

# From Bronze Age enclosure to Anglo-Saxon settlement

Archaeological excavations at Taplow hillfort,  
Buckinghamshire, 1999-2005

by Tim Allen, Chris Hayden and Hugo Lamdin-Whymark

with contributions by

*Roger Ainslie, Leigh Allen, Edward Biddulph, Paul Blinkhorn, Matthew Canti,  
Dana Challinor, Kate Cramp, Emily Edwards, Emma-Jane Evans, Rowena Gale,  
Peter Hacking, Elias Kupfermann, Peter Marshall, Peter Northover, Adrian Parker,  
Mark Robinson, Jean-Luc Schwenninger, Ruth Shaffrey and Roberta Tomber*

Illustrations by

*Julia Moxham, Magdalena Wachnik, Jeff Wallis, Lucy Martin,  
Amy Hemingway, Sarah Lucas and Georgina Slater*

Oxford Archaeology

Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph No 30

2009

The publication of this volume has been generously funded by English Heritage

Published for Oxford Archaeology by Oxford University School of Archaeology  
as part of the Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph series

Designed by Oxford Archaeology Graphics Office

Edited by Alan Hardy and Tim Allen

This book is part of a series of monographs about the Thames Valley Landscapes –  
which can be bought from all good bookshops and internet bookshops.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-905905-09-6

Typeset by Production Line, Oxford

Printed in Great Britain by Information Press, Eynsham, Oxford

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# Summary

Recent excavations at Taplow Court (at NGR SU 907 823), undertaken in advance of the construction of a Conference Hall for the owners Soka Gakkai International-UK, have revealed a long sequence of activity stretching from the Mesolithic to the Anglo-Saxon period.

Mesolithic struck flints and charred hazelnuts, and early Neolithic flints, were found in a small number of tree-throw holes. A group of intercutting hollows or shallow pits of early Bronze Age date included sherds of Collared Urn and worked flint, rare evidence of domestic activity of this period. There were also finds of the middle Bronze Age, although no features of that phase were confirmed.

In the late Bronze Age, a defensible hilltop enclosure, just over 1 ha in area, was constructed on the site. The enclosure, probably first established in the 11th century BC, had a complex sequence of defences including a pair of posthole rows possibly indicating a timber palisade backed by a raised walkway, a trench-built palisade, a ditch and rampart and further posthole-lines outside the ditch. Only a limited area of the interior was examined, but it contained a series of parallel fence lines, one probable roundhouse and up to six possible four-post structures, with occupation extending into the 9th century BC.

There followed a probable hiatus in activity represented by a very slow-forming deposit – termed in this report the ‘standstill’ layer – in the

upper part of the ditch. Subsequently a larger U-profiled hillfort ditch was constructed in the early Iron Age, probably in the 5th century BC, the spoil being dumped over the previous ditch to form a timber-laced rampart. Another internal roundhouse may be middle Iron Age in date. Soon after its construction the rampart was destroyed in places by fire, and remains of the charred timbers within the rampart have revealed some details of the ramparts construction. In contrast, the associated ditch remained open into the Saxon period.

A third and even larger V-profiled ditch was found outside the second ditch. Although the date of construction of this outer ditch is uncertain, it too remained open into the Saxon period, suggesting that the hillfort was multivallate in its later stages.

The abandoned hillfort was re-occupied in the Saxon period, probably in the late 6th or early 7th century AD, at roughly the same time as the rich burial within the Taplow Mound. No evidence for reconstruction of the hillfort was found but considerable quantities of domestic material were deposited within the surviving Iron Age hillfort ditches. Amongst the domestic debris was a sherd probably from an eastern Mediterranean amphora, the first from Buckinghamshire, and an indicator of high status. A fragmentary early Anglo-Saxon inhumation associated with a knife was found in the entrance to the hillfort. The ditches were finally infilled in the 11th-12th century AD.

# Zusammenfassung

Neuerliche Ausgrabungen in Taplow Court (Koordinaten SU907823) im Vorfeld der Errichtung einer Konferenzsaal (*Butsuma*) im Auftrag der Eigentümer, Soka Gakkai International-UK, haben eine lang anhaltende Aktivität, welche vom Mesolithikum bis zur angelsächsischen Periode reichte, nachgewiesen.

Mesolithische beschlagene Feuersteine und verkohlte Haselnüsse, sowie Frühneolithische Feuersteine wurden in einer kleinen Anzahl Baumumwürfen gefunden. Eine Gruppe sich untereinander schneidender ausgehöhlter oder flacher Gruben der Frühen Bronzezeit, enthielten Scherben von Krugurnen sowie bearbeitete Feuersteine, diese sind somit seltene Nachweise domestischer Aktivität aus dieser Zeit.

Zwar konnten keine Befunde der Mittleren Bronzezeit eindeutig nachgewiesen werden, doch einige Funde dieser Periode wurden sichergestellt.

In der Späten Bronzezeit wurde im Untersuchungsgebiet eine befestigte Höhenanlage auf einer Fläche von über einem Hektar angelegt.

Die Verteidigungsanlage, vermutlich genutzt seit dem 11ten Jahrhundert vor unserer Zeitrechnung, bestand aus einer komplexen Sequenz unterschiedlicher Strukturen, darunter zwei Reihen Pfostenlöcher – wobei es sich wahrscheinlich um eine Holzpalisade mit anschließendem erhöhtem Gang handelt, einer Grabenpalisade, einem weiteren Graben mit anschließendem Wall und einigen Pfostenlochrainen außerhalb des Grabens.

Nur Teile des Inneren der Anlage wurden untersucht, diese enthielten einige parallele Zaunreihen, wahrscheinlich ein Rundhaus und bis zu sechs mögliche Strukturen mit jeweils vier Pfostenlöchern, welche bis ins 9. vorchristliche Jahrhundert genutzt wurden.

Dieser Phase folgte möglicherweise ein Hiatus, beschrieben durch eine sich nur sehr langsam formenden Schicht im oberen Bereich des Grabens – welche in diesem Bericht als „Stillstand“ Schicht bezeichnet wird.

In dessen Folge wurde in der frühen Eisenzeit eine große U-förmige Wallburg angelegt, wahrscheinlich im 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr. Der Aushub dieser Anlage wurde über den vorangegangenen Graben geschichtet und formte damit einen mit Holz überdeckten Wall.

Ein weiteres Rundhaus im Inneren der Anlage stammt vermutlich aus der mittleren Eisenzeit. Nur kurz nach dessen Errichtung wurde der Wall teilweise durch Feuer zerstört. Teile der verkohlten Hölzer im Wall konnten einige detaillierte Informationen über den Aufbau des Walls liefern. Im Gegenzug blieb der dazugehörige Graben bis zur Zeit der Sachsen offen.

Ein dritter noch größerer V-förmiger Graben wurde außerhalb des zweiten Grabens angefundene. Obwohl nicht sicher gesagt werden kann, wann dieser Graben errichtet wurde, ist klar, dass er bis in die Sachsenzeit offen blieb, was suggeriert, dass die Wallburg in ihrer späteren Zeit durch Mehrfachgräben, bzw. Wälle abgesichert war.

Die verlassene Höhenanlage wurde in der Sachsenzeit im späten 6. oder frühen 7. Jahrhundert n. Chr. wieder in Benutz genommen – ungefähr zur selben Zeit aus der die reiche Bestattung im Inneren des Taplow Grabhügels stammt. Es gibt keine Anzeichen für die Wiedererrichtung der Höhenanlage doch wurde eine große Anzahl Siedlungsmaterial in den erhaltenen eisenzeitlichen Gräben deponiert. Unter anderem wurde eine Amphorenscherbe aus vermutlich mediterranem Kontext in diesem Material entdeckt, welche damit die erste Scherbe dieser Art ist, die in Buckinghamshire gefunden wurde und somit auf einen hohen Status der Anlage hinweist.

Eine fragmentierte früh angelsächsische Bestattung mit einem Messer als Grabbeigabe wurde im Eingang der Höhenanlage gefunden. Die Gräben wurden schließlich im 11. bis 12. Jahrhundert n. Chr. verfüllt.

## Résumé

De récentes fouilles archéologiques à Taplow Court (à NGR SU 907823/Buckinghamshire) menées sur l'emprise du projet de construction d'un centre de conférence (Butsuma) appartenant à Soka Gakkai International-UK, ont permis de mettre au jour les vestiges d'une occupation allant du Mésolithique à la période anglo-saxonne.

Les éléments les plus précoces consistent en du mobilier lithique du Mésolithique et du néolithique ainsi que des restes de noisettes carbonisés découverts dans quelques chablis. La présence de tessons d'une urne (de type Collared Urn) et de silex travaillé dans un réseau de cavités ou de fosses peu profondes du Bronze ancien, constitue les indices rares d'une activité domestique. Du mobilier du Bronze Moyen a aussi été mis au jour bien qu'aucune structure de cette phase n'ait été confirmée.

Au Bronze récent, une enceinte fortifiée ceignant un peu plus d'un hectare fut édiflée sur le site. Cette enceinte, probablement établie au XI<sup>ème</sup> siècle av. J.-C., comportait une série complexe de défenses dont deux rangées de trous de poteaux indiquant probablement une palissade en bois renforcée par un passage surélevé, doublée d'une clôture fossoyée, d'un fossé défensif de profil en « V », d'un rempart et d'une série d'alignements de trous de poteaux extérieurs au fossé. Seule une portion a été analysée à l'intérieur de l'enceinte mais la fouille de celle-ci a toutefois révélé une série de clôtures parallèles, un bâtiment circulaire et peut-être six structures à quatre poteaux, attestant une occupation jusqu'au IX<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C.

L'activité anthropique du site est également marquée par un hiatus clairement perceptible par un comblement très lent, évoqué dans cette publication

comme « standstill layer » - dans la partie supérieure du fossé. Par la suite, une enceinte fortifiée plus profonde caractérisée par son profil en « U » fut édiflée, probablement au V<sup>ème</sup> siècle av. J.-C., les remblais de laquelle ont comblé l'ancien fossé et ont ainsi formé un rempart en bois. Un autre bâtiment circulaire intérieur pourrait dater du second Age du Fer. Peu après son achèvement, le rempart fut partiellement détruit par le feu, comme l'attestent les restes de bois carbonisés découverts au sein du rempart et qui permettent de documenter la construction de ce rempart. En contraste, le fossé associé demeure ouvert jusqu'à la période anglo-saxonne.

Un troisième fossé encore plus vaste de profil en « V » a été découvert à l'extérieur du deuxième. Bien que la date de construction de ce fossé extérieur demeure incertaine, il reste lui aussi ouvert jusqu'à la période anglo-saxonne, suggérant que l'enceinte était dotée d'un système de fosses multiples vers la fin de l'Age du Fer.

L'enceinte abandonnée fut réinvestie à la période anglo-saxonne, probablement au Ve et VI siècle ap. J.-C., approximativement au même moment que la riche sépulture du monticule de « Taplow Mound ». Si aucun élément de construction n'a été observé, les fossés de la fortification ont livré une abondance de vestiges domestiques dont un tesson d'amphore de Méditerranée orientale, unique exemplaire jamais découvert à ce jour dans le Buckinghamshire qui atteste le statut privilégié des occupants du site. Une inhumation fragmentée de la période anglo-saxonne et un couteau ont été mis au jour à l'entrée de la fortification. Les fossés de l'enceinte furent finalement comblés au XI et XII<sup>èmes</sup> siècles.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Soka Gakkai International-UK for funding the excavations and the post-excavation assessment, and English Heritage for funding the post-excavation analysis and publication. SGI-UK also kindly allowed geophysical surveys north and south of Taplow Court, which helped put the excavations into context. English Heritage gave permission for geophysical survey of St. Nicholas Church within the Scheduled Area.

Tim Allen would like to thank Sean Cook, who supervised the 1999 excavation, and Mike Farley and Julia Wise of Buckinghamshire County Council for their advice and support in formulating an excavation strategy. During the fieldwork John Maloney of AOC acted as archaeological consultant to SGI-UK, and we would like to thank James Lichfield, who had the unenviable task of dealing with the unexpected significance of the archaeological discoveries within an already agreed construction programme, for his understanding and patience.

Much invaluable help has been received from local archaeologists and in particular Geoff Fairclough and Elias Kupfermann of the Taplow Court Archaeological Survey Team. For the geophysical surveys we would particularly like to thank Roger Ainslie and the many members of the Marlow Archaeological Society who volunteered in carrying out the resistivity surveys. We are also very grateful to Angela Bolger, archivist at Taplow Court,

for her interest and for the loan of the pottery from the TCAST trenches to record and include within this report.

Emily Edwards would like to thank Stuart Needham for advice on the pottery.

Chris Hayden would like to thank the many colleagues at OA who have assisted with his numerous queries, and in particular Leo Webley for discussion concerning the late Bronze Age enclosure at Fairfield Park and the late Bronze Age enclosure at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham, Oxfordshire.

The authors would like to thank all of the specialist contributors listed at the front of the report, and also the illustrators, Julia Moxham and Magdalena Wachnik. Tim Allen would especially like to thank Alan Hardy, who, in addition to copy-editing the report, suggested how the report might be shortened, and carried out the consequent reordering and renumbering of the tables and figures.

Oxford Archaeology would like to thank the following for their significant contribution to the project during and after fieldwork: Robert Bailey, Michelle Bailey, Dan Bashford, William Bedford, J Bennett, Rosie Burton, Gaylynn Carter, Sharon Cook, Jodie Ford, Rose Grant, T Jenkins, Steve Kelly, Mike Kershaw, Steve Laurie-lynch, Darko Maricevic, Penny Middleton, Jim Mumford, Andy Norton, Andrew Parkinson, Mark Peters, Mercedes Planas, Kay Proctor, Christopher, Richardson, Emma Sanderson, M Sutherland.