What Archaeological Features can tell us about the Past

Katharina Möller

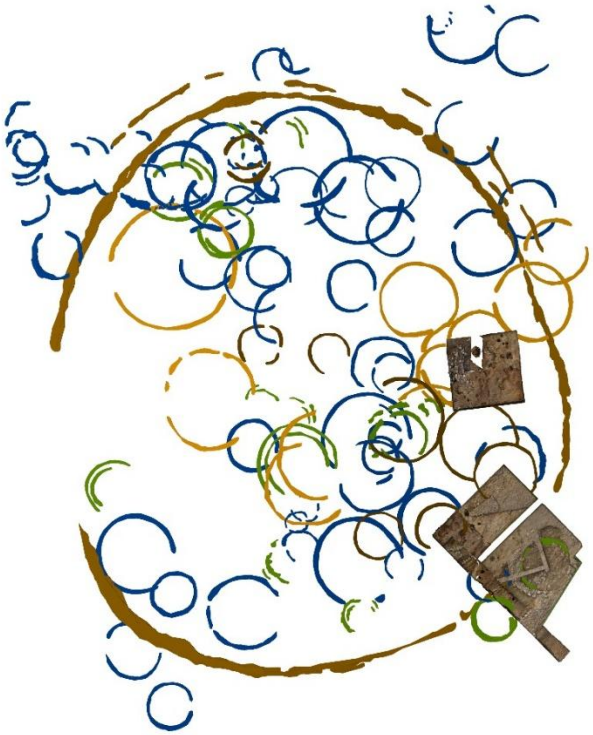
When people hear that I am an archaeologist they usually want to know if I have ever found anything interesting on an excavation. I usually tell them about the blue glass beads which I found on our excavation at Meillionydd, near Rhiw on the Llŷn peninsula in Northwest Wales (UK). To me these beads are special because they were hard to spot - tiny and covered in soil as they were. However, from an archaeological viewpoint those beads are hardly something to be excited about. They do not tell us much about the site or the people who once lived there.

One of the glass beads found at Meillionydd in 2014 in situ. The glass beads from Meillionydd in their cleaned state. Photo: Katharina Möller.

What is much more interesting to me as an archaeologist are the features that we excavate. Meillionydd is a double ringwork enclosure, a settlement that at some point during its existence was surrounded by two banks. If you are on site today – outside of our excavation season – you will hardly notice the remains of the banks, because they were slighted at some point.

However, underneath a few centimetres of grass and soil there remains plenty of archaeological evidence. Thanks to our excavations and a Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey, which was carried out by the ZAMG in 2012, we know that the site started out as an unenclosed settlement consisting of timber roundhouses. The settlement was surrounded by a ditch and a wooden palisade at a later stage; both of these features were replaced by

two earth and stone banks. At roughly the same time, the timber roundhouses were replaced by stone-built roundhouses. The GPR interpretation shows that there were around 100 roundhouses on site. We do know that these houses were not built all at once, because they intersect with each other and, therefore, cannot have existed at the same time.

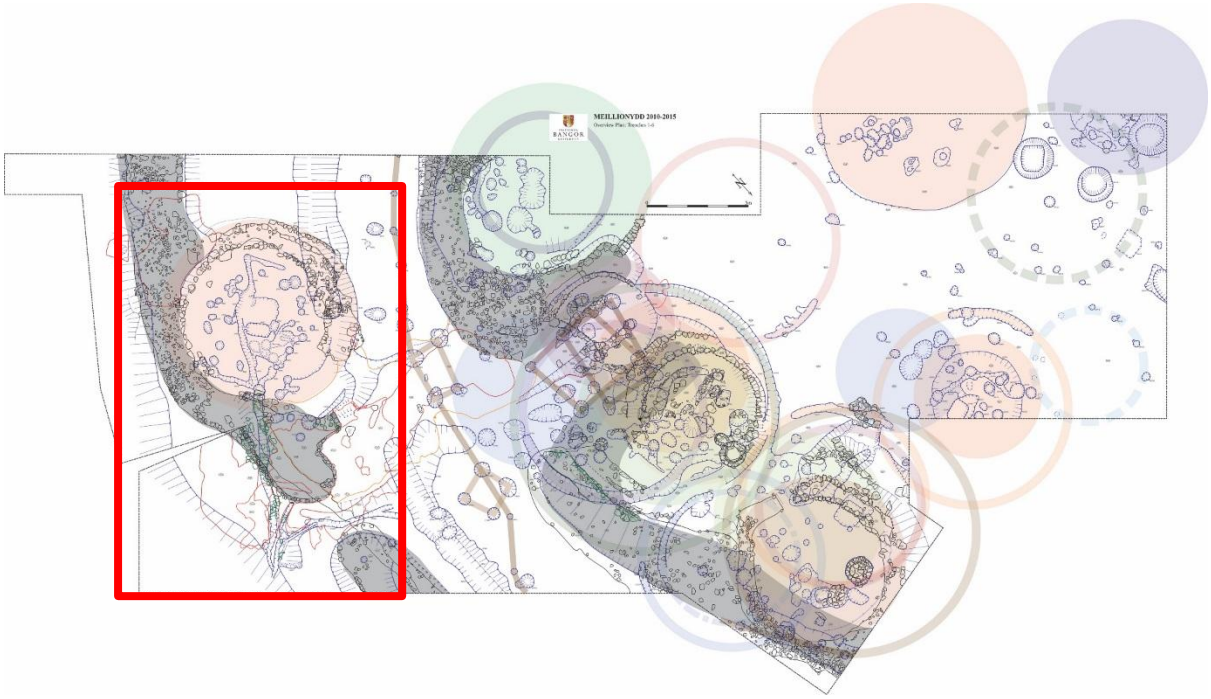


Interpretation of the 2012 GPR survey highlighting the ditch (brown) and - where possible - different types of roundhouses (blue = unspecified roundhouse, yellow = timber roundhouse & green = stone roundhouse) potentially present on site. Furthermore, it includes Trenches 1, 2 and 3 in different stages of excavation.

Archaeologists usually use pottery or other finds to date sites or specific features on sites. Unfortunately, people in Wales stopped using pottery during the Late Bronze Age and only started using it again after the Roman invasion in the first century AD. In fact, at Meillionydd we find hardly any finds except for stone tools, which are chronologically unspecific and thus cannot be used for dating the site. In the absence of finds, the only absolute dating method that we can use is radiocarbon dating. For this purpose, we collect charcoal samples. The two samples that we had analysed at the time of writing give us a range of 500 years, from the 8th to the 3rd century BC, during which the site was in use. We are planning to use this method to date most features on site.

Where we do not find charcoal, the only method we can use to date features is stratigraphy. While this method does not give us actual dates for features, it does tell us if features are older or younger than others. When you use the stratigraphic method, you look at how features overlap and/or intersect with each other. For example, at Meillionydd we found the remains of a roundhouse next to the entrance through the outer bank. When we first started

to excavate this feature in 2012 it looked like the roundhouse was cut into the outer bank. It seemed likely that it was built at a later stage than the bank and that part of the bank had been cut away to build the roundhouse.



Plan of the 2010 to 2015 excavations at Meillionydd. Banks indicated in grey, roundhouses as coloured circles. Roundhouse with drainage gully at the end of the southern terminal of the outer bank highlighted by red square.

However, when excavating the entrance through the outer bank in 2014 we realised that the drainage gully of the roundhouse runs underneath the bank. For the gully to be underneath the bank it must have been dug before the bank was build. Therefore, the gully and the roundhouse must have been built before the bank was built. Combined with other evidence it seems likely that both the roundhouse and the bank were built roughly at the same time and that the roundhouse functioned as a gate house.

This example explains how archaeological features give insights into the past and why an undisturbed, well documented stratigraphy is important. At this point, most of the dating at Meillionydd has been done through stratigraphy. Without this method we would not have been able to say how the settlement developed. The undisturbed stratigraphy on site enables us to gain valuable information that might be lost otherwise.

Katharina Möller is a German archaeologist with an interest in Public and Community archaeology. She is an Honorary Research Associate and a PhD student at the School of History and Archaeology at Bangor University (UK). Since 2013 she co-directs the excavations at Meillionydd together with her colleague Raimund Karl.

For more information on the Meillionydd excavations, please visit the website (http://meillionydd.bangor.ac.uk/) or follow us on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/meillionydddig/) and Twitter (https://twitter.com/Meillionydddig).