Porty y Candas: A Manx site with similarities to Irish ringforts

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Introduction

Port y Candas is a late Iron Age/early medieval site located on the Isle of Man. It is similar in arrangement to Irish ringforts, consisting of two circular mounds, one within the other. One major feature unearthed during the 2010 excavation was the palisade in the northern section of the dig site, and it is this feature that will be discussed in depth below. It is possible to interpret the structure, purpose, and development of the palisade utilising what was discovered during the excavation, including the differences in rock size and the locations of these rocks, the gully beneath the palisade, potential postholes, and various deposits. In addition to all of these things, the palisade must be related to other areas of the site, in order to gain a greater understanding of the area. In doing so, it will be shown that Port y Candas can be considered a ringfort like those found in Ireland and thus can serve as an excellent example of the Celtic heritage of the Isle of Man. Before any of this can be done, however, the palisade must be put into the context of the rest of the excavated area.

Site Overview

Port y Candas was originally excavated in the 1970s and early 1980s by Peter Gelling, whose notes were used as the framework for the investigation. The 2010 excavation site was bordered by two of Gelling’s trenches: 1976 and the northernmost portion of 1977A. The area to the northeast of these trenches was unexcavated, so we continued Gelling’s work in this location. Unearthed were, among other things, a hearth, various postholes, and two palisades – one in the southern section connecting to the 1977A trench and one in the northwest corner of the 1976 trench. The latter is the focus here. On the eastern side of the excavation site, a few postholes were found, as well as a gully. To the north of the palisade, a section of the ditch was dug out as well. In the northeast corner, there is a mound which appears to go over the palisade. In general, it cannot be said for certain what went on in this area of Port y Candas. However, there was quite a bit of slag and burnt material found. This evidence of craft activity may indicate that the area was used for metallurgy, which is quite common in ringforts (Kneale 2006: 7). Overall, the function of the area is unclear, which makes the analysis of individual features all the more important. Linking the palisade to other features in the site and vice versa helps in formulating a hypothesis about the usage of the site.

The Palisade

Variation in Rock Size

In the northwest corner of the 1976 trench, Gelling found a portion of the palisade, which consisted of several large rocks (figure 1). In the earlier stages of the 2010 excavation, we unearthed the top layer of the palisade, which consisted of relatively small rocks (figure 3). These stones were significantly smaller than those in the 1976 trench, the largest of them only approximately 10cm across. It was clear that the palisade differed across these areas.
However, as the palisade ran east, a few larger stones were uncovered amongst the small ones, indicating that perhaps the layer below held similar stones to those found by Gelling. Recognising this, the layer of small stones was removed. As expected, large rocks were unearthed (figure 4), matching the stones in the 1976 trench. This begged the question of whether the two layers represented the same or separate phases of the palisade, which will be discussed below. It is interesting to note that the southern palisade consisted only of large stones—the few smaller stones that were found are presumed to be part of the backfill rather than the palisade itself.

The Underlying Gully

Prior to the removal of the layer of smaller rocks, it was noted that there appeared to be two channels running along either side of the palisade: the soil was darker in these places. Removing this dirt revealed that there were two narrow channels sloping towards the palisade stones. Once the top layer was removed, we wanted to determine whether these two channels were indeed separate or if there was actually one larger channel running beneath the stones. Upon the removal of a section of rocks, it appeared that the channels joined beneath the palisade, forming one larger gully. This fits with what is seen in palisades at other sites (pers. comm. Alistair Cross). The gully would have been for structural purposes, stabilising the palisade in the ground. Because the area is waterlogged and boggy, it can be assumed that this would have been necessary in order to keep the palisade from falling over or deteriorating quickly over time.

The Ditch

Stability is of course a necessity for a structure intended, theoretically, for the defence of people and/or property or as a status symbol (Kneale 2006: 4). At any site, a feature running along the outer edges is indicative of its own of a desire to keep something in or out of an area. In and of itself, the presence of a palisade alone does not necessitate the people using it for defence—it could easily be intended for maintaining livestock, for example (Kneale 2006: 4; Proudfoot 1961: 109). However, at Port y Candas, the palisade appears in conjunction with another feature: the ditch. Like the area excavated by Gelling, it seems that the palisade is on top of a bank, which drops into the ditch, with another bank and ditch surrounding that. The ditch itself consists mainly of organic deposits, with some slag found as well. There was also one small layer of charcoal. It does appear that various rubbish and waste materials were dumped over the edge of the palisade; in addition to the charcoal, along the northeastern outer border there was a deposit of burnt material. However, these instances alone are not enough to say the area outside the wall was a dump site. On the contrary, the lack of evidence suggests otherwise. The ditch appears in this case to have been for defensive purposes, which is a common enough feature at sites such as this one (Barker 1996: 27). If not for defence, it may have been meant to show high status. Regardless, it is clear that much effort was put into the construction of this feature and it needed stability, which it gained from the gully beneath the lower layer.

Interpretation

As discussed above, the palisade had two layers: the lower with larger rocks and the upper with smaller. It is possible that the two layers were in fact a single phase of the palisade. In this case, the base of the palisade would have consisted of the larger stones, with the smaller ones acting as packing stones for drainage or further
stability (pers. comm. Alistair Cross). Although postholes are expected to be found along palisades (pers. comm. Alistair Cross), on the whole of the palisade uncovered there was only one potential posthole found. This was on the northwest edge, next to Gelling’s trench (figure 2). It is true, though, that postholes can be missed, depending on preservation and the method of excavation (Barker 1996: 117). Regardless, it could be that the smaller stones were used to pack posts and keep them upright.

However, it seems more likely that the palisade had two phases. Directly in front of the opening to the ditch section, there is a gap where no large rocks were found (figures 2 and 4). This area did have the small rocks, but is lacking the large ones found elsewhere. This gap seems to indicate that the lower structural layer of the palisade was earlier than the layer above. It is interesting to note, however, that in Gelling’s drawings of his excavations, the palisade appears to simply stop in one trench (1977B) and pick up again in another (1975). This could be the entryway to the site, as it appears to be quite large, whereas the gap in front of the ditch is relatively narrow.

In addition to these two phases, it is possible to theorise about relationship between the palisade and the rest of the site. It appears, for example, that the mound of earth in the northeast corner covers the rest of the palisade as it curves around the site. At the current stage of excavation, the palisade does not appear in the site once it is close to the mound, and it seems that it does indeed run beneath it. This indicates that the mound in that corner was deposited afterwards, covering up the palisade. This could be for various reasons, each of which involves the palisade falling into disuse. It is possible that it was simply a natural deposit, covering what was no longer used. It could be that it was done intentionally, that the residents were perhaps building something new or for whatever reason had to build up that particular corner. In all likelihood, it was some combination of the two.

It is also possible to compare the two palisades found on site. As mentioned above, the southern palisade had only large rocks, as the smaller rocks found were most likely backfill. It was originally theorised that the southern palisade was of an earlier date than the palisade in the north. However, with further excavation it became evident that the site was sloped. The two palisades could potentially be from the same time period. Until absolute dating can be done, no assumptions can be made. The lack of a layer similar to the smaller stones in the north, however, is nonetheless interesting. If the two palisades are in fact of the same time period, then this supports the idea of the palisade in the north having two separate phases.

**Conclusion**

Overall, much can be theorised about Port y Candas based upon the palisade, both on its own and in relation to other features of the site. Firstly, the palisade is one of many aspects of the site that contribute to the evidence of Port y Candas being multi-phase with different levels of occupation. The idea discussed above, for example, that the two structural layers of the palisade represent two separate phases, fits in. Through studying the palisade, we also are able to determine a general outline of the enclosure – indeed, if the excavation was to go on, it would be possible to determine where the palisade continues to and from there determine with certainty the size of the enclosed area.

Examining the palisade in relation to other features, namely the ditch and the southern palisade, also grants information about those features. The palisade and the southern palisade, for example, can be compared to an extent – the lack of small
stones in the southern palisade, the potential for being on the same stratigraphic level, and so on — and each can help with the interpretation of the other. The ditch and the palisade together show the boundary of the settlement as well as supporting the idea that they were intended for defence or showing status. It is true that without further evidence it cannot be claimed that the palisade was definitively for defence or for social prestige, but because the arrangement of Port y Candas and the palisade and ditch within the context of the site are reminiscent of similar sites, it can be theorised. Indeed, in Ireland, ringforts or raths are commonly interpreted as a sign of social status or as a defensive construction (Proudfoot 1961: 94). This is another way in which the analysis of the palisade helps in the interpretation of the overall site: the study of this feature makes it possible to compare Port y Candas with other sites on the Isle of Man and elsewhere in the British Isles.

In conclusion, through the analysis of an individual feature, it is possible to gain more insight into the site as a whole. By scrutinising the details of what was revealed about the palisade — two layers of very different rocks, a gully as a base, the gap in the larger rocks, and so on — not only can the feature itself better understood, the site can be as well. Thus it has been possible to establish that, in all likelihood, the palisade was defensive, had a gully running beneath it for structural support, and had two phases, eventually being covered over by later occupation. With the information from this excavation, we have been able to add to the data gathered by Gelling, and determine to an extent the structure and purpose of the palisade, as well as its development. Overall, Port y Candas represents an important part of Manx heritage; it is a relatively unique find in Manx archaeology, as the site relates to the island’s Celtic background rather than its Viking settlements. Its similarities with Irish ringforts allow us to better interpret the site. With further studies, Port y Candas and similar Manx sites related to their Celtic history will help connect the Isle of Man with the rest of the British Isles.

References


Alistair Cross, personal communication, August 2010.


Fig. 1: View of palisade stones, facing east, including the stones found in Gelling’s 1976 trench.
Figure 2: View of palisade, facing east.
Figure 3: Drawing no. 9 – upper layer of palisade
Figure 4: Drawing no. 50 – lower layer of palisade.