Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari)

A small hillfort in Denbighshire, North Wales

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables

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This report is dedicated to Jon Humble, a good colleague and friend who is greatly missed.

Introduction

The Clwydian Range in North Wales provides a spectacular upland landscape that contains a series of well-preserved Iron Age hillforts (Gale 1991; Brown 2004). These have been little studied and are poorly understood other than mainly through the pioneering work of the Heather and Hillforts Project run by Denbighshire County Council.[1] This had the broad ranging objectives of landscape and heritage management to encourage public understanding and participation in outdoor activities including archaeology. It concentrated on six hillforts within the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB):[2] Penycloddiau, Moel Arthur, Moel-y-Gaer (Llanbedr) and Moel Fenli in the Clwydians and in the adjoining Llantysilio Mountains the sites of Moel-y-Gaer (Llantysilio) and Caer Drewyn, Figure 1. Topographic survey was carried out at each site together with differing levels of geophysical survey (Mrowiec 2011; summarised in Lloyd-Jones 2017 and Lloyd-Jones and Gale 2020).

The importance of hillforts is central to the understanding of the north Welsh Iron Age settlement record and has been emphasised for some time within a series of research agendas (Haselgrove *et al.* 2001; Gwilt 2003; IFA Wales/Cymru 2008), the latest version of which has recently been published online.[3] To stimulate continuing research in this area the Heather and Hillforts Project actively encouraged collaborative work which has resulted in a series of excavations and further survey. Geophysical survey has been carried out within the interior of Caer Drewyn by the Universities of Oxford and Bangor (Brown and Wintle 2008) and its environs including the small enclosed site of Moel Fodig (Karl and Brown 2010; Brookes 2010b). This was followed by further survey and excavation at Moel Fodig (Morton Williams *et al.* 2012) and survey at a second small enclosure, Fron Newydd (Brown and Karl 2011). Small-scale excavations were also carried out by the Universities of Bangor and Vienna to investigate the rampart at Moel-y-Gaer (Llanbedr) (Karl and Butler 2009). A single trench was excavated within the interior of Moel-y-Gaer (Llantysilio) by the Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust in 2010 (Grant and Jones 2013). From 2012 a longer term project was carried out at Penycloddiau by the University of Liverpool with geophysical survey and excavations across the rampart and of a house platform in the interior (Mason and Pope 2012; 2013; 2015; 2016). Excavation on the slopes of Moel Arthur has taken place by CRAG (the Clwydian Range Archaeological Group).[4]

Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) is just north of the Heather and Hillforts project area and was not included in that work. With the encouragement of the landowners and after discussion with CADW and Fiona Gale of Denbighshire County Council, it was decided to carry out a campaign of survey and excavation that would help to incorporate the site into the wider research schemes described above and add to the growing corpus of information about the area. From the outset it was decided that Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) provided an opportunity for a relatively large-scale excavation compared to what has been carried out so far on Clwydian hillforts, and also as a testbed for the integration of a range of non-intrusive remote sensing techniques. Consequently, in the summer of 2011 topographic and extensive geophysical survey combined with morphometric analysis of LiDAR data was undertaken followed by seven seasons of excavation.

Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari)

Bodfari is the lowest of the Clwydian hillforts at *c.* 200m, positioned outside the village of Bodfari, 5 miles north-east of Denbigh in the northern Clwydian Range (NGR SJ 0950 7080). It is situated

[1] http://www.clwydianrangeanddeevalleyaonb.org.uk/hillforts/ (accessed December 2021)
[2] For details of all hillforts mentioned in this paper, including references, see the *Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland*, online at https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk (accessed December 2021)
[3] https://www.archaeoleg.org.uk/intro.html (accessed December 2021)
[4] https://cragnorthwales.wordpress.com/ (December 2021)

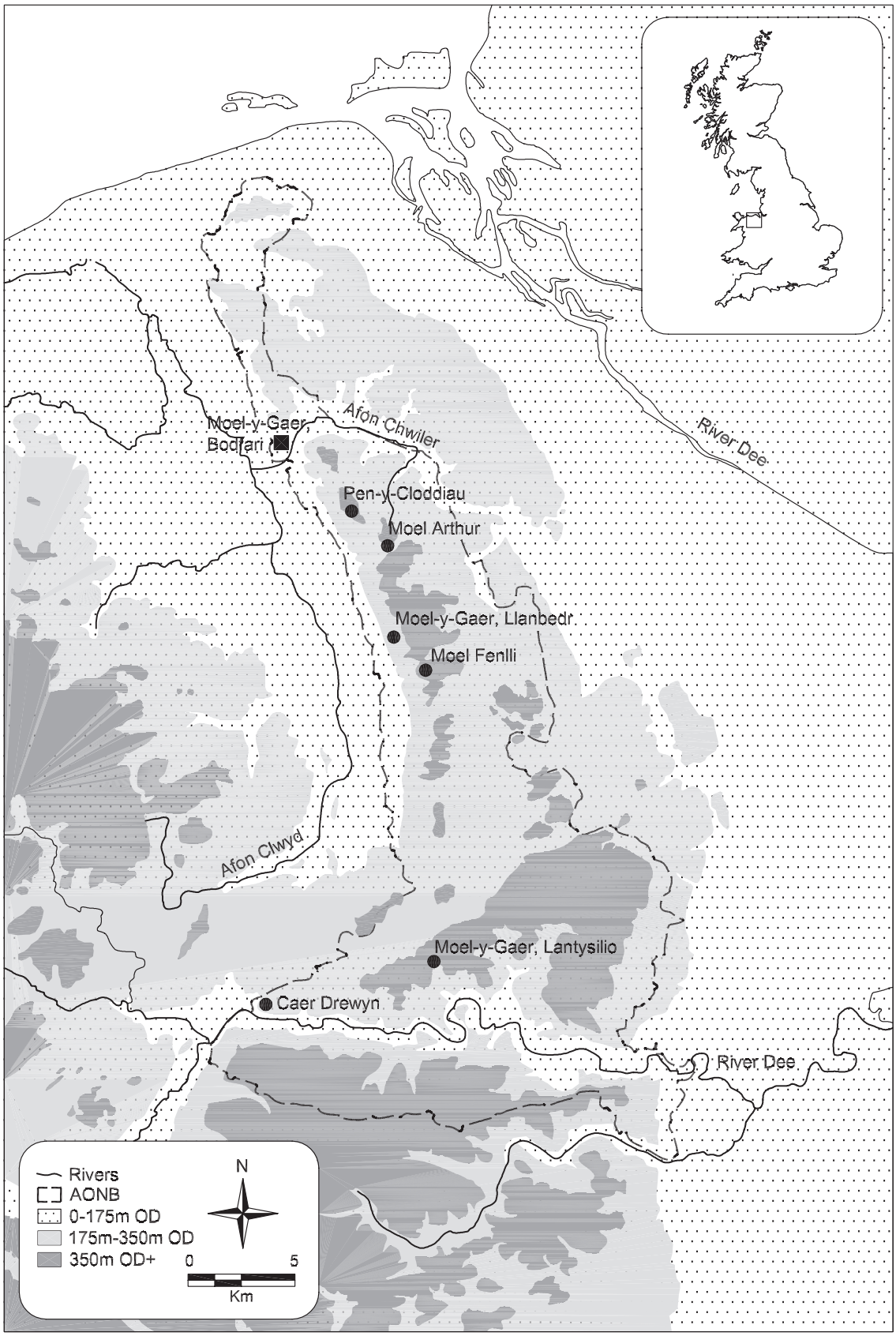

Figure 1. The location of Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari), Denbighshire, and the six hillforts within the Heather and Hillforts Project.

Figure 2. Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) viewed from the north.

on the top of a discrete hill, Figure 2, strategically located overlooking the confluence of the Rivers Chwiler (Wheeler) and Clwyd with an enclosed area of *c.* 2ha. The site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (CPAT HER PRN 102154, FL073) and the work reported on here was done under Scheduled Monument Consent.

The solid geology of the Clwydian Range, including Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari), is Silurian mudstones and shale, a grey well bedded rock that is prone to shattering when exposed. This is in contrast to the Carboniferous limestone plateau which runs along the eastern side of the Clwydians and to the softer, and now much eroded, Triassic red sandstones of the Vale of Clwyd (Embleton 1957). Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) is a northern outlier of the main Clwydian Range separated by the Chwiler (Wheeler or Bodfari) Gap through which the river runs into the Vale where it joins the Clwyd. To the east of the Gap the valley is wider and shallower but the Gap itself is relatively narrow and deep, Moel-y-Parc which flanks the Gap to the south being 335m high compared to the hillfort at *c.* 200m on the north. The Gap breaks the main watershed of the region and was caused by the Bodfari Fault which runs across the shale outcrop creating a gap which was probably made larger by torsional movements and shattering of the shale during the Triassic resulting in a hollow (Brown and Cooke 1977).

The importance of this for the archaeology of Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) is that the Gap was exploited by ice during the last glaciation leaving deposits on the hilltop. Glaciation was severe in this area with two ice sheets meeting, the Welsh Ice from the west-south-west and the Irish Sea Ice from the east-north-east. Other than forming the rounded hill profiles of the Clwydians and the U-shaped cols and valleys, the drift deposits left by the ice sheets took two forms. In essence these tend to be fluvio-glacial deposits and landforms in the valley which are often stratified and the unsorted tills (boulder clays) of the higher areas including the limestone plateau. The natural deposits on the top of Moel-y-Gaer are mainly the red fluvio-glacial sands and gravels which are very variable

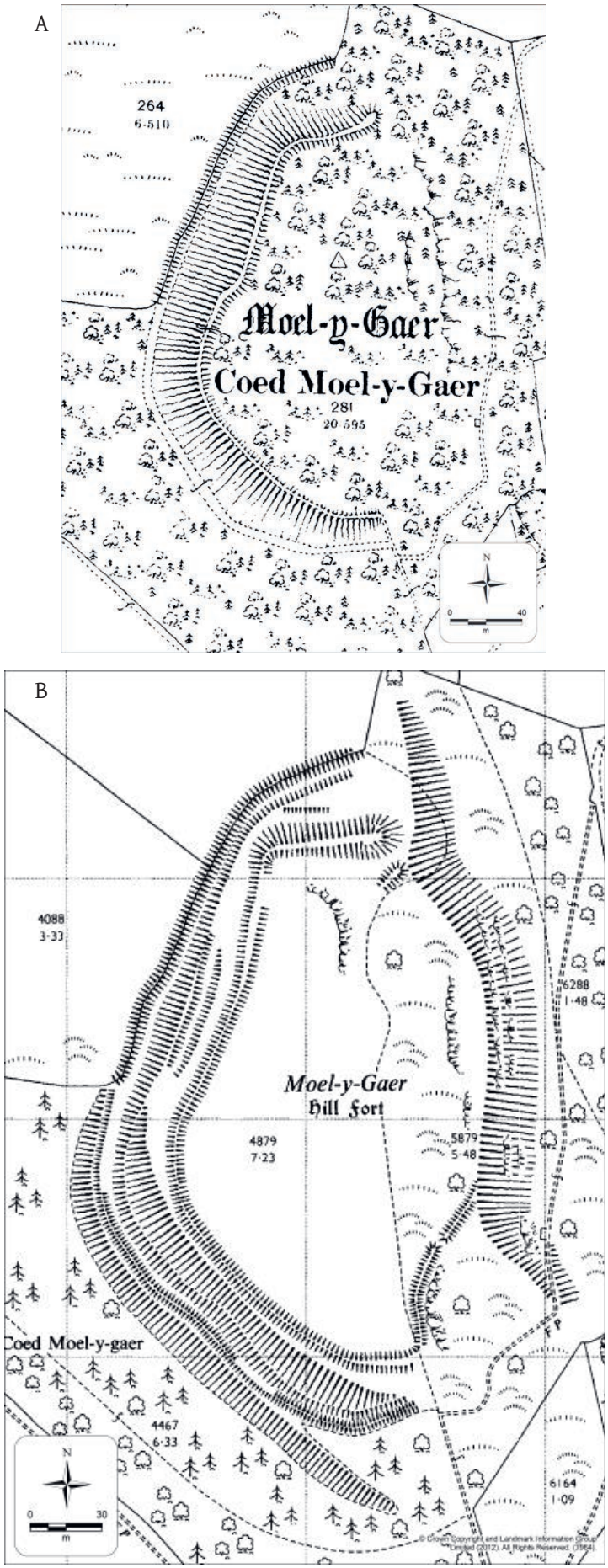

Figure 3. Ordnance Survey earthwork plans of Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari), A) 1880s, B) 1964.

in constituents and structure deriving from the Bunter sandstone deposits in the Vale. There are also occasional patches of boulder clay and erratics of various sizes are scattered across the hilltop, mainly of limestone but of other rock types as well. The gravels are rounded and sub-rounded pebbles of pale grey limestone, siltstone, sandstone and occasional vein quartz and granite. If these deposits were originally laid down in the Chwiler Valley by ice moving through the Chwiler Gap, Peake (1961: 368) has argued that they could have been pushed up to the tops of the hills by ice movement, which may apply particularly to Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) as it is relatively low.

Before our survey work in 2011 there existed only a minimal earthwork plan by the Ordnance Survey from the late 19th century and a more detailed plan from 1964, Figure 3, showing the main features to be the western ramparts and ditches and the inturned entrance to the north. The northern entrance was planned and described as turning both inwards and outwards by Forde-Johnston (1976: 229, Figure 129).

Small-scale excavations were carried out within the hillfort in 1908 by Philip Stapleton and students of nearby St. Bueno's College with 'advice and direction' given by Professor J.L. Myers of Liverpool University who visited the site twice (Stapleton 1909: 234). This work was re-iterated by Davies in his corpus of Flintshire (1949). Stapleton excavated ten trenches in total although the exact positions of these are impossible to relocate from his published plan. His most significant and relevant conclusions are from three trenches all focussed on the western ramparts: a possible entrance through the central area of the inner rampart (his Cutting 4, Figure III); the V-shaped profile, '6 feet deep', of a ditch in the north-western area (Cutting 1, Figure II); the rear of a rampart with a stone wall '5 feet high' (Cutting 5), possibly the middle rampart in the central western area. In his conclusion Stapleton referred to the lack of finds, particularly Roman, (1909: 237) which is significant because of the suggestion that Moel-y-Gaer (Bodfari) could be the location of *Varae (Varis)*, the 'lost' Roman fort shown on the Antonine Itinerary (Davies 1949: 41). This argument is based on the number of Roman finds from in and around the village of Bodfari, but not from the hillfort, and the place name derivation although the Roman fort in question was probably located at St. Asaph (Silvester and Owen 2003).