
Archaeological Excavations at Catcote, Hartlepool

A Prehistoric and Romano-British settlement

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1 Introduction

Catcote is a prehistoric and Romano-British settlement on the crest and slopes of a low hill on the edge of the modern town of Hartlepool (see Fig. 1).

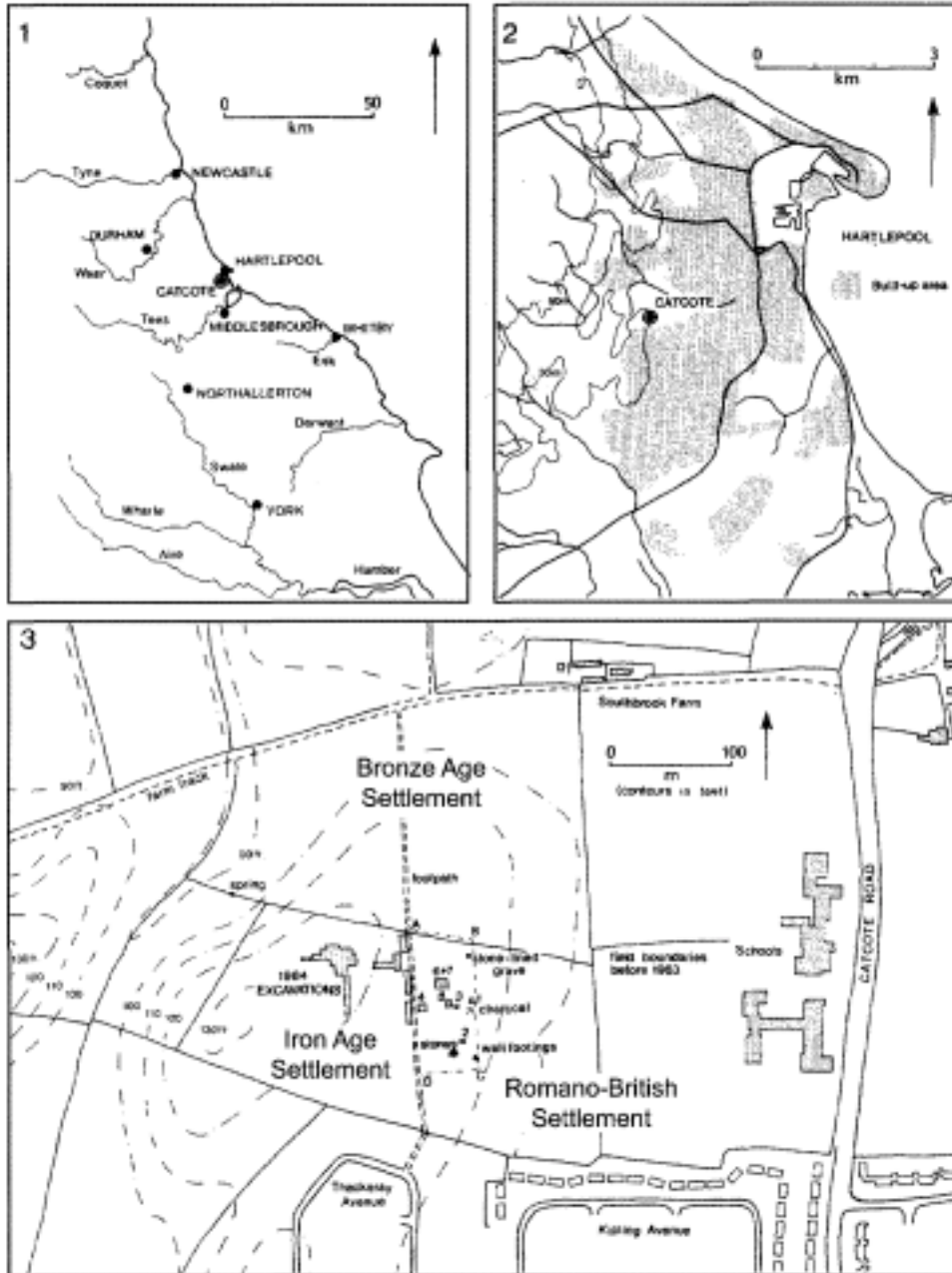


Figure 1: Catcote – Location plan

The hill commands panoramic views of the Tees Estuary and Hartlepool Bay. This panorama almost certainly influenced the location of the Iron Age and Romano-British settlement. There is also good evidence for Bronze Age activity in the valley bottom off the northern slope of the hill in the area now occupied by the Summerhill Visitor Centre.

The concentration of occupation in the same area over thousands of years reflects the ideal nature of Catcote for settlement, with good soils and commanding vistas.

2 Archaeological Investigations

1963 - Rescue excavations

The first archaeological finds came to light in 1963 during the levelling of the playing fields at English Martyrs School on the eastern slope of the hill. There are few records of exactly what was found other than observations of local amateurs who were hard pressed to make fuller records with next to no resources. Diaries and archive photographs suggest that a large part of the settlement was destroyed including substantial stone buildings (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Archive photographs showing the 1963 rescue excavations

1964 & 1987 - Research excavations

The rescue work was followed by an excavation organised by the University of Durham in 1964 (Long, 1988). This uncovered a round house and human burials. It was over twenty years before any further work took place. This occurred in 1987 when excavation took place prior to the construction of allotments to the immediate north-east of the hill. This resulted in the discovery of an earlier, Bronze Age settlement and a rectangular Romano-British building (Vyner & Daniels, 1989).

1998 onwards - Research Project

In 1998 Tees Archaeology established a long-term research and training project with the University of Durham and the Summerhill Woodland Centre. Four weeks of excavation have taken place every year since then with students from the University and local volunteers taking part. This has resulted in the excavation of more buildings and the discovery of further human burials.

3 Bronze Age Settlement at Catcote (800 BC)

The Bronze Age settlement was in a completely different location to the later Iron Age and Romano-British ones. It lay to the immediate north of the hill in a sheltered valley with well drained gravel soils. The present Summerhill Visitor Centre and access road to it occupy much the same position.

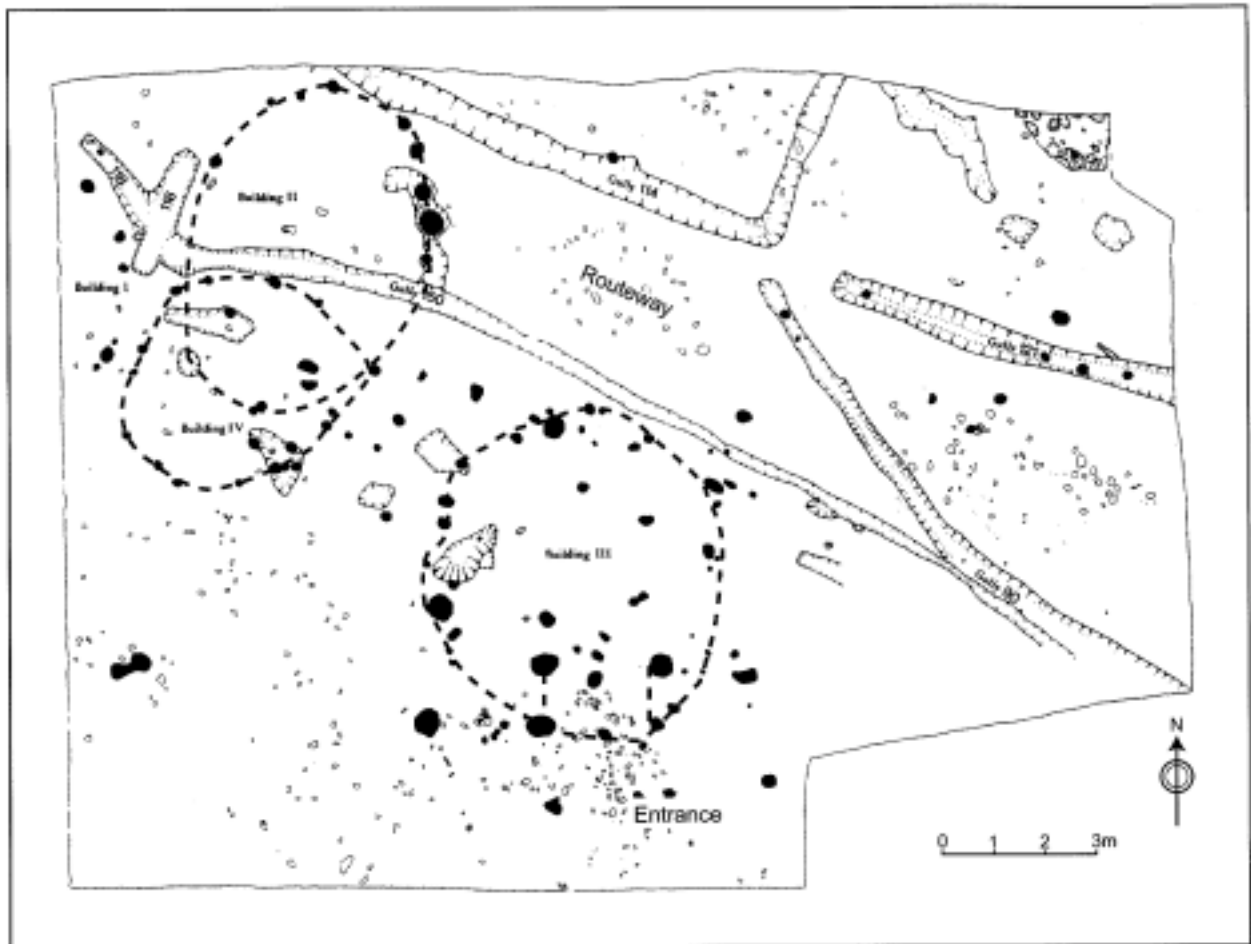


Figure 3: Bronze Age settlement at Catcote

The settlement seems to have been made up of a series of enclosures set out on both sides of a routeway which ran along the valley. These enclosures had entrances from the routeway and the post holes of small buildings were found within the enclosures (Fig. 3).

Background to the Bronze Age

The period between 2000 and 1000 BC was one of the most significant in the relationship between people and the landscape. This was the first time that farming dominated as the mode of subsistence. There was extensive woodland clearance and by 1000 BC highly organised farming systems had been developed. These changes suggest a growing population and an increasingly organised and perhaps centralised society capable of physically transforming large areas of landscape.

Landscape Organisation

Evidence of this large scale organisation of the landscape has been particularly well preserved on Dartmoor (Fig. 4) and in the low lying Lincolnshire Fens.

There are surviving examples of such late Bronze Age landscapes on the North York Moors to the south of Catcote. The evidence from Catcote would suggest that it was also part of an extensive system of landscape organisation.

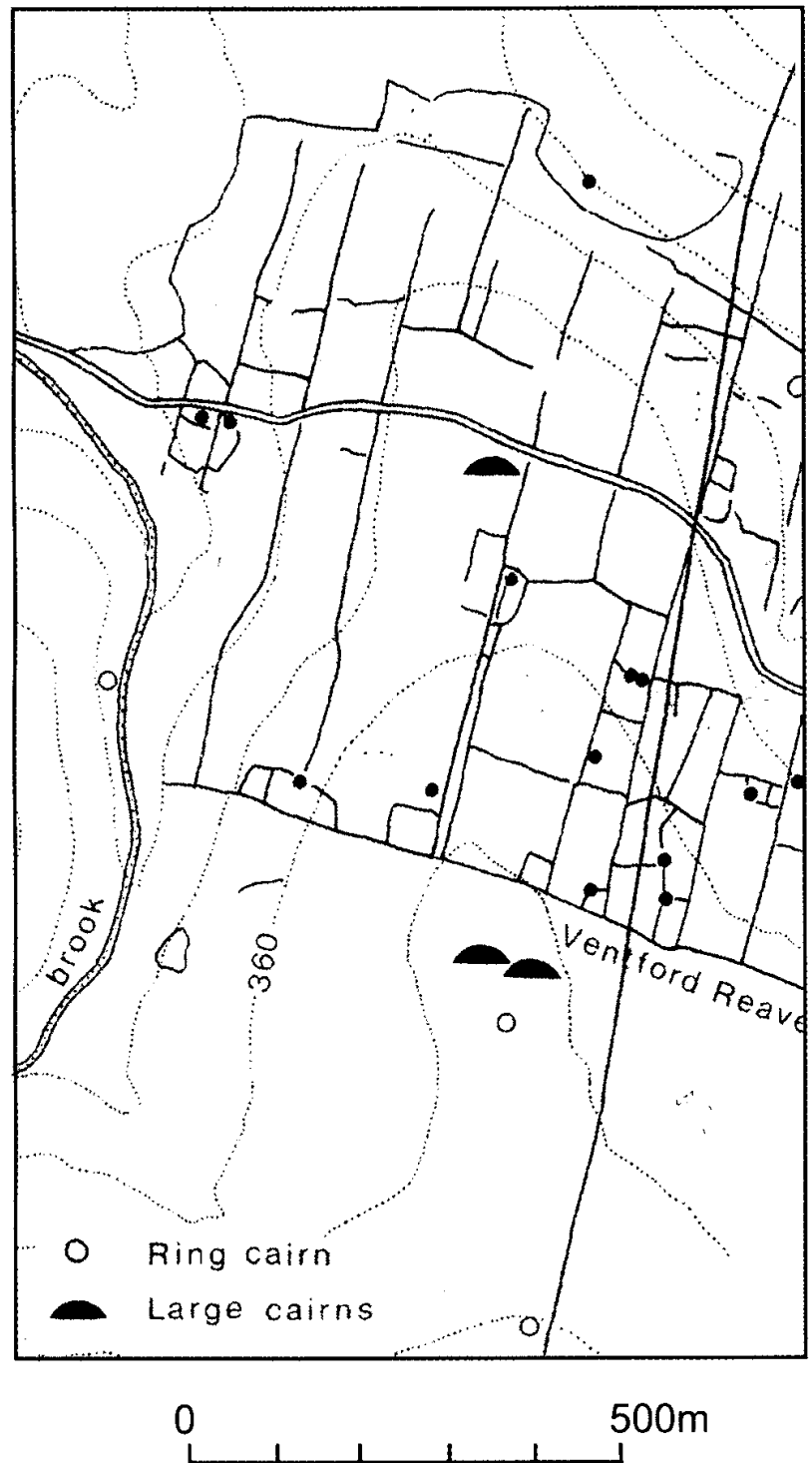


Figure 4: Bronze Age landscape organisation at Dartmoor

The Buildings

The buildings found at Catcote are typical of Late Bronze Age structures in apparently being of very light construction. The main building seems to be Building III (see Fig. 3), the light posts of which mark an oval 6.2m in diameter. There is evidence of an entrance in the south-east corner and the post settings suggest a type of internal porch arrangement. The ring of postholes may not mark the outer wall of the building but may represent internal support for a substantial thatched roof. The timbers of this roof probably rested on wattle and daub walls, all evidence of which has disappeared. Roofs of this type have been reconstructed and are strong enough to support a person (Fig. 5).

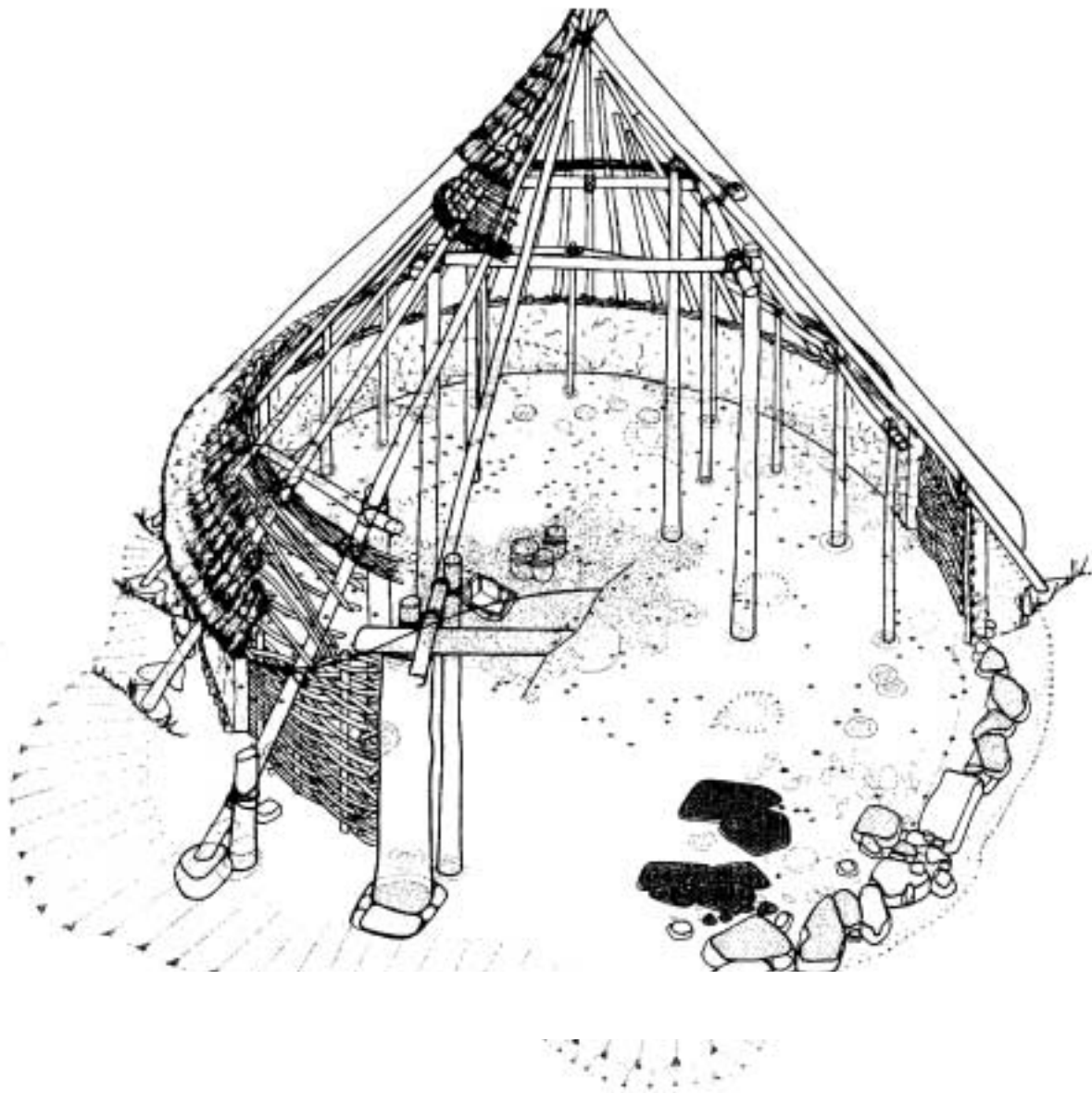


Figure 5: A reconstructed Bronze Age roundhouse

Economy

There are few artifacts from Bronze Age Catcote which may have thrown light on the economy of the settlement. However using evidence from sites elsewhere we can suggest the purpose of the routeway and attached enclosures.

Detailed study of Fengate in Lincolnshire and of other field systems has suggested that they are designed to manage livestock. Archaeological finds from sites of this period point to cattle and sheep farming being far more important than cereal production. The systems of routeways and enclosures were developed to allow the movement of livestock over relatively long distances between fields on a regular basis.

These kinds of systems, of which we have a part at Catcote, were probably designed to handle hundreds or even thousands of head of livestock in an intensively organised system (Pryor, 1999). Sheep were used mainly for meat and wool while cattle were probably used for their meat, milk and hides.

Alongside the large-scale intensive animal farming, cereals would have been grown in small plots of land close to the settlement where they could be easily managed. Both wheat and barley are known to have been grown by the farmers at Catcote. Wild resources such as hazelnuts and fruits supplemented their diet.



Figure 6: Bronze rings from the Throston hoard

Conclusion

The limited evidence from Catcote suggests that the landscape was organized to allow intensive farming of livestock. This implies a relatively large, cooperative and well-structured society. This emerging picture of a prosperous Bronze Age community is emphasized by the recent find of a major collection of Bronze Age metalwork from Throston, two miles to the north (Fig. 6).

4 Iron Age and Romano-British Settlement at Catcote (200 BC – 400 AD)

Introduction

Whilst the Bronze Age settlement was in the valley bottom, the later Iron Age and Romano-British site is based on the crest and east facing slopes of the hill. We still have a very incomplete picture of this settlement. In the Iron Age it seems to have comprised a system of routeways linking fenced and ditched enclosures containing roundhouses. Later developments include rectangular stone buildings.

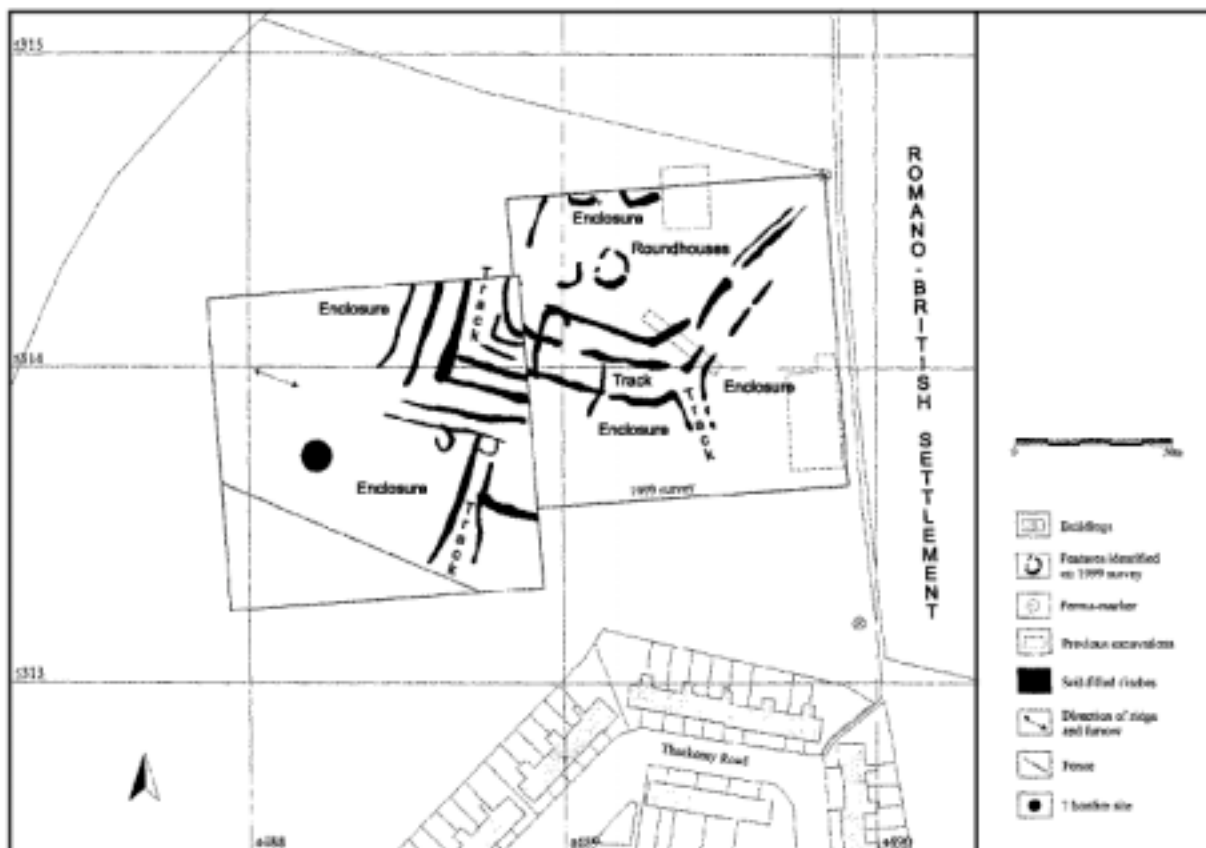


Figure 7: Geophysical survey of the Iron Age and Romano-British settlement

Each enclosure may well have contained a farmstead. To date, one enclosure has been explored in detail. It shows evidence of intensive use over a long period with houses being rebuilt on the same site many times. The geophysical survey of the settlement (Fig. 7) shows many inter-cutting ditches which suggests renewal and alteration of boundaries over a long period of time.

The evidence of the enclosures, buildings and finds from the site all point to a relatively large and prosperous settlement. This continued through to the end of the Roman period and possibly beyond it.

Background to the Iron Age & Romano-British periods

By the Iron Age most of the woodland had been cleared. Cereal farming had become of equal importance to livestock farming. We see fields and farms re-organised to reflect this. The population had also increased and people lived in tribes under chieftains. The Iron Age saw the creation of defended settlements, such as Catcote, as land for agriculture became scarce and competition for it grew.

The impact of the Roman conquest on the Tees Valley is still poorly understood. The area was part of the militarised zone of the north but there seems to have been little Roman military presence. There is, however, increasing evidence that the economic activity and culture of the Roman Empire had an impact on the area. There was widespread re-organisation of field systems and some adoption of Roman ideas such as villas and rectangular rather than round buildings.

At Catcote the Roman conquest does not seem to have disrupted the settlement. In fact it may have become wealthier as a result of increased trade.



Figure 8: A Celtic ploughman and his team as depicted in a bronze figurine found at Piercebridge

Farming

Unfortunately the animal bone from Catcote is not generally well preserved. From the fragmentary material that survives, cattle and sheep are well represented and suggest that livestock farming was still a major part of the economy. Cereals were also plentiful. Wheat and barley were the main species present with some oats and peas. Beehive quern stones from the site confirm the processing of grain to flour. There is no particular evidence of major changes to farming practices throughout the period of occupation.

A rectangular Romano-British building (see Fig. 16) may have served as a grain store. It contained large amounts of barley. There was a great deal of chaff from cereal processing to the immediate west of this building suggesting that part of one enclosure may have been set aside for cereal processing and storage.

While the basis of the economy of the settlement was farming, there is evidence to suggest that other activities were taking place.

Craft Activities

Weaving

Finds from the settlement include a bone comb (Fig. 9) and a pin beater (Fig. 10), both used in weaving. There have also been finds of spindle whorls, all of which indicate the production of cloth. Cloth was presumably manufactured using wool from the herds of sheep managed at the site.

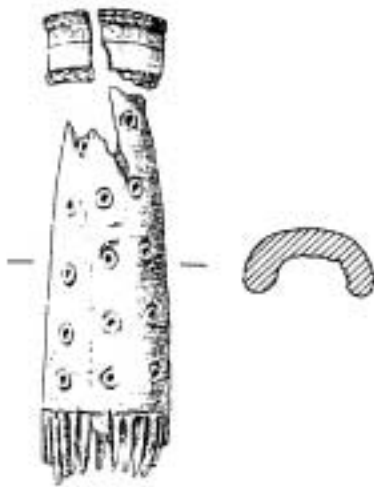


Figure 9: Bone weaving comb



Figure 10: Bone pin beater

Metal Working

In 1963 a clay metalworking furnace was found. Whilst we are unsure exactly what products were made, most communities would have had the skill to undertake metalworking. It is likely that they had the capacity to manufacture their own tools and weapons and to make repairs.

Bone Working

There are sufficient numbers of bone objects from Catcote to suggest that quite large-scale bone working was carried out. Objects include weaving equipment (see Fig's. 9 & 10 above), pins and most interestingly an antler cheek piece (Fig. 11). This would have been used as part of a horse harness. It indicates that horses were ridden at Catcote. Riding was a high status activity in the Iron Age.

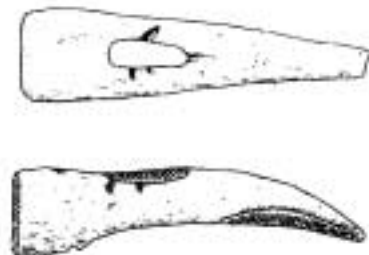


Figure 11: Antler cheek piece

Trade

The quality and quantity of finds from Catcote suggest that it was a relatively important settlement and may have been the headquarters of a local chief. There are a few indications of early contact with the Romans before they had conquered the north of England. These comprise some mid 1st century AD pottery and a brooch of the same period. The range and quantity of such imports increases significantly as the Roman presence in the north strengthens.



Figure 12: High status imported pottery found in the 1960's at Catcote

Following the Roman Conquest and the establishment of garrisons on Hadrian's Wall there was extensive trade up the east coast. It seems certain that Catcote played a role in this. The site is perfect for controlling access to the beach at Seaton Carew where there is another Romano-British settlement. Catcote may well have served as a local centre for trading with coastal shipping.

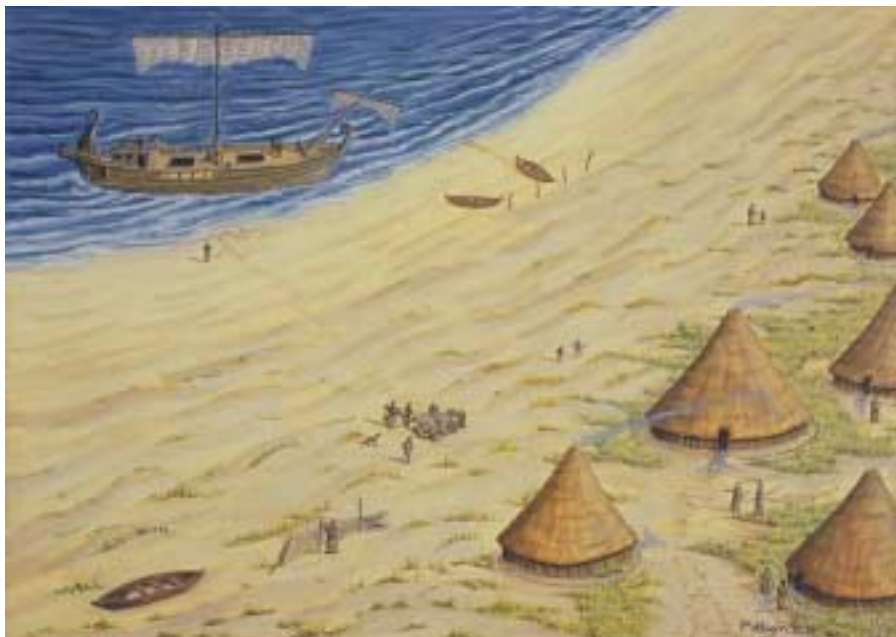


Figure 13: Reconstruction of the trading settlement at Seaton Carew

The Buildings

Iron Age buildings

Several Iron Age roundhouses have been excavated at Catcote. The archaeological evidence for these comprises a circular ditch, dug around the house to drain water running off the eaves (Fig. 14). These ditches allow us to re-construct the maximum diameter of the building but tell us little about how they were constructed. Work elsewhere has shown that they are of a much more substantial construction than earlier Bronze Age examples.

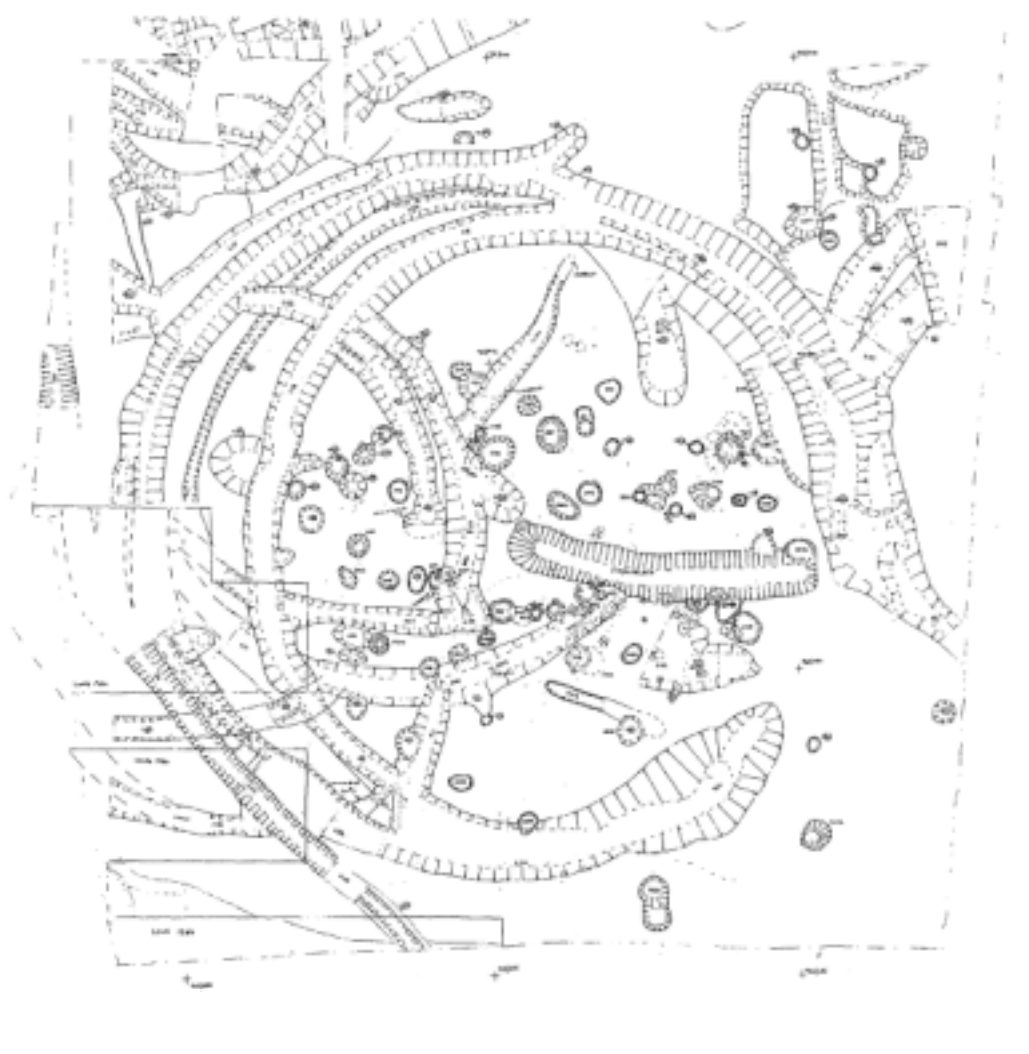


Figure 14: Excavated roundhouse at Catcote

The evidence from Catcote suggests that houses were rebuilt many times in the same or similar position. It seems to have been important that the position of particular houses was maintained, perhaps because of limited space in the enclosures. Moreover, it suggests the occupation of individual house positions by one family over a long period of time.

Romano-British buildings

The very limited evidence from the work on the playing field in 1963 suggests that there was an extensive Romano-British settlement on the lower eastern slopes of the hill. In a number of instances low stone walls were noted and these may have been the foundations of rectangular timber buildings. In 1998 part of a Roman roof tile (Fig. 15) was found in a ditch and this may indicate that there was at least one substantial building with a tiled roof in the settlement.



Figure 15: Fragment of Roman roof tile

Excavations in 1987 uncovered part of a small rectangular building. It had walls of wattle and daub. The roof may have been supported on posts set in from the wall lines (Fig. 16). This building may have been used as a grain store and could have been contemporary with the more substantial stone based structures destroyed in the 1960s.

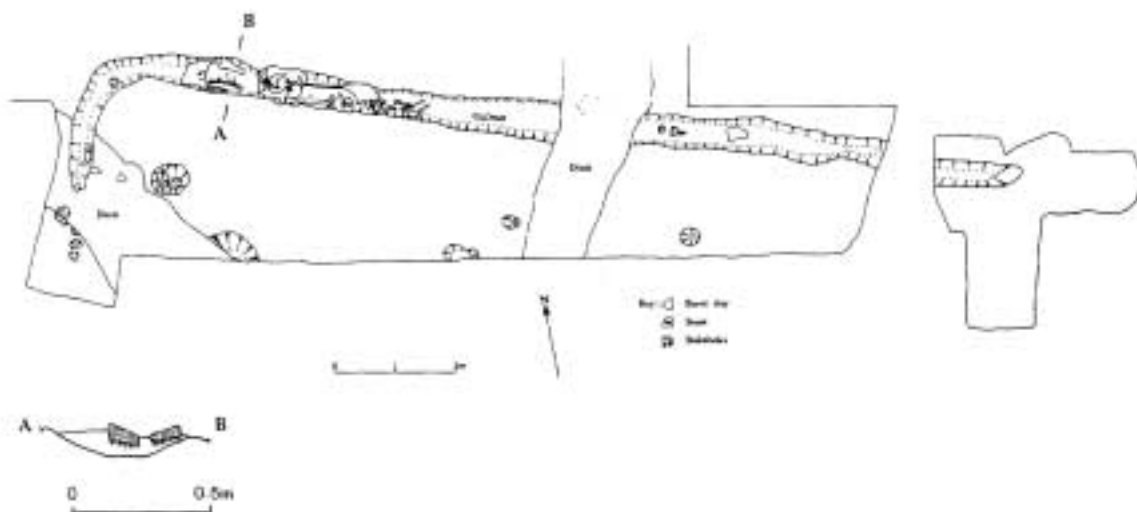


Figure 16: Rectangular Romano-British building

Burial Practices

All periods of the settlement have produced human burials. These were not organised into cemeteries but appear to occur in odd groups of two or three. They are sometimes placed in old boundary ditches and sometimes within abandoned buildings (see Fig. 17).

In 2002 two cist burials were excavated close to the crest of the hill at some distance from the main settlement area (Fig. 18). Both burials were of juveniles. Cist burials are stone lined graves with a stone slab for a cover. This burial practice may date to the 5th or 6th century AD. It is one of a few clues which hint at the site continuing in use after the end of the Roman period.



Figure 17: Burial from 1963 excavations

Bone preservation at Catcote is poor. Almost all of the bone from the cists had disappeared. These burials would not have been recognised had it not been for the cists themselves. Undoubtedly there would have been many other burials in normal graves, many of which no longer survive.



Figure 18: Cist burial from 2002 excavations

5 Conclusion

The more we learn about Catcote the more distinct it appears as an Iron Age and Romano-British settlement. It was clearly long lived and almost certainly of a high status. It appears to have played an important role in north-east coastal trade of the period.

The circumstances of the end of the settlement are completely unknown. Economically it may have fallen into decline with the end of Roman control, as trade links broke down with the rest of the Empire. The lack of Roman influence led to a resurgence of native British tribalism. Catcote may have been abandoned for social reasons as its past links with the Romans were seen a hindrance to its redevelopment.

There are good indications that there was a high status post Roman settlement at Newton Bewley, approximately 5 miles to the south-west. It is possible that, following the end of Roman control, this was the successor to Catcote.

There is still a great deal to learn about the settlement at Catcote. We are still not certain of its date span or of the full nature of the transition which occurred with the arrival of the Romans. Nor do we know if parts of the settlement had specific purposes. However it is hoped that the continuing research programme will throw greater light on these and other questions.



Further Reading

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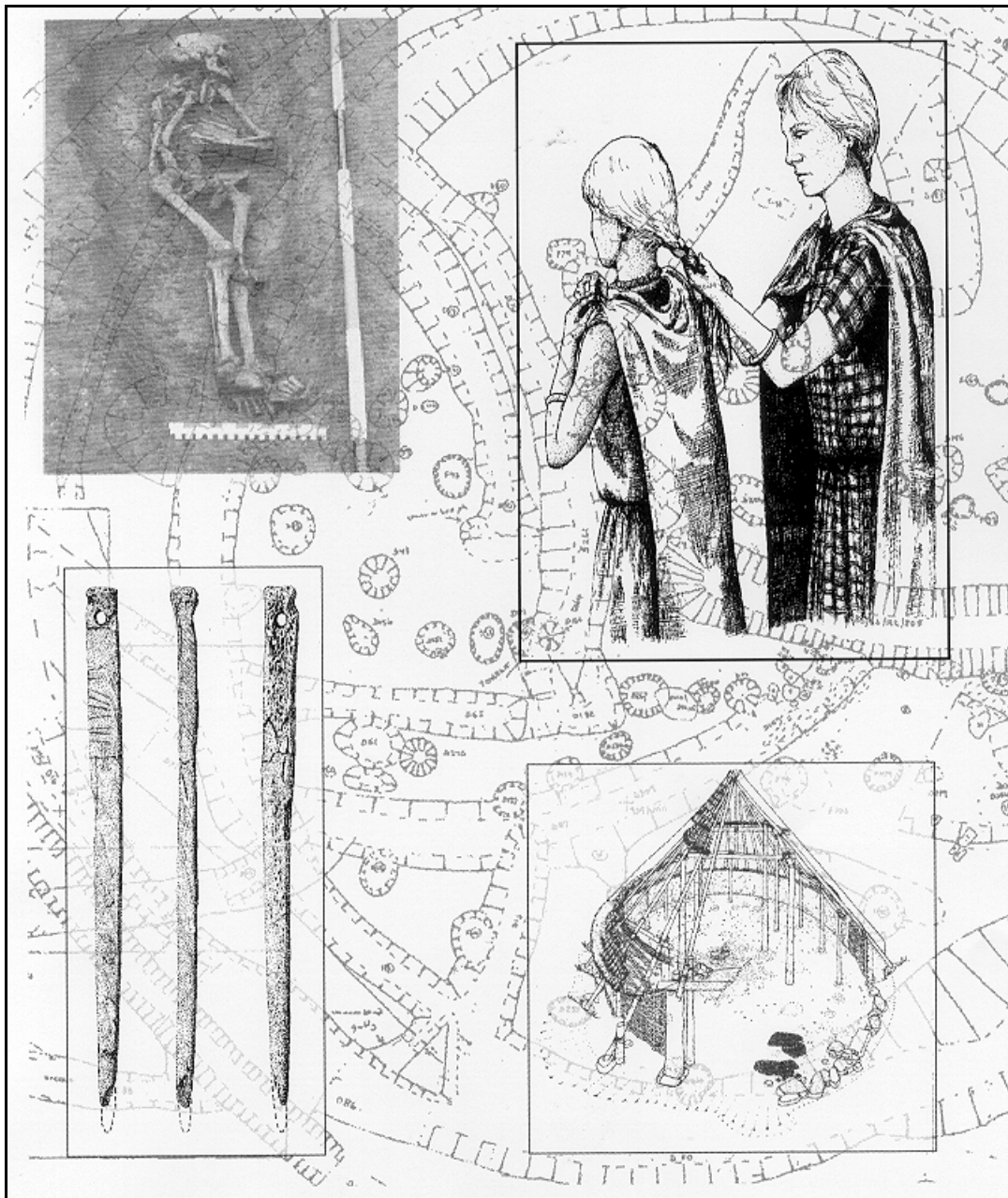
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A Romano-British Blacksmith

Archaeological Excavations at Catcote, Hartlepool



A Prehistoric and Romano-British
settlement

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Romano-British costume



Milling grain using a beehive quern

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