Mellor - its archaeological context and future directions of study

by Norman Redhead

The excavation season of 2003 was very important for our understanding of the Mellor site. The 'story of three ditches' that emerged from these investigations gave us for the first time unequivocal evidence for an Iron Age round house (the little ditch or eaves drip gully), an enclosure ditch which was not large enough to be defensive in nature but more likely was a stock enclosure encompassing the whole hilltop site (the medium size ditch), and an inner ditch on a massive scale which was defensive and enclosed the core settlement area of the lower part of the hilltop (the large ditch).

The artifactual evidence has also told us a great deal about the nature of the Mellor site. For instance, radiocarbon dating from charcoal points firmly to a mid-Iron Age date for the construction of the large, defensive ditch, and round house. The well-preserved Iron Age vessel recovered from the lower fill of the medium sized enclosure ditch in 2001 suggests this ditch was also of that date. We know that the site was used into the late Romano-British period, with some pottery types suggesting a late 3rd or early 4th century occupation. The variety and quality of finds is fascinating and a vital part of the story of Mellor. A large percentage of Samian ware, which was the best quality Roman table ware, and the high ratio of jars to bowls, suggests a relatively high status site; and this has led to speculation that a high ranking official, perhaps associated with the civilian settlement (vicus) at Melandra only a few miles away, resided at Mellor; equally it is possible that a native chieftain adopted Roman ways and continued to dwell at this site. Several bronze brooches of late AD 1st to 2nd century date were discovered in the 2003 excavations, adding weight to the high status theory. The presence of hard, gritty Derbyshire wares from the east and oxidised Cheshire Plains wares from the west indicate that Mellor lay on a trans-Pennine trade route in the Romano-British period.

For the Iron Age period, evidence of material culture and economy is more sparse yet Mellor is beginning to provide important clues in the archaeological record. We know that metal working was being undertaken, with fragments of moulds or crucibles from the main ditch lower fills indicating the production of bronze objects, and a piece of tap slag which was a waste product from iron smelting. The presence of several quern fragments in the main ditch fills points to cereal cultivation at or near the site, corroborated by pollen analysis from the outer ditch where some cereal grains were identified. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the Iron Age economy in the North West of England was based on stock rearing and animal products (Matthews 2001). This economic activity has been extremely difficult to trace in the archaeological record and it is only in recent years that regionally based archaeologists have managed to identify and investigate sites of this period. The reasons for this are as follows: acid soils which do not preserve organic remains such as animal bones, a small and scattered population which existed in a marginal farming environment characterised by a wet and boggy landscape, a lack of surviving earthwork monuments (Mellor is a good example of this with the ditches having been completely filled in), a material culture that used very little pottery, and extensive development over the landscape in the 19th and 20th centuries. No wonder then that the North West has been described as a 'black hole' in the archaeological record for the late prehistoric period! Mellor itself illustrates the point, with Stockport Borough having no known Iron Age or Roman period settlement until the excavations began at Mellor in 1998. In the absence of animal bone, we can identify other indicators of an animal based economy: for instance at Mellor pollen analysis suggests herb rich managed grasslands for animal grazing in the vicinity of the site, and an unusually high number of sherds of Very Coarse Pottery representing several vessels that were used as containers for salt, which was essential in the curing of animal products.

But how does Mellor fit into the wider picture of late prehistoric settlement in the region? The 2003 excavations confirmed that there had been a large, inner ditch clearly dug on a massive and defensive scale; did this prove that Mellor could indeed be classified as a hill fort rather than just a hilltop enclosure? The true dimensions of this inner defended area, which includes the round house, are not yet precisely known. There is a distance of 100 metres between the ditch excavated by the driveway entrance in the southern part of the Hearle's garden to the original ditch excavated in 1998 in the northern garden. West to east is more problematic, although in the early 18th century Marriot recorded an ancient fosse (ditch), revealed when a vault was being dug near to the western edge of the graveyard, and recent geophysics and excavation evidence suggests an eastern return of the ditch to be under or just to the east of the driveway, giving a distance of c 80 m. This would make a hill fort size of 0.8 ha. However, if the outer ditch is taken into account, and if it really does encompass the whole hill top as recent investigations suggest, then the enclosure at Mellor would be of the order of a massive 12ha. Forde-Johnson (1962) made a study of Iron Age hill fort earthworks in which he distinguished true hill forts as being above c 2.5 ha in area; they acted as central places in which resided a local chieftain, with lesser sites being farmsteads. In the Mersey Basin there are only a handful of sites which fit into this category, these being Kelsborrow (3.3 ha), Eddisbury (3.5 ha) and Beeston (4 ha). Of course, Mam Tor which lies in Derbyshire south of Mellor is very much in this class of monument, at 5 ha in size. These sites are characterised by visible banks and ditches. Mellor differs from them in that there is as yet no evidence for a bank, with the excavated evidence suggesting a palisade on the inner side of the ditch. The big hill fort sites, including Mam Tor and Beeston, but also Almondbury near Huddersfield, and Castercliffe and Portfield in the Ribble Valley, are all abandoned by the last quarter of the 1st millennium BC, and in some cases by around 500 BC. It is interesting to note that at Mellor, whilst dating evidence points towards a construction date of 500-400 BC, there is as yet no firm evidence for site occupation in the last 2-3 centuries BC. However, this must be tempered by the problems of dating Iron Age pottery in the region, with so little comparative and well provenanced material available for cross-reference purposes.

Research by regional archaeologists over the last two decades has identified over 50 defended lowland enclosure sites in Cheshire, Merseyside and Greater Manchester. These generally take the form of ploughed-out crop mark sites ranging from 0.1ha to 2.8ha in size and with a single or double ditch. Archaeological excavation has been undertaken at a number of these sites, so that we know 13 can be shown to be prehistoric in origin whilst 16 have Romano-British occupation. Only 6 are shown to have late prehistoric and Romano-British phases, these being Duttons Farm, Lathom, Brookhouse, Great Woolden Hall, Irby, Rainsough and Mellor. There are three main types of late prehistoric settlement site: the defended promontory on river valley spurs, hilltop enclosures on the Pennine fringes and the Central Cheshire Ridge, and niche sites on or near the junction of two different soil types (Nevell 1999a, 14-26).

One of the main forms was the ditched enclosure containing a farmstead with round huts. In Greater Manchester the most extensively excavated site is Great Woolden Hall on a promontory overlooking the River Glazebrook N of Cadishead. This settlement began in the mid- to late Iron Age and continued well into the Roman period (around 200 AD). The open area excavation at Great Woolden revealed a nearly complete plan of a double-ring house, radio-carbon dated to 65-15 BC. It consisted of an outer circular post-trench nearly 13 metres in diameter, with an entrance indicated by a gap of 1.8 m width and two large post pits which once held entrance posts of 0.6m diameter. A line of small, circular post holes c 0.2-0.25m diameter formed the inner ring (Nevell 1999b, 48-63) . There are likely to be many more such settlements awaiting discovery and aerial photograph analysis has revealed several potential promontory sites in the Irwell and Roch valleys. Equally, there are potentially many more defended hill-top enclosures to be found along the Pennine fringe, on ridges such as Mellor which provide excellent visibility across the Mersey Basin and provide good defensive positions

Future research directions

Despite several seasons of excavation, Mellor is still being evaluated, with only a very small fraction of the site having been examined. Each year our understanding of the site is transformed by new findings – as illustrated so well in the 2003 season when the existence of a massive inner defensive ditch was confirmed and the line of the outer ditch was found to be running south up towards Mellor Hall to encompass, perhaps, the whole hill top, rather than as was previously thought to run east past the New Vicarage. Defining the alignment of the two enclosure ditches is clearly an archaeological priority and it is hoped further light on these features will be shed in the 2004 season. We do not yet know the location of the gateway into the settlement nor the nature of its defences. Another key area for site investigation is the character and sequence of occupation. How many round houses were there and were they confined within the inner ditch enclosure? Were there other building types such as four post structures for storage? Did the shape and type of house change through time. Can we shed more light on the phasing and character of features revealed as a plethora of pits, post-holes and gullies revealed in the 2002 open area excavation? Although there are a few Romano-British features, such as gullies, we do not yet have any evidence of buildings from that period. Have most of the Roman levels been truncated by later activity, and could the large quantity of Roman finds deposited in the upper fills of the inner ditch be the result of site clearance in the late or post-Roman period? Was Romano-British activity confined to the inner ditch area. What form did the Roman period occupation take, was there a military phase or was it purely civilian in character? The main excavation area for 2004, located in the Triangular Field, will hopefully explore some of the questions above.

As time goes on and we learn more about the site at Mellor, it becomes more important to place the archaeological findings in the context of the site's immediate hinterland and the wider region. Studies of the environs of the Mellor site could inform our understanding of its origins. We have some evidence that the Mellor area was occupied in pre-Iron Age times but we need carry out a hinterland survey to look more closely at the origins of the Mellor site and its influence on the surrounding landscape. We have a collection of Mesolithic waste flints from the Mellor excavation which suggest a temporary hunter–gatherer processing site of around 6000-8000 years ago. Excavations at Cobden Edge, which is only one mile to the south, have also produced flints of the Mesolithic period (Myers 2000, 86-96). As yet we have no firm evidence of structural remains associated with these nomadic people; these remains might be hard to identify and could be limited to a few stakeholes for a tent or shelter, with perhaps a hearth. Nonetheless, it is clear that the area was favoured in this early period and it is quite possible that more extensive remains could be uncovered in the future. The Neolithic period is represented by finds only in the Greater Manchester area, with the closest known settlement site being located at Tatton Park in north-east Cheshire. However, post excavation analysis of the material remains from Shaw Cairn on Cobden Edge show that this funerary site began in the late Neolithic and therefore suggesting settlement in the area at that time (Mellor 2000, 99-111) . We also have the fine Neolithic flint chisel recovered from the Mellor dig itself in 2002.

The early Bronze Age (c 2000-1500 BC) appears to have been a time of favourable climate and rising population. There is an increase in finds, including the first metal objects and first widespread use of pottery in the area, and a number of funerary monuments date from this period, indicating the existence of settled farming communities. Early Bronze Age funerary sites are well known in the Mellor area, with examples at Brown Low, Shaw Cairn, Marple Ridge (near the parish church) and Werneth Low. But, as

with the Neolithic, we have as yet no known settlement site from this period close to Mellor. The most important evidence for early Bronze Age settlement in the area has come from Manchester Airport's 2nd runway where archaeologists have recorded evidence for a long-lived occupation site on a sand and gravel terrace overlooking a ford across the Bollin. Remains include a series of circular and rectangular buildings beside a sunken trackway which was associated with a midden deposit. Finds such as domestic pottery, stone implements including flint tools and quern stones, and the presence of cereal grains, indicate a farming community (Garner 2001, 41-56). Mam Tor Hill Fort also has a substantial community established in the Bronze Age (Coombs and Thompson 1979, 7-50). So far we have no evidence for settlement at Mellor hill fort at this period, but it is very likely that a farm site or larger settlement will exist either on the hill top at Mellor or close by. There is evidence for climatic deterioration in the middle Bronze Age, from around 1300 BC to the mid-Iron Age of c 500 BC. This corresponds with a marked decrease in the number of find spots and funerary sites. Pollen core analysis shows expanding peat bog during this period and it is likely that marginal farmland became unworkable and the population declined. We do not know if settlement continued in the Mellor area during this period of poorer climate.

Research priorities for the future should include a close examination of the whole Mellor hill top, through geophysical survey and trial trenching, establishing not only the full parameters of the Iron Age ditch system but looking for earlier occupation evidence as well. A wider hinterland survey should also be undertaken which will use aerial photographic analysis, historical research (including antiquarian reports and observations), field walking and further investigation of key sites such as Shaw Cairn, to build an understanding of the settlement of the Mellor area through time and its affect on the surrounding landscape. Previous specialist reports on the pottery from the Mellor excavations have stressed how significant the assemblage is in a region which has so little Iron Age ceramics. Thin section analysis has linked some of the pottery to the Castleton area, where Mam Tor is situated. The possibility of cultural affinities with the Mam Tor site needs to be researched further. Indeed, this research should include re-analysis of the Mam Tor finds assemblage, as that site was excavated a long time ago (in the 1960s) and should be re-examined in the light of subsequent discoveries and improved knowledge.

One of Mellor's continuing successes is the way it communicates results both to the public and the academic community. Mellor Archaeological Trust hosted a very well attended study day in April 2003, which aimed to put Mellor in its archaeological context. Archaeologists presented the results of recent investigations on Iron Age and Romano-British settlement sites across the region, which included Cheshire, Merseyside, Greater Manchester, the Peak District and Derbyshire. The study day showed that Mellor sits at a key location both in topographic terms, lying as it does on the edge of two distinctive environments (the Pennines and the Mersey Basin), and in terms of east to west trade links. The Study Day presentations will be now be published as a monograph, hopefully in spring 2005. The Story of Stockport, the Borough's new museum which will open in late 2005, will also have some important artefacts from the Mellor dig together with computer models of the site. This will enable the exciting archaeological discoveries to be disseminated to a wider range of people. Next year sees the last of the 3 year programme of excavations funded by Your Heritage (with support from Stockport MBC). Discussion is underway as to whether this will be a good time to publish the results of the excavations at Mellor, and what format such a publication should take. This will allow a line to be drawn under the initial, exploratory excavations at the site, and enable to new programme of research led investigation to be undertaken.

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