



# The 'Foundation Burial' At Maiden Castle Hillfort

*Samantha J MacLaren (2011/977)*

*'The Celts Through The Eyes Of The Greeks And The Romans'  
(HPCS6016)*

# Maiden Castle Dorset

- Largest in the UK
- Originally a smaller neolithic structure
- Permanent settlement between 800 BCE and 43 CE



(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

# The Iron-Age Settlement

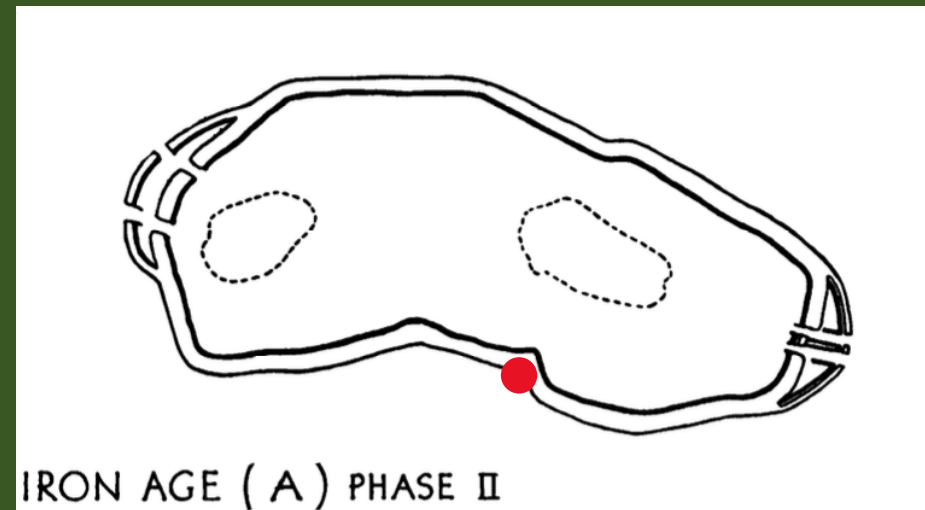
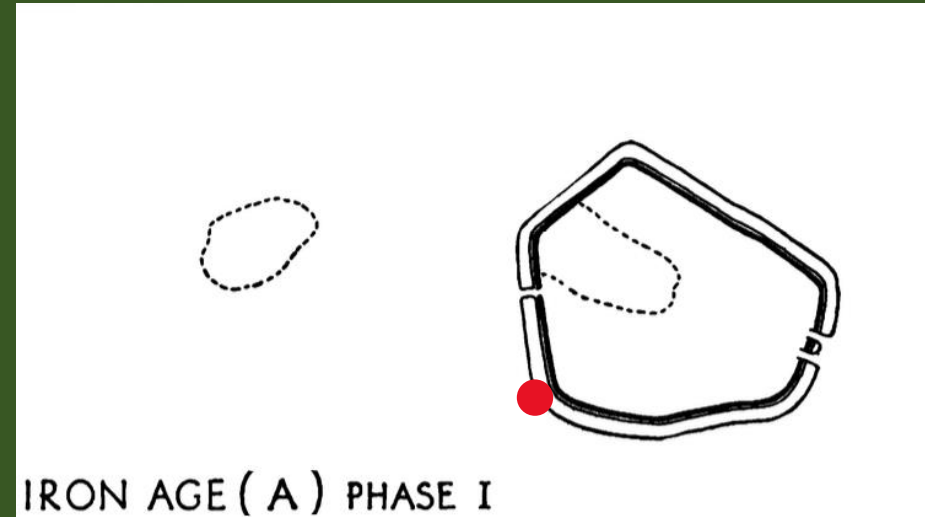


(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

## The Excavation 1934-1937

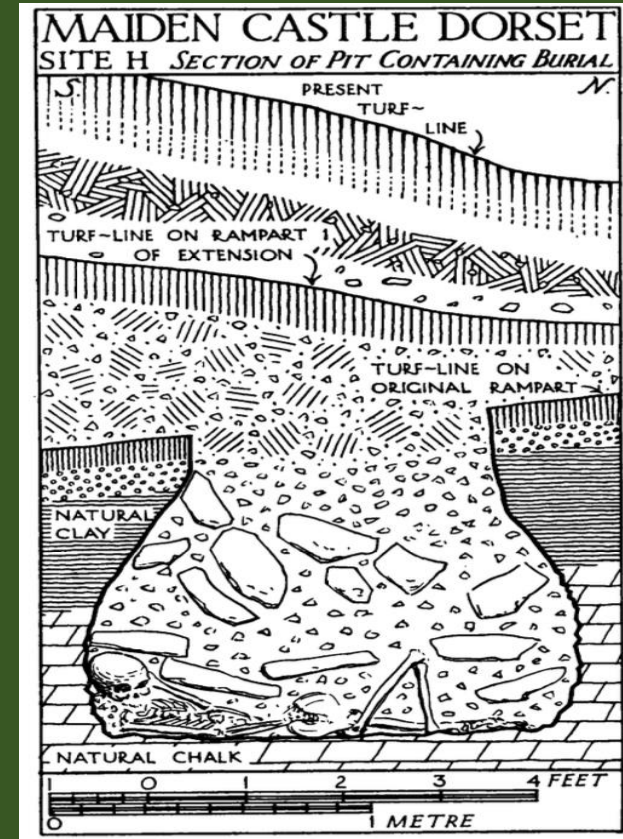
- 1934-37 Mortimer Wheeler's excavation
- Unusual burial in a significant location
- Axis of extended rampart and original original c. 350 BCE

(Images: Wheeler's report, p. 17)



# The Burial

- Pit 4ft x 3ft deep
- Male between 20 and 30 years old
- Interred in a seated position
- No signs of violence
- Possibly buried alive?



(Image: Reproduced from Wheeler's report, p. 39.)

# The Body



(Image: The burial, 1937, Wikimedia Commons)

## Observations

- **‘The loose chalk within the pit over the skeleton contained many large blocks of limestone, and in the upper part of the pit this filling passed without interruption into the actual material of [the] extension’**
- **‘The upper part of the pit was cut in a patch of natural clay and could never have stood free for more than a few hours’**
- **‘The whole filling and covering were contemporary with the pit ... the burial took place at this point of junction precisely at the moment ... the new rampart was built.’**
- R.E.M Wheeler, *Reports Of The Research Committee Of The Society Of Antiquaries Of London XII: Maiden Castle, Dorset*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 123.

## Wheeler's Theory

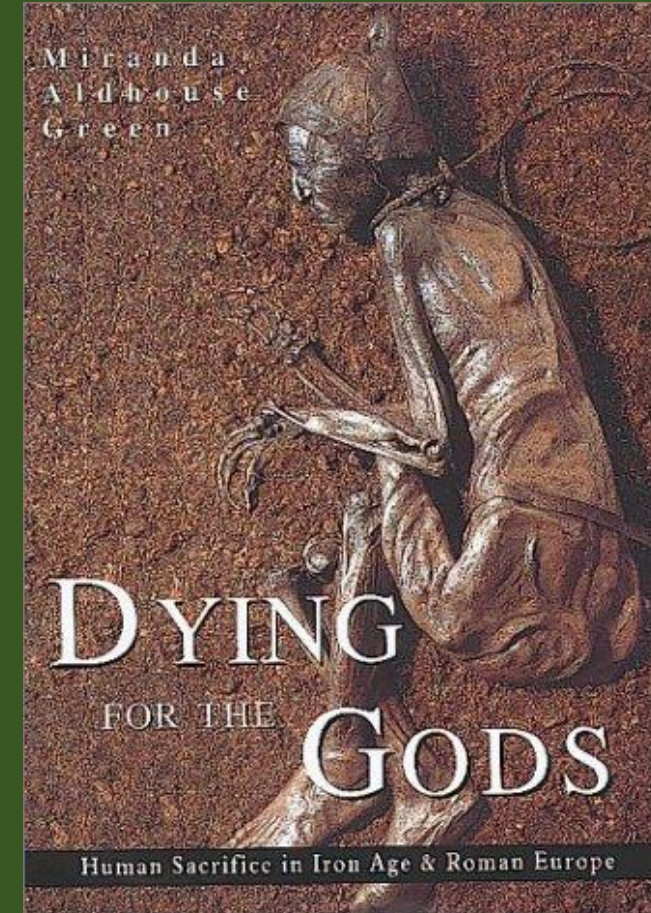
- Careful site preparation
- The body's position
- Immediate sealing by the extension rampart
- The burial's intersection at this crucial point
- A possible foundation sacrifice?



(Image: Sir Mortimer Wheeler, 1937, ©  
UCL Archaeology Institute)

## Foundation Burial – A Definition

- Buried alive at the entry point of a structure.
- Supernatural approval and/or protection/good luck
- Miranda Green: cross-cultural, maybe pan-Celtic
- Madurai District India, and Dinka Tradition of Sudan
- Hitobashira – ‘Human Pillar’ - Japan



(Image: courtesy of Abe Books)

## Danebury And Acy-Romance

- **Bias in victim selection: Young males, 20-30 years**
- **All seated, temporal variations**
- **Acy-Romance victims deceased before interment**
- **Danebury victims buried alive?**
- **Weighted down with chalk/flint**



(Image: Acy-Romance burial,  
[www.archeologie.culture.gouv.fr](http://www.archeologie.culture.gouv.fr))

## Classical Authors

- **Hypocrisy abounds with Plutarch:**

**‘... most averse to barbarous or cruel rites, and entertained more than any nation the same pious and reverent sentiments of the gods with the Greeks.’**

**‘Yet when this war was coming, they then, from some prophecies in the Sybil’s books, put alive underground a pair of Greeks ... and likewise two Gauls.’**

**Plutarch, ‘Life Of Marcus Claudius Marcellus’ 3, (2005) [www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com](http://www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com) [accessed 20 April 2023]**

## Prof. Niall Sharples

- **Excavated Maiden Castle in mid-1980s**
- **Alternative hypothesis – an outcast from society; one who has transgressed societal boundaries.**
- **Criminal activity or other malicious intent**

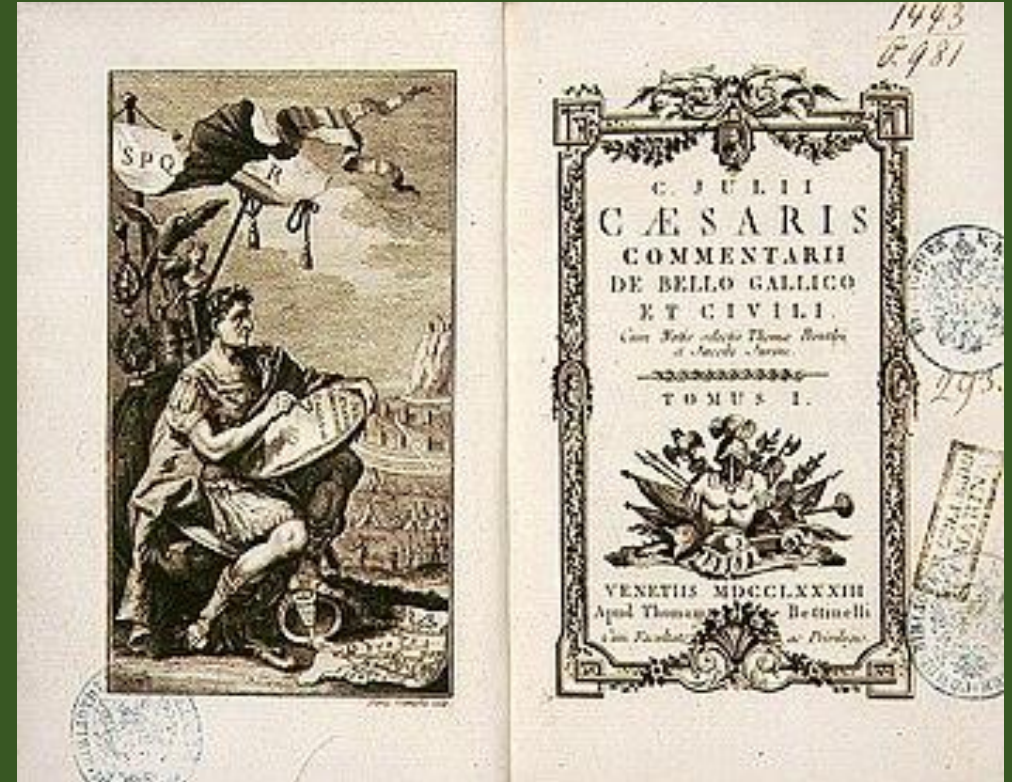


(Image: YouTube/Smithsonian Channel)

## Caesar's Opinion

- Caesar:  
‘They believe that the gods  
are more pleased by such  
punishment when it is  
inflicted upon those who are  
caught engaged in theft or  
robbery or other crimes’

Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*,  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press,  
2008), p. 128



(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

## Conclusions

- **Wheeler: timing, body position, placement in construction**
- **Green: supporting evidence, both historical and contemporary**
- **Sharples: ostracized person ritually killed as punishment and purification**
- **No definitive conclusion possible**



(Image: [www.nicepng.com](http://www.nicepng.com))

# Select Bibliography

Aldhouse Green, Miranda, *Dying For The Gods: Human Sacrifice In Iron Age And Roman Europe*, (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2002)

Caesar, Julius, *The Gallic War: A New Translation By Carolyn Hammond*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Green, Miranda, 'Humans As Ritual Victims In The Later Prehistory Of Western Europe', *Oxford Journal Of Archaeology*, 17.2 (1998), 127-244

Redfern, Rebecca C., 'A Re-Appraisal Of The Evidence For Violence In The Late Iron Age Human Remains From Maiden Hill Castle Hillfort, Dorset, England', *Proceedings Of The Prehistoric Society*, 77 (2011), 111-138

Sharples, Niall, *English Heritage: Maiden Castle*, (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1991)

Sharples, Niall, *Social Relations In Later Prehistory: Wessex In The First Millennium BC*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Tsuda, Noritake, 'Human Sacrifices In Japan', *The Open Court*, 17 (1918), 760-767

Wheeler, R. E. M., *Reports Of the Research Committee Of The Society Of Antiquaries Of London XII: Maiden Castle, Dorset*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943)