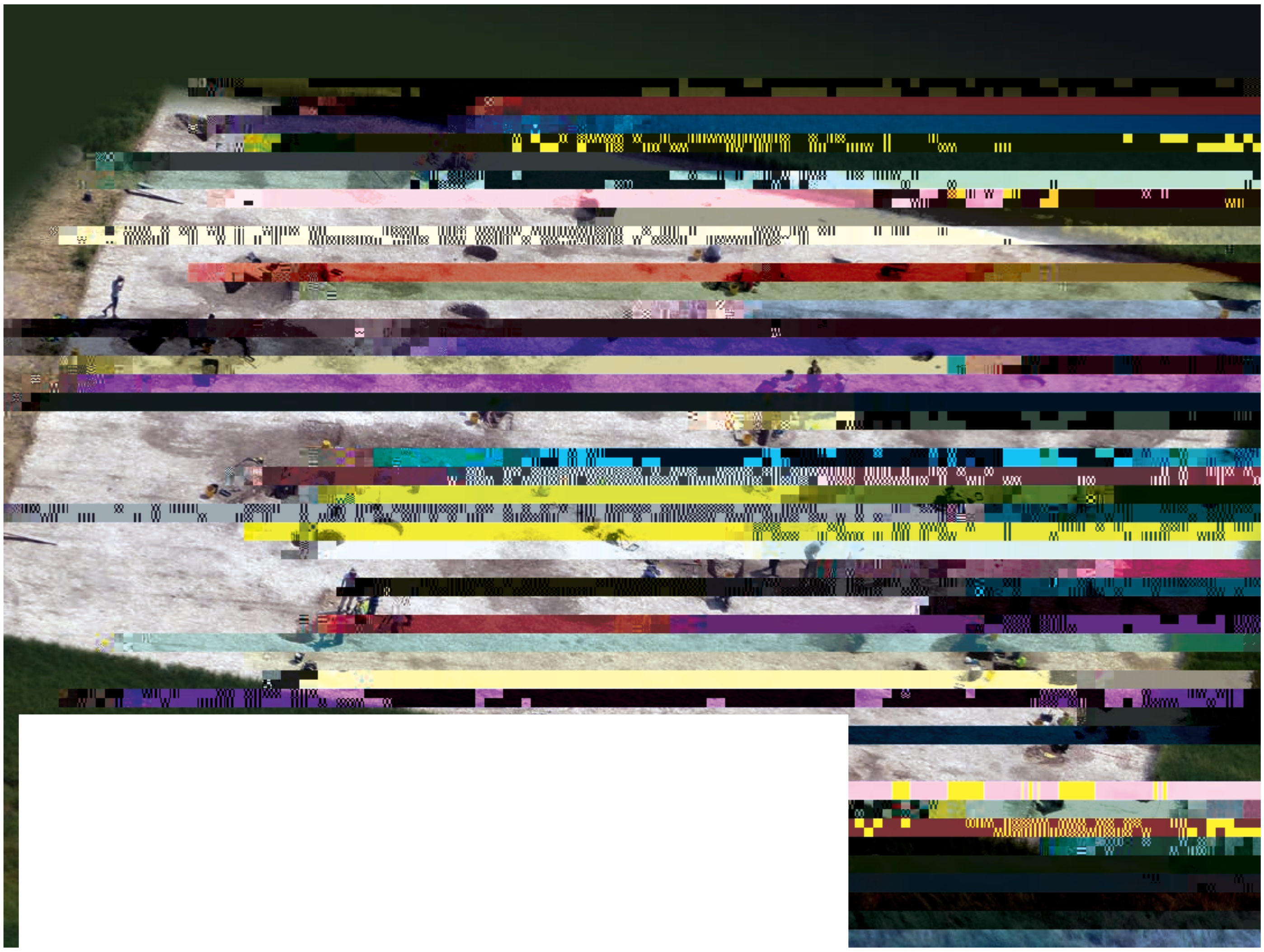

Until 2012, our excavations at Winterborne Kingston, Dorset, were focused on an early Iron Age banjo enclosure and a later Iron Age 'Durotrigian' burial ground (281). Quite where the people laid to rest in this cemetery had originally lived remained unknown. Then, in the exceptionally dry spring of 2012, something emerged in the fields to the immediate south of our site: a veritable 'rash' of pits, ditches, and lesser features. This was an exciting discovery – a previously unknown and apparently very large area of prehistoric occupation was sketched out in the ripening crop. Could it be what we had been searching for since the start of the project: the settlement that had existed during the crucial years running up to the Roman conquest?

In search of the Durotriges

The Durotriges Project had been set up to investigate the transition between the late Iron Age and Roman period in Dorset. During the first six years, an early Iron Age banjo enclosure, a later Bronze Age settlement, a late Roman villa, a sub-Roman farmstead, and cemeteries dating from the late Neolithic, early Bronze Age, late Iron Age, and later Roman periods were all investigated.

appeared in an area of farmland where small, but appreciable, quantities of later prehistoric and Roman metalwork had been located. With the permission of the landowner, Rebecca Hill, we conducted a quick surface collection survey that

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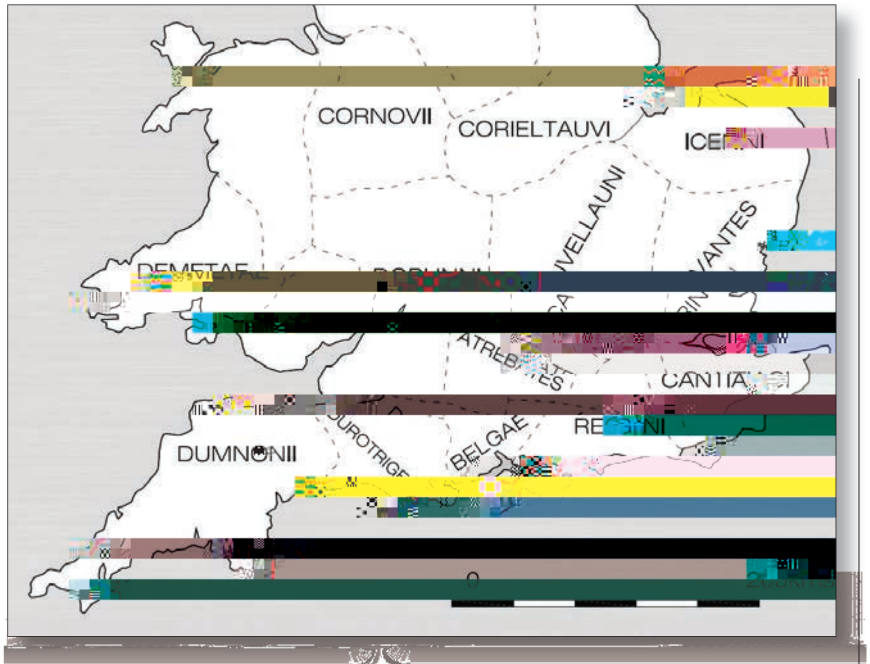

the county has been exposed, excavated, and recorded. In recent years, National Trust archaeologist Martin Papworth has conducted a detailed reinvestigation of the various archaeological components that comprise the Durotriges, his work and publications helping to create a more balanced and objective understanding of the tribe.

Despite recent work, however, there is still a feeling that we remain in the shadow of Maiden Castle, arguably the most impressive Iron Age hillfort in Britain, which was memorably excavated by the husband-and-wife team of Tessa and Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s. It is almost impossible today to discuss the Durotriges without mentioning the Wheelers; so important was their investigation and subsequent publication of Maiden Castle, that it has impacted on all discussion of prehistoric Dorset. The Iron Age burials excavated within the eastern entrance of the hillfort, which lies a mere 16km from Winterborne Kingston, appealed to Mortimer Wheeler's sense of drama, offering him an opportunity to link the archaeological evidence to a specific historical event, namely the Roman Conquest. At least 14 of the 52 bodies exhumed by the Wheelers showed signs of trauma, most clearly the famous burial of an adult male with an iron projectile, probably a bolt fired from a Roman (catapult) embedded in his spine. As a former artillery officer, Wheeler found such evidence hard to resist, and his published report is a beautifully written, if semi-fictionalised, account of the industrial carnage resulting from a Roman assault.

Excavations directed by Sir Ian Richmond within the multivallate hillfort of Hod Hill, also in Dorset, in the 1950s, built on and developed the Wheeler story. Here, a series of iron projectiles, again interpreted as bolts, were recovered. Richmond interpreted these as the residue of a withering Roman artillery barrage directed against the 'chieftain's hut', which undoubtedly brought about the defenders' capitulation. Unfortunately, Richmond's well-written report focused on the 'death' of the Iron Age settlement, rather than its occupation. Once again, the Durotriges were defined by their apparent fiery demise, instead of by their life and culture.

Whether one agrees with the approach taken by Richmond and the Wheelers or not, it can be difficult to see the archaeological reality beyond these evocative accounts Wheeler's understanding of Maiden Castle has since been questioned, on the basis that signs of violent injury on the skeletons could relate to longer-term indigenous processes – such as sacrifice, execution or single combat – rather than a single dramatic event But it is difficult, when looking at Iron Age Dorset, to extract oneself from the narrative of conquest and assimilation, a narrative that focuses on the notion of unrelenting Roman invaders brutally subduing the native population

Digging the Durotriges

While not wishing to turn our backs on the excellent work of the Wheelers and Richmond, we wanted the Durotriges Project to provide a more nuanced approach to the past, moving away from the archaeo-historical accounts that have tended to dominated the literature. We also wanted to distance ourselves from the hillfort, a type of archaeological monument that has overshadowed most studies of the period, whether an examination of more open rural settlements could shed light on the true

ABOVE One of the roundhouse gullies in trench B being recorded. Settlement within the excavated area proved to be far denser than initially suspected.

with regard to the Winterborne Kingston banjo enclosure (281), the term ‘storage pit’ is traditionally applied when discussing such features, although no definitive evidence as to the nature of storage has yet been found. Presumably, if purely functional in purpose, the pits were designed to hold a particular type of foodstuff, such as dairy produce (in the manner of a cold store) or grain, with perhaps each pit or silo storing the surplus produce of a single agricultural cycle. Some of the pits, it was observed during the dig, had been backfilled shortly after they went out of use, while others had been allowed to weather for a considerable period of time before being filled in.

At the point of disuse, the majority of pits, where bottomed, were found to have contained a special, placed deposit. The nature of these deposits varied from pit to pit, one comprising the fully articulated remains of a dog. Others contained deposits of triangular baked-clay loom weights, quern stones, upended and perforated pots, or the inverted skulls of cow or horse; in one case, an articulated horse forelimb was extended with cow bone and an associated cow rib. The structured nature of deposition, and the complete absence of what one may describe as disordered midden waste, makes it clear that these were not simple dumps of domestic refuse, but something rather more special. Similar deposits of sheep, dog, pig, and, in one special case, human bone had been noticed within the banjo enclosure, together with associated deposits of freshly dismembered horse and cow. No two patterns of deposition were directly comparable, but together they provide a window into the belief system of our Iron Age ancestors who were, perhaps, making offerings to their gods in order to guarantee the continued success and fertility of crops, herds, and community.

Three of the pits within trench A appear to have received secondary deposits placed on top of weathering cone fills, presumably at some significant time after formal pit abandonment but prior to the total backfilling and sealing of holes. One deposit comprised the articulated remains of a sheep, set down with the skull of a cow placed directly against its posterior; a second consisted of the fully articulated remains of three pigs, laid out in careful order. Presumably all three had been killed together, and buried within pit-fill as an offering. After these placed deposits were inserted, they were sealed by fully backfilling the pit in a single, swift operation.

At least seven areas of quarrying and additional activity were encountered within the trenches. Three such areas within the more northerly trench B were closely associated with charcoal, baked clay, iron slag, at least one possible furnace bottom, and a small number of lead and copper alloy droplets. It is probable, therefore, that activities focusing around the potential roundhouses included iron metallurgy and the

BELOW One of the cylindrical pits emptied during the excavations (LEFT), and another containing horse and cow bones (RIGHT). Here, an articulated horse forelimb is associated with two cow bones.

unheard of in Dorset and the South-west outside the security of a hillfort (indeed covering an area comparable to that of the interiors of many of the Dorset hillfort enclosures). This, of course, creates a problem, for how does one refer to the site without recourse to standardised archaeological monument descriptions?

Defining 'Duropolis'

During the days that followed the first exposure of our potential roundhouses, we were visited repeatedly by reporters and journalists. It soon became clear that simply describing the site in a factual sense – 'what we have here is a large, apparently unenclosed, later Iron Age settlement comprising multiple ring gullies, some of which may or may not be roundhouses, surrounded by a host of pits and activity areas' – was not doing us any favours (and may well have left some listeners feeling drowsy). What we needed was a name for the site: a shorthand that could be used without reference to existing terminology, for the site was clearly not an , hillfort or banjo enclosure. Hence we coined the name 'Duropolis'.

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RIGHT Machine clearance of trench A at the beginning of the 2015 excavations.

British equivalent of Atlantis, perhaps), but most reported the site factually and objectively.

Intriguingly, the excavations at Maiden Castle in the 1980s by Niall Sharples, which revised the Wheelers' phasing, demonstrated that occupation of that particular hillfort had been in sharp decline from 100 BC. Is it possible that Duropolis was an example of the type of settlement that came to prominence just as the hillforts became less relevant and depopulated? Does Duropolis herald the end of hillfort culture in Dorset, and represent a period of social and political stability that has previously gone unidentified in a climate of interpretation focused on conflict and conquest? If so, could Duropolis be less the Dorset equivalent of a 'lost' civilisation (an Atlantis) than perhaps a Shangri-La?

To modern eyes, Duropolis seems unusual. It was a late and apparently large, substantially unenclosed settlement in a part of Iron Age Britain where such a dense concentrations of people should not, apparently, exist. We do not yet know, though, just how exceptional or typical Duropolis was in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. Geophysical survey at a number of sites elsewhere in the South-west, including Carrun Farm and Middle Amble Farm by Mark Borlase in Cornwall (309), suggest that they may actually be quite common. Perhaps we have been so fixated on the more prominent side of the later Iron Age – the , hillfort, and banjo enclosure – that we simply have not noticed, nor indeed looked for, the less obviously monumental. Perhaps more 'Duropolitan' settlements exist out there on the lower-lying slopes of Dorset, Devon, and Cornwall. Only further fieldwork will tell us. One thing is clear, however, our present understanding of the nature and level of social organisation in the late Iron Age of south-western Britain would appear to be profoundly flawed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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J Gale (2003) *Prehistoric Dorset*, History Press.
M Papworth (2011) *The Search for the Durotriges*, History Press.

BELOW The 'Durotrigan wave'. Students participating in the excavation mark out in exuberant style the outer wall of an Iron Age roundhouse.