

The South Barrule Hill-Fort Reconsidered

by P. S. GELLING

ANY attempt to reconstruct the early history of the Isle of Man must find a place for the hill-fort on South Barrule, if only because no other ancient settlement of such size is known to exist on the Island. It is true that there is another hill-fort on Cronk Sumark, at Sulby, which may have contained a comparable settlement, but without excavation it is impossible to say whether it was the site of a permanent village, or whether it was merely a place of refuge for people who lived in the north of the Island. A much lower hill-top is defended by a rampart at Chapel Hill, Balladoole, Arbory. Only on South Barrule, however, are the huts of a considerable village clearly visible on the surface.

It must have been some exceptional circumstance which caused people to live in so bleak a spot.¹ It was quite a large community, whose huts clustered thickly inside a rampart which was mainly built of sods, but faced on the outside with large slabs of slate. Little of this rampart remains, because subsequently a larger area of the hill-top was fortified and — so it seems — the new rampart was partly built with material robbed from the old one. It is the later rampart which is clearly visible today, especially on the north and west sides of the fort.

In the excavations of 1960 and 1961 a section was dug through both ramparts, and three huts were examined. On the floors of the huts there was a considerable quantity of pottery. This was unexpected, partly because pottery had never before turned up in any quantity on a prehistoric site on the Island, and partly because experience in England suggests that Iron Age people were in general rather tidy, and threw their broken pottery into rubbish pits, instead of leaving it on the floor of their huts. This pottery was almost the only evidence available for judging the date of the first occupation of the fort. Unfortunately it was of an unfamiliar type, and the considerations which led to its being ascribed to about the fourth century A.D.² were little more than guesswork. This dating had one apparent merit, however, in that it ascribed the site to a century in which people might have been expected to go and live in an inaccessible spot to escape the piracy and raiding which broke out in the Irish Sea as Roman military control of England and Wales declined.

It was to check this theory that a further hut was excavated in September 1968. Its principal

purpose was to collect a sample of hearth material from which a radiocarbon date could be secured, but it proved possible, at the same time, to examine a hut rather more precisely than had been possible in the earlier excavations. This was largely due to excellent weather. It seemed possible to detect two separate occupations of the hut, probably not very widely separated in time, but with a long enough gap between them for the roof to have collapsed. Pottery was plentiful. There was a hearth associated with both the earlier and later occupations of the hut, and a sample of carbonised material was taken from both. The sample from the earlier hearth proved to be unsuitable, but the other was examined by the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory in Birmingham University, and its date pronounced to be 523 ± 84 B.C.

This was a surprise. So far from belonging to a very late phase of the Iron Age, the earliest hill-fort on South Barrule must belong to the very beginning of that period, and this involves a complete reconsideration of its significance. At the same time, all our accepted ideas about the Early Iron Age are being brought into question. Until recently archaeologists have regarded the Iron Age as a period which began at (very roughly) 500 B.C., and was marked by the fairly large-scale immigration of Celtic people into the British Isles. As a result, it was thought, a way of life evolved in which communities had to defend themselves by fortifications, and hence the construction of hill-forts. These assumptions are being increasingly queried today, and there are two main problems. The first is, when did the new way of life which led to the construction of hill-forts begin to evolve? The second is, what brought it about? Was it really due to the immigration of new peoples, or did it evolve spontaneously amongst a substantially unchanged population? South Barrule is one of the relatively few sites in the British Isles which can contribute to the solution of these problems.

The early date is not quite such a surprise as it would have been a few years ago, because even earlier radiocarbon dates have been produced by at least three fortified sites in Scotland, one in Angus, one in Renfrewshire, and one in Wester Ross, near Ullapool.³ All three could have been built by 600 B.C.; and South Barrule is not so very much later. So at least in some parts of the British Isles people had to fortify their settlements long

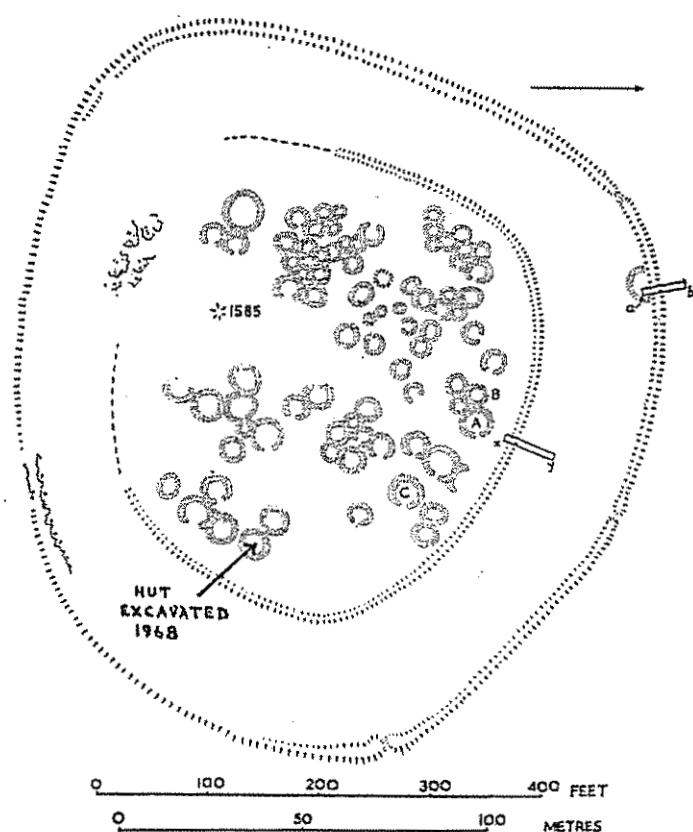


Fig. 1. South Barrule Hill-Fort

before the traditional date for the beginning of the Iron Age, in a period, in fact, which a few years ago we might have confidently labelled Late Bronze Age.

The question then arises, to what extent was this early hill-fort building due to the arrival of invaders? Normally, when a new technique such as fort-building appears, the archaeologist is tempted to postulate the arrival of newcomers to account for it. It could be imagined, for instance, that the earliest hill-fort on South Barrule was built by immigrants who hoped to effect a permanent settlement, but who for a time felt insecure, and so lived on a fortified hill-top. A sixth century B.C. date for such an immigration would be earlier than previously we had any reason to expect, but it would not be, in terms of current opinion, entirely unacceptable. The natural way to approach such a problem is to look at the pottery (or other finds, if any), to see if it reflects any identifiable cultural tradition, since it is almost an article of faith with archaeologists that

newcomers will bring with them pottery of a new and distinctive kind. One of the sherds found on South Barrule in 1968 is decorated with a low ridge of clay, technically known as a cordon, which is strongly reminiscent of some of the Bronze Age cinerary urns which have been found on the Island. One characteristic of these urns is that their rims are often plain except for an internal bevel, and closely comparable rims occur amongst the pottery found on South Barrule. Complete similarity is not to be expected, as the cinerary urns were specialised containers for the ashes of the dead, while what is found on South Barrule is the equivalent of ordinary domestic crockery, but such distinctive features as this domestic ware has seemed to point decidedly towards the older Bronze Age styles, rather than towards any hypothetical new ones. It is legitimate, therefore, to conclude that the fort was built by the native population of the Island, and is not necessarily an indication of invasion from outside.

If so, it can still be asked why the fort was built at all. Perhaps one need only point to the quantities of very effective swords and spearheads which have come down to us from the Late Bronze Age, and suggest that life was no more peaceable then than it was to be in the Iron Age. Yet one would have to admit that warfare is not considered to have been so endemic then as to induce people to live in so inhospitable a spot as the top of South Barrule. Perhaps the truth is that there really were certain invading groups in the British Isles at this time, and that displaced persons were everywhere on the move, causing a general breakdown of security. Hill-fort building may have begun at this time in many parts of England and Wales. One of the factors which make the solution of this problem difficult is that quite an average hill-fort in England will enclose ten acres, which is a very big target for the archaeologist, so it is extremely difficult for him to find the critical evidence which will give the date of the earliest phase of a fort's history. It may turn out, in the course of time, that dates as early as the sixth century B.C. are by no means uncommon, but at the moment South Barrule belongs to a very small group of forts which have produced evidence for occupation at this time.

It is assumed here that the early date belongs to the robbed inner rampart, and this leaves the date of the outer one as obscure as ever. It could represent a modification of the fort which was carried out within a generation, or it could be several hundred years later in date. It is possible to point to certain resemblances between it and some hill-fort ramparts in Caernarvonshire,⁴ which would suggest a date not later than the middle of the

first century A.D., but these resemblances are not very specific.

The exact historical context which led to the building of a hill-fort on South Barrule will presumably never be known. It is suggested here that it was built by the local Bronze Age population, and there is a little evidence to support this, but the reality may have been less simple. The people who lived there could have been a mixed community, partly invaders, and partly local people. All we know is that the indigenous style of potting seems to be represented there, so it is hardly likely that the inhabitants of the fort were exclusively newcomers. The only thing which can be

said with certainty is that it must have been a real crisis which compelled people to go and live there.

¹ Summit height 1585 feet above sea level.

² P. S. Gelling, 'Excavations at the Hill-Fort on South Barrule', *Proc. Isle of Man Natural History & Antiquarian Society* VI, no.3, 1963, pp.313 - 323; 'The Hill-Fort of South Barrule', *Journal of the Manx Museum*, VI, no.78, 1961 - 62, pp.146 - 148.

³ E. Mackie, *Antiquity*, XLIII, no. 169, March 1969, pp.16 sqq.

⁴ For example the small 'postern' gates at Tre'r Ceiri (*R.C.A.M. Caernarvonshire*, II, pp.101 sqq.) and the stone chevaux de frise at Pen-y-gaer (*R.C.A.M. Caernarvonshire*, I, pp.100 sqq.) of which there seems to have been a timber version on South Barrule.
