

Hillforts and the Durotriges

A geophysical survey of Iron Age Dorset

**Dave Stewart
Miles Russell**

With contributions by Paul Cheetham and John Gale

Illustrations by Justin Russell

Aerial photographs by Jo and Sue Crane

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Cover: Flowers Barrow hillfort looking south-east to the English Channel (Jo and Sue Crane)
Durotrigian silver stater: obverse and reverse (Miles Russell)

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1. Introduction: The Durotriges Project

Miles Russell and Paul Cheetham

Of all the tribes identified by modern writers within the context of later Iron Age Britain, the Durotriges are arguably the most archaeologically and culturally distinct. Across an area that roughly equates with modern Dorset, together with significant areas of southern Wiltshire and south-eastern Somerset (Figure 1.01: Gale 2003, 125-26; Papworth 2011, 9), the pottery, coinage and burial practices of the Durotriges, combined with their apparent use of elaborately defended hillfort enclosures, clearly marks them out from their contemporary, pre Roman neighbouring social groups, especially the Atrebates and the Belgae, to the east, and the Dumnonii and Dobunni, to the west and north.

Elements that comprise this distinctive Durotrigian ‘package’ have been much studied in recent years. The most detailed analysis has been conducted by Martin Papworth, whose work in this area has helped to create a more nuanced understanding of the cultural ‘footprint’ of the tribe (Papworth 2007; 2008; 2011), moving archaeological discussion away from the evocative, archaeo-historical accounts of the Durotriges that derived from earlier fieldwork and which focused on aspects of the Roman invasion (e.g. Wheeler 1943; Richmond 1968). Most notably, Papworth’s research has helped to refine the observation that the Durotriges ‘were not a definite cultural entity’ (Papworth 2008, 2-3), discrete archaeological indicators, such as burial rite, artefact manufacture and settlement morphology, varying significantly across the region. Whatever the reality on the ground, the presence of a common prehistoric coinage when combined with the apparent ‘unRoman’ nature of the Later Iron Age population (Russell 2009, 28-9; Russell and Laycock 2010, 43-61) may, however, indicate that despite such diversity, the region was ‘linked economically and politically’ (Papworth 2008, 93).

The coinage is, as noted, probably the most recognisable and defining aspect of Durotrigian identity, suggesting a significant degree of socio-political cohesion. Unlike the coin series of later prehistoric polities in the east, south-east and west of Britain, those produced in the south-west, within the area of modern Dorset, were not inscribed with the names or titles of tribal leaders (Figures 1.02 and 1.03). This has led to speculation that the social groups here were in some way more egalitarian than their neighbours, perhaps being more of a loose coalition or confederacy of semi-autonomous units with no single supreme queen, king or ‘overlord’



Figure 1.01. The Later Iron Age tribes of Southern Britain
(Justin Russell)

(Cunliffe 1991, 160; Papworth 2008, 58; Cottam et al 2010, 20). The most common coin type produced within the ‘Durotrigian zone’ is the so-called ‘Cranborne Chase stater’, named after examples found and recorded in excavations carried out by Augustus Pitt Rivers in north Dorset (1887; 1888; 1892; 1898). With their lively and somewhat surreal interpretation of the god Apollo both in portrait (obverse) and in his chariot (reverse), the origin of the Cranborne Chase stater design can ultimately be traced back, via a series of coin types manufactured across central Europe, to that produced under the authority of the Macedonian royal family in the eastern Mediterranean during the fourth century BC (Mack 1953; Van Arsdell 1989, 347-51; Papworth 2008, 86-7; Cottam et al 2010, 113).

Although few Durotrigian coins have been found in secure contexts, their broad distribution across the south-west has been used with some success to help define the limits of political influence for the tribe (e.g. Haselgrove and Mays 2000, 249). To the east, the

Durotrigian boundary appears to have been set by the river Avon and the heathlands of the New Forest with the earliest phases of Bokerley Dyke, the earthwork system that still marks the Dorset / Hampshire border, defining the limits at the north east (Bowen 1990; Papworth 2008, 66-9). The northernmost margin of Durotrigian culture was probably formed at the chalk escarpment at the southern and western edge of Salisbury Plain whilst the western margins may have been along the line of the river Axe in Devon (Cunliffe 1991, 201; Papworth 2008, 60-5; 2011, 46-8).

Burial rite is the second major factor frequently used to define and categorise Durotrigian identity and ethnicity. Although crouched inhumations, burials set down on one side with the legs drawn up towards the chest in a crouching position, are found across in Britain in the Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, their presence in later prehistory is geographically restricted, significant clusters occurring in central and southern Dorset (Whimster 1981, 37-59). Although there is some considerable variation in orientation, association with earlier monuments and the provision of grave goods, the 'typical' Durotrigian burial (Figures 1.04 and 1.05) is set down in a crouched or flexed position on its right side within an oval cut, the head generally to the east, facing north (Whimster 1981, 43-7; Papworth 2011, 53-5). Grave goods, where found, comprise ceramic vessels (perhaps originally containing food or drink for the deceased), copper alloy brooches at the head or chest or joints of meat, usually pig or sheep (although cow, horse and chicken are also known: Whimster 1981, 50). In exceptional cases, more unusual forms of metalwork, such as decorated bronze mirrors, toiletry sets, swords or other weapons such as spear heads, have been noted, for example at Portesham (Fitzpatrick 1996) and Whitcombe (Aitkin and Aitkin 1990).

Other factors in the identification and designation of the Durotrigian cultural footprint include distinctive artefact types, especially the ceramic form known as Black Burnished Ware, produced in considerable quantities across Purbeck, decorated bone weaving combs and bangles (or armlets) made from shale (Papworth 2008, 76-9, 91-3; 2011, 50-2). With regard to archaeologically identifiable monument types, there are the enclosed farmsteads, best defined by the polygonal enclosure systems of Woodcutts (Pitt



Figure 1.02. Durotrigian 'Four Branch' silver stater: ABC 2166
(© Chris Rudd www.celticcoins.com)



Figure 1.03. Durotrigian 'Cranborne Chase' silver stater: ABC 2157
(© Chris Rudd www.celticcoins.com)

Rivers 1887) Tollard Royal (Wainwright 1968) and Tolpuddle Ball (Hearne and Birbeck 1999), the so-called banjo enclosures (Figure 1.06: Russell et al 2014) and, of course, the hillforts. It is the hillfort that has rather dominated the archaeological literature for Iron Age Dorset in recent decades, especially since the excavations of Tessa and Mortimer Wheeler at Maiden Castle (Figure 1.07: Wheeler 1943) and Ian Richmond at Hod Hill (1968) whose combined narrative of siege and sustained attack has cast a long shadow, reinforcing a view of heavily fortified native centres, created to withstand assault from native warriors but ultimately poorly equipped to survive the military onslaught of a Mediterranean superpower.

The dating of the so-called 'Durotrigian cultural package' has proved particularly difficult to resolve, especially, as noted above, discrete archaeological indicators, such as burial rite, artefacts and settlement morphology vary in both quality and quantity across the region. Papworth has suggested that Iron Age communities in Dorset 'co-existed in close proximity with diverse forms of settlement' something which would make it 'difficult to consider them as elements of a unified tribal group' (Papworth 2008, 374). The development of a distinctive coin type (Cottam et al 2010, 110-13), from the mid first century BC however



Figure 1.04. A formal, Durotrigian style contracted burial dating to the early 1st century AD from the Durotriges 'Big Dig' excavation at Winterborne Kingston (Miles Russell)



Figure 1.05. A formal, Durotrigian style crouched burial dating to the early 1st century AD from the Durotriges 'Big Dig' excavation at Winterborne Kingston (Miles Russell)

HILLFORTS AND THE DUROTRIGES



Figure 1.06. An Early Iron Age banjo enclosure at Sixpenny Handley, Cranborne Chase, Dorset, showing as a crop mark in 2017
(Jo and Sue Crane)



Figure 1.07. Maiden Castle hillfort looking north (Jo and Sue Crane)

does seem to indicate the later evolution of a ‘common economic and political structure’ which may in turn reflect a strengthening of social relationships and clan-based alliances (Papworth 2008, 375). Quite how long such cultural traits were maintained following the arrival of Rome is unclear although the distinctive Durotrigian burial rite, which began in the last decades of the first century BC, certainly seems to have been maintained at least until the later second century AD (Papworth 2008, 376). Some evidence exists to suggest that Durotrigian coins were still being minted into the second century (de Jersey 2000; Papworth 2008, 377), whilst Black Burnished Ware pottery certainly continued at least into the fourth century (Allen and Fulford 1996, 223–81).

In 2009, Bournemouth University established the Durotriges Project, a programme of archaeological fieldwork designed to further investigate the nature of the native cultural footprint and objectively assess how Britons and Romans interacted across Dorset and central south-western Britain. The project was intended as an opportunity to move away from the accepted and rather dramatic historic interpretation of events, with hillforts and other native power structures being forcibly eradicated by the Roman military, Durotrigian cultural traits disappearing within a couple of generations, to see whether a more rigorous examination of the archaeological dataset could shed light on the true nature of Later Iron Age society before the arrival of Rome and its evolution into the first century AD and beyond.

A series of potential sites was identified for investigation during the formative stages of the Durotriges Project, using a combination of the National Monument and county-based Heritage Environment Record, supplemented by a new series of aerial, geophysical,

surface collection and metal detector surveys. The initial focus of excavation began at a number of locations to the north of Winterborne Kingston, near Bere Regis Dorset (Russell et al 2014; 2015) and this was later complemented by an intensive programme of geophysical survey and targeted ground intervention elsewhere across the county. A major consideration during this phase of the non-intrusive survey programme was the Iron Age hillforts of Dorset. Several detailed surveys of hillfort interiors have already been undertaken across selected parts of the country with remarkable success (e.g. Payne et al 2006) and it was felt that an understanding of the Dorset enclosure sites, especially with regard to their date, phasing, form, structure and possible function would be greatly facilitated by a detailed programme of subsurface feature mapping.

With this in mind, Dave Stewart set about the unenviable and frequently very lonely task of surveying the interior of defined hillforts within the so-called ‘Durotrigian zone’ of Dorset. This he undertook throughout 2013 and early 2014, resolutely resolving access, setting out survey grids and downloading, processing and interpreting the resulting dataset. It was, and remains, a major achievement. The results and conclusions, as presented here, deserve widespread dissemination, discussion and debate for the they will, it is hoped, not only help to change our perception of what hillforts were, what they were for, how they functioned and what went on within them with regard to the division and use of space, but also aid in their long-term future preservation and conservation. The results further provide a useful starting point to assess the longevity of these iconic sites and to reconsider how they were perceived and reused, if at all, into the very Late Iron Age and Early Roman period. To this end, we are very pleased to introduce this, the first volume of results from the Durotriges Project.