

This article is reproduced by courtesy of Manx National Heritage and was published in *The Journal of the Manx Museum*, Vol VI No. 78, 1961-62.

## The Hill-Fort of South Barrule

BY P. S. GELLING.

*The following is an account of the recent archaeological excavation undertaken by the author, under the sponsorship of the Manx Museum Trustees and the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society.*

AS a working rule in British archaeology it can be said that fortified sites are not older than the Iron Age; that is, they are not older than about 500 B.C. In the preceding Bronze Age life was anything but peaceful, to judge by the quantity of weapons which have survived, but it seems that in Britain people were not yet driven to fortify their settlements. In the Iron Age it was different. From about 500 B.C. (if not earlier) Celtic tribes were immigrating from the continent into the British Isles. As the population increased the competition for the best land became keener, and the new technique of iron-working meant that serviceable weapons could be produced much more cheaply, and a larger proportion of the population could possess them.

The result was a much more military society than Bronze Age England had known, and the

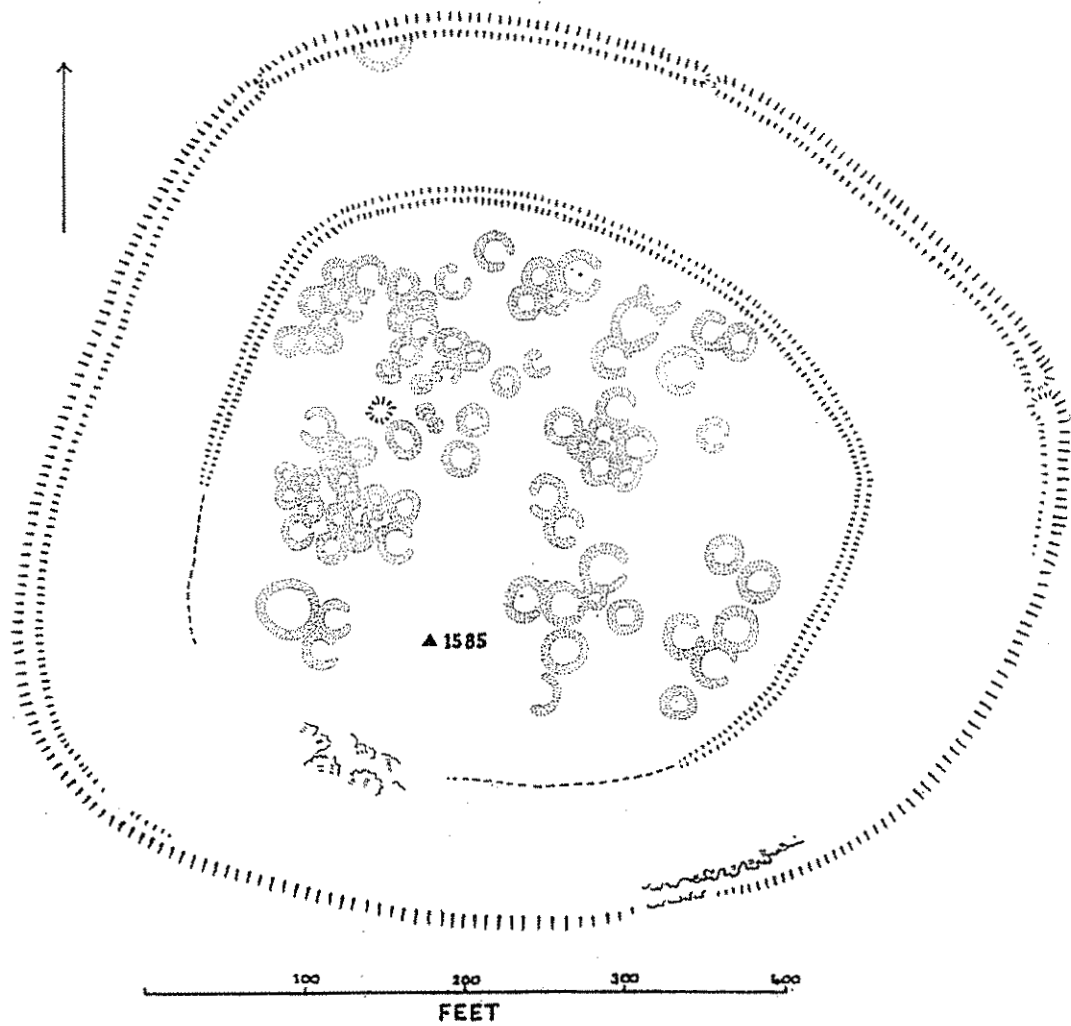
clearest evidence for the change is provided by the formidable earth ramparts which were now built to protect villages. In England these fortified settlements are very common both in the South and in the West Midlands, but the period during which they were occupied was relatively short, for the Roman armies which invaded Britain in A.D. 43 made short work of their defences, and compelled the bulk of the inhabitants to live elsewhere. With certain exceptions, therefore, we can say that the occupation of English hill-forts came to an end in the first century A.D.

In the Isle of Man, as in Ireland and much of Scotland, the position is less simple. Not only is the date of the beginning of the Iron Age even less certain, but there is no decisive event such as the Roman invasion of England to provide a closing-date for the use of hill-forts. We can still say that they are unlikely to be earlier than the fifth century B.C., but their heyday may have been during the centuries when the Romans were ruling in England and Wales, or even in the ensuing Dark Ages.

The principal Manx hill-forts are South Barrule

and Cronk Sumark, which dominate respectively the southern and northern plains, and of these the former is both the larger in size and more orthodox in plan. Its most conspicuous feature is the broad low bank, with some stone facing on the outside, which runs round the top of the mountain and represents the rampart which defended the site in the later part of its history. The original rampart enclosed a much smaller area. Very little of it remains, but it can be traced on the north and east sides of the hill-top running along a low rise some way inside the outer rampart. Even the more noticeable rampart is not particularly impressive, but the great interest of the fort lies in the large number of huts which are crowded inside the inner

rampart. They are represented today by small circular enclosures demarcated only by the slight remains of their walls, and the ease with which they may be noticed varies considerably with changes of sunlight and vegetation. The cover photograph, taken from the air when the sun was low and the ground covered by a light powdering of snow, shows up the ramparts and the hut circles unusually clearly. There are certainly over eighty hut circles, and as can be seen from the plan, there is a general tendency for the larger ones to be on the east side of the fort, and the smaller ones on the west. Can this mean that those who could afford the larger huts were privileged to live on the more sheltered side of this very exposed hill-top?



Plan of hill-fort, South Barrule

When an archaeologist sets out to discover something of the history of a site such as this there are two main kinds of evidence from which he may hope to deduce something: methods of building, and small finds. Small finds, amongst which sherds of pottery will normally bulk the largest, are to be expected on the spots where people were actually living, so to find them we excavated some of the huts. Significant details of building-methods may be found in the huts, but they are more likely to appear in the defences.

Before the excavation began, the appearance of the fort on South Barrule suggested one or two inferences. As a substantial amount of the outer rampart has survived, but very little of the inner one, it seemed likely that the latter had been robbed to provide material for the former; and as no huts were built in the extra space enclosed by the later rampart, it was tempting to guess that this had been built for a quite different purpose, more as a place of temporary refuge in a crisis than as a permanent fortified village. This may be correct, but the excavation has shown that both the outer and the inner ramparts were built in very much the same way, as if the same people had built both. It would be wrong to attach too much importance to this, as there are not many possible ways of building when only stones and sods are available, but it suggests that the outer rampart represents the enlargement of an existing village rather than a separate use of the hill-top at a later date. The fact that no huts were built in the newly-enclosed area may simply mean that it was intended for penning animals in at night. There may, therefore, have been only one period of occupation of the hill-top, and not two, as appears at first sight.

In an English hill-fort there is very often no surface trace of huts to be seen at all, and they can only be located by trial excavation. The striking fact about South Barrule is that so many huts are clearly visible on the surface. One of them was excavated in 1960, and two more in 1961. They were irregular in shape, but roughly circular or oval, varying between about twelve and eighteen feet in interior diameter. One of them had a square hearth in the centre, and a drain running from it out through the doorway, so that it resembled quite closely the huts discovered at Close ny chollagh, Malew, in 1955 and 1956. The excavation of these huts was rewarded by a large number of sherds of pottery, principally from the 1960 excavation. The discovery of Iron Age pottery is commonplace in many parts of England, but in the Isle of Man it has hitherto been rare, and it is all the more precious because it is almost the sole evidence we have for

the date of the occupation of South Barrule. Unfortunately, it is of an unfamiliar kind, and any conclusions which are drawn from it at present are little more than guesses. The nearest parallel is a single sherd from Professor Bersu's excavations at Ballacagen, near Castletown. A plausible, but by no means certain, line of thought suggests that it belongs to about the fourth century A.D., and this is borne out, for what it is worth, by the structure of the rampart, which resembles a kind known in Wales from that century, and from the fifth century A.D. in Scotland.

If this is correct, the occupation of the hill-fort on South Barrule would belong to a time when the Romans still ruled England and Wales, but when they were no longer able to suppress raiding and piracy around the coasts. It is clear from the number of huts in the fort that a large part of the population of the south of the island must have been concentrated there, and it is probably not too imaginative to ascribe this to some kind of political leadership. A possible explanation is that the Roman government established in the Isle of Man (as they did in North Wales) a native chieftain whom they entrusted with the task of preventing settlement by people from Ireland, who would use the island as a base for raids on England. He may have decided to concentrate most of the population into a single fortified centre. On the other hand, it could equally well have been an Irish leader, who appreciated the value of the island as a base for raids on Roman Britain, and gained control of it, and made South Barrule his fortress. Both suggestions are pure speculation, but they are in keeping with what is known of the history of the time.

If one of these possibilities represents the main use of the hill-fort, it is quite likely that the local population resorted to it as a place of refuge long after they had ceased to live there permanently. There is a hint in the 'Chronicle of Man', the earliest account of Manx history, that this was done as late as 1316. In that year a band of Irish robbers was plundering the south of the island, and the place where the Manxmen chose to do battle with them is described as being on the lower slopes of South Barrule. There may have been many reasons for this choice of battlefield, but a possible one is that the population had taken refuge behind the old fortifications on the mountain-top, and that the menfolk had advanced from there in an attempt to put an end to the plundering. In the event most of them chose to live and fight another day, for we are told that they fled at the first onset, leaving about forty dead on the field, and the plundering went on uninterrupted.