

Stories of "What if?"

THE CONTEXT AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MARLBOROUGH MOUND

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In the Ellis Theatre at Marlborough College

Monday 20th September 2010

Josh Pollard has an interest in the Marlborough Mound because of suggestions that it has its origins in pre-history. It has been a dark horse in the archaeological world.

What is the Marlborough Mound?

- An artificial mound c.80 m in diameter and c.18m high.
- We know its history as a garden feature (mid 17th century) and before that as a castle mound (early 12th century)
- But did it originate as a Norman motte, or does it possess earlier origins? If so, where do we place those beginnings?

There is a history of archaeological investigation from 1912 onwards to a survey and review by Joanne Best in 1997 and by Field, Brown and Crockett in 2001.

There has never been a clear archaeological exploration however.

The earliest exploration in 1912 was the most important and pieces of red deer antler were found within the mound. These could be remains of very sturdy picks which could work on chalk and indicate prehistoric origins.

The case for the mound as a castle motte – it was used as such by 1100 or 1134. The format is familiar from the Bayeux tapestry.

Similar sized mottes were constructed (e.g. Oxford castle), but these are uncommon in Wiltshire, and tend to be small. The most common form in Wiltshire tend to be concentric circles.

If it were a Norman motte, then it is rather unusual.

Was it constructed fresh as a motte, or did the builders utilise a pre-existent feature of whatever age?

1999 – when a swimming pool at the college was being installed, what was thought to be the outer bailey of the castle was discovered. 13th century pottery was found in the re-cut.

The outer bailey ditch should have a bank and palisade on the outside of it. The ditch has a very un-medieval profile. Most are flat-bottomed whereas this is not – it is deep v shaped which is more characteristic of later Bronze Age and Iron Age earthworks.

Is there something akin to a hill fort to the north of the mound? This needs further investigation in its own right.

A pre-Norman origin?

- Debate place-name evidence – Maerlanbeorg, "hill" or "barrow of Maerla".
- Haslam places the core of the late Saxon town around St. Mary's at the east end of the present High Street. If a castle mound was created de novo, why not there?
- Stukeley's early 18th century record of Roman coin finds within or on top of the Mound itself. There have also been other finds of Roman antiquities near the mound. If coins are coming out of the side or the top, it must have been there before the Romans.
- The red antlers discovered in 1912, with battered burrs (Brentnall was convinced they were picks)
- The Silbury Hill analogy.... Over the last century and a half much activity has been centred on Silbury and tunnelling that was not properly back-filled has had to be repaired. Immediately to the east of Silbury Hill massive monuments have been discovered – timber structures and large quantities of feasting debris with flint tools and pottery also. The pig bones indicate that massive numbers of people feasted there. The people involved in creating Silbury Hill gathered there and lived. Silbury was certainly not in isolation and making a massive mound like that involved many other constructions etc. English Heritage investigated during 2000 – 2008. They discovered a more complex sequence than previously was envisaged, beginning around 2400 BC. It was seen that the mound was not constructed in one go but was continually added to in successive stages.

Silbury appears to have been a monument in motion – one that was continually growing.

Silbury has a relationship to the source of the Kennet – and to the springs nearby at Beckhampton etc. Perhaps Silbury is marking the origin of the River Kennet. Its presence attracted settlement – including in Roman times. The Roman road went nearby and there was a possible shrine complex. The Marlborough Mound also has a close association with the River Kennet. Early records speak of springs emanating from in and around the mound.

The Marlborough Mound may well fit in to the picture of late Neolithic mounds – vis Hatfield Barrow at Marden which was eventually levelled.

These are not burial mounds but have more to do with marking significant places.

Dorchester in Dorset is another large mound (Mount Pleasant). At Knowlton also in Dorset are the remains of a fully investigated Neolithic complex with another colossal mound. Therefore big mounds are a feature of the Late Neolithic.

The possibility of the Marlborough Mound being prehistoric is therefore very strong. If the mound is late Neolithic then it's not going to be in isolation – look at Silbury and the West Kennet palisades, Hatfield Barrow and the Marden Henge. Knowlton Great Barrow and the henge complex etc. We would expect it to be part of a larger monument complex.

There were late Neolithic finds during the 1997 excavations at Duck's Meadow off Isbury Road, Marlborough. The pottery discovered is very similar to that found in the Silbury palisaded enclosures.

A Roman or Anglo-Saxon origin?

Large barrows are an occasional feature of both Roman and Anglo Saxon funerary traditions.

Roman finds – coins discovered from the 17th century.

Roman barrows are known in the region – West Overton.

In Conclusion

So, is the spiral path a metaphor for our understanding of the Mound? Are we just going around in circles?

How to overcome this?

- 1) Enjoy the mystery and debate!
- 2) Think of the Mound as a multi-temporal monument.
- 3) Both of the above, but engage in some fieldwork – this is about to happen with investigations by English Heritage. The mound needs to be put into its setting and the surrounding area should be investigated. There are likely to be two bore holes vertically downwards – one in the centre and one at the outer ring. In addition they are looking to take as many as six bore holes in the ditch.

The bare white chalk appearance would only have been relevant for about 10 years before vegetation colonisation set in. Experiments have been set up to replicate this process and also motorway cuttings through chalk show this also.