


Rosetta

Reeves, T. (2022): 'Shelagh Norton. *Assessing Iron Age Marsh-forts: With Reference to the Stratigraphy and Palaeoenvironment Surrounding The Berth, North Shropshire*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2021.'

Rosetta **27**: 101-105

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue27/reeves.pdf>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25500/rosetta.bham.00000006>

Shelagh Norton. *Assessing Iron Age Marsh-forts: With Reference to the Stratigraphy and Palaeoenvironment Surrounding The Berth, North Shropshire*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2021. i, 211. ISBN 9781789698633 £38.00 (Pbk). E-ISBN 9781789698640 £16.00 (E-Book).

Theodore Reeves (University of Birmingham)

The category of marsh-forts, a sub-set of Iron Age hillforts, has become more commonly accepted within the archaeological lexicon since the publication of work at Sutton Common (Van de Noort et al. 2007). Despite this, however, no holistic study has been conducted to determine what is meant by the term. Norton's contribution begins to address this exciting new topic, encompassing both the monumentality of hillforts and the mystery of prehistoric wetlands. As such it provides a useful starting point for addressing this relatively new classification.

Norton approaches the subject systematically, in three stages from national to local focus. The opening chapters establish the current setting of marsh-forts within Iron Age and hillfort studies (Chaps. 1 & 2). Identifying some of the issues with hillfort studies, in particular, Norton acknowledges an opportunity to develop new terminology that is more nuanced to enable a better understanding of these sites.

Beginning with an examination of marsh-forts in their landscape context (Chap. 4), Norton establishes a criteria for marsh-forts based on Sutton Common. From this site, Norton identifies seven characteristics: large size, a wetland location, 'unusual' morphology, a Middle Iron Age chronology, discontinuous use, a pastoral economy and a non-domestic function (p.35). These criteria are then applied in a 'tick-box' methodology to a total of fifty-four sites in England and Wales currently defined as marsh-forts, valley-forts or low-lying forts, compiled from various sources (p.35-7). From this, four groups have been created with varying similarities to Sutton Common, the last of which comprises sites that are considered too different to be considered part of the classification.

The examination of this relatively new and poorly defined classification is much needed. Its application thus far has been largely simplistic and descriptive. In general terms, it has been used to describe a class of hillforts that do not conform to the existing criteria. Marsh-forts are typically low-lying sites (see Historic England 2018). As such, these sites have often been damaged by ploughing, development and other agencies; in contrast to hillforts, the topography of which offers them some protection from this. As often extant archaeological remains sitting on the skyline, hillforts dominate their respective landscapes and have therefore attracted considerably more attention from archaeologists. The resulting tendency has been to group together 'other' sites which do not conform to traditional hillfort criteria, irrespective of the nuances between them. Norton's work has attempted to rectify this shortcoming.

The approach she has adopted is logical; working from the known to the unknown. However, by asserting that Sutton Common 'defines the site-type' (p. 14), Norton follows an inductive approach that does not fully reflect the full breadth of nuance among these sites. Inductive reasoning is best summarised as 'observing data, noticing common features of the data, and then generalising that unobserved members of a particular class have the same features as the observed members' (Salmon 1976: 376). Norton's use of this approach follows a similar pattern that occurred in hillfort studies more broadly, resulting in the dependency on the likes of Danebury and Maiden Castle. Although the publication of Sutton Common offers the first general acceptance of the term, it is hasty to assume it is representative of the full range of sites. Norton does briefly acknowledge that it is possible to disagree with the criteria but argues that it allows the sites to be 'thought through' (p.37). As previously mentioned, the study provides a useful contribution to our understanding of these sites, however, given that marsh-fort studies as a subset of hillfort studies are still in their infancy, it represents a missed opportunity to adopt a new approach that is better representative of the range of sites.

Having established a new gazetteer of marsh-forts, Norton focuses on those in North Shropshire (Chap. 5), corresponding with an area of wetland that forms a part of the Welsh Marches. Here she examines more closely the physical and archaeological landscapes surrounding eight potential 'marsh-fort' sites. Providing a detailed picture of the region's geological and hydrological landscape as well as an introduction to

wetland development, Norton provides a comprehensive guide to the setting of these sites which is both clear to those less familiar with wetland landscapes, but with sufficient detail to provide a useful resource to the more specialised reader. Via a summary of settlement and enclosure types and some background to Iron Age society, the reader is then led into the examination of each of the eight sites. Each covers a description of the size, morphology and location of the site, its phasing, palaeoenvironment, and some concluding remarks which attempt to cover the function of the site and its relation to the criteria determined from the Sutton Common site. Discussion varies slightly depending on the availability of previous literature, but it nonetheless provides a useful resource for future examination of these sites through its compilation of information alone. This is accompanied by a plethora of colourful images: GIS-produced plans representing topography, geology, and nearby contemporary Historic Environment Records; as well as, satellite imagery and photographs of earthwork morphology and site surroundings taken by the author; all of which help the reader to visualise and so understand these sites.

Chapters 6 to 8 then focus on the Berth, one of the sites identified in the previous chapter. Progressing from macro to micro-scale investigative techniques, Norton first examines the socio-economic context of the site within the Upper Perry river valley and North Shropshire Plain (Chap. 6). This includes a detailed examination of the archaeological evidence of not just the Berth site, but other Iron Age sites in the local area as well. The examination of the Berth includes both desk-based research and field observations; the former of which includes the drawing together of the archive from Gelling's work at the site in the 1960s, much of which had been believed lost and is still largely fragmentary. She then moves on to a comprehensive examination of the development of the Late Glacial landscape (Chap. 7) and the Holocene environment (Chap. 8) of the Berth, using the results from coring and multi-proxy palaeoenvironmental analysis respectively. Both of these demonstrate a sound methodology and produce a detailed picture of the development of the landscape. Chapter 8 is particularly extensive and provides a sound understanding of the environmental conditions when the Berth was constructed. Despite this, however, some of the conclusions drawn in Chapter 9 feel a little too broad with many factors considered in light of interpretations made at Sutton Common rather than by their own merit.

Norton's presentation of marsh-forts is both comprehensive and interesting, from the snippets of poetry that head each chapter to the extensive use of GIS-produced imagery which helps to illustrate the setting of these sites and the detailed discussion in-between. The breadth of different factors which is covered in the discussion too is admirable. Norton's work is centred around an acceptance of Sutton Common as *the* archetypal marsh-fort, lacking a more critical approach. As a result, it has adopted a line of inductive reasoning which does not recognise the diversity of characteristics at the less comparable sites. This book provides a useful starting point for discussions about marsh-forts as a class of archaeological site, although further work is warranted to explore other potential sites that do not fit the 'Sutton Common'-model.

Bibliography

Historic England. 2018. *Hillforts: Introduction to Heritage Assets*. Swindon: Historic England.

Salmon, M. H. 1976. "'Deductive" versus "Inductive" Archaeology', *American Antiquity* 41 (3), 376-381.

Van de Noort, R., Chapman, H. P. and Collis, J. R. (eds.) 2007. *Sutton Common: The Excavation of an Iron Age 'marsh-fort'*, CBA Research Report 154. York: Council for British Archaeology.