



During the late Iron Age, a new class of focal site emerged in southern Britain, many of them associated with extensive systems of linear earthworks known as dykes and sometimes occupying vast areas. These complexes are often known by archaeologists as *oppida*, a Latin word for town, and the term used by Julius Caesar to describe many of the fortifications he encountered in the 50s BC whilst campaigning in Gaul. Most of the British sites called *oppida* are in fact of later date and differ in form from the continental sites; tellingly, Caesar mentions only one *oppidum* in Britain, the stronghold of the war leader, Cassivellaunus, which he attacked in 54 BC during his second invasion of the island, and goes on to note that 'the Britons call it an *oppidum* when they have fortified a thick-set woodland with rampart and trench.'¹

Archaeologists have identified two main types of British *oppida*: 'enclosed *oppida*' and 'territorial *oppida*', although the distinction between these categories is somewhat elastic, with some sites appearing in both classes. Geographically, they are predominantly found in southern and eastern England, although examples exist as far north as Stanwick (North Yorkshire) and in the west at Bagendon (Gloucestershire) (Fig. 1). A third group of sites are sometimes described as 'unenclosed *oppida*', but this grouping lacks coherence, united as much by the absence of any evidence of major earthworks as by any shared features.

The enclosed sites are the closest in form to continental *oppida*. They comprise a range of fortified sites, generally between 20–50 ha in extent, occupying valley-bottom, slope or plateau locations. Examples include Abingdon, Dyke Hills, Dorchester-on-Thames, Hengistbury Head, Loose, Salmonsbury, Silchester, and Oram's Arbour Winchester. Few of them have been extensively excavated and detailed understanding of their layout and chronology is often lacking, especially those that lie beneath modern towns, but most of them have revealed at least some evidence of intensive occupation and they are larger than major middle Iron Age hillforts such as Maiden Castle.

The Oram's Arbour enclosure (Fig. 2) and the coastal trading site at Hengistbury Head were occupied in the 2nd century BC, but most of the enclosed *oppida* date to the end of the 1st century BC and early 1st century AD. Silchester (*Calleva*) is unusual in displaying close affinities with continental *oppida* such as Condé-sur-Suipe or Villeneuve-Saint-Germain in northern France, in the form of a regular street grid lined with pits and residential compounds (Figs 3–4). Many of the British sites are located on major rivers, for example Dyke Hills, Loose and Salmonsbury, which may indicate that they played a prominent role as exchange centres, although their positioning at river confluences could also have had religious significance.

The territorial *oppida* are characterised by discontinuous linear dyke systems, often extending over many km², but more rarely forming clearly defined entities. The constituent banks and ditches are often massive and elaborate. At Colchester (*Camulodunum*) there are multiple dyke systems, laid out over several decades, whilst at Stanwick the stone-faced perimeter measured 8 m from rampart top to base of ditch, and enclosed an area of 3 km²; another linear earthwork ran all the way to the river Swale, 10 km to the south (Fig. 5). Such earthworks would have been difficult to defend in their entirety and are more likely to represent a symbolic demarcation of the landscape. The huge labour required to build them implies an element of conspicuous display and reflects the enormous social power of late Iron Age elites. Other territorial *oppida* existed at Bagendon, Chichester (*Noviomagus*) and St Albans (*Verulamion*), with Silchester often added to the group on account of the many linear earthworks beyond the enclosed core.

The layout of the territorial *oppida* cannot be regarded as urban in any modern sense, but was polyfocal, with different activities dispersed throughout the complex, separated by fields and open spaces. St Albans has evidence of elite settlement at Gorhambury; an enclosure beneath the Roman forum; a rich burial at Folly Lane across the valley; and a large cemetery at

King Harry Lane. Colchester displays similar zoning: a ritual area at Gosbecks; elite cemeteries at Lexden and Stanway; and a harbour at Sheepen. All the territorial *oppida* have produced evidence of long-distance trade in the form of Roman imports, and of craft activity and metalworking, the latter often located on the edges of the complex. The focus of some of them around damp, marshy areas – as at Bagendon, St Albans and Stanwick – may indicate that they emerged from ritual locations or places of assembly, where different groups gathered together periodically to conduct a range of social and economic transactions (Fig. 6).

The territorial *oppida* emerged in the last quarter of the 1st century BC or in the early first century AD. Roman imperialism was surely an important factor in this development. In the reign of the emperor Augustus, several British rulers were evidently recognized as client kings, and thanks to Roman support were able to consolidate their power over progressively larger territories. The newly-founded *oppida* provided political foci unifying these larger groupings, sited as they often were at the interface of distinct territories. In some cases, the names on coins allow us to link individual rulers with the *oppida* that were the seat of their power: Tasciovanus with Verulamion, Eppillus with Calleva, and Cunobelin with Camulodunum. The continued prominence of many of the territorial *oppida* in the decades after AD 43 undoubtedly reflects the pro-Roman position of their ruling dynasties.ⁱⁱ

The group of ‘unenclosed *oppida*’ comprises various complexes dating to the 1st centuries BC and AD, which, whilst lacking substantial earthworks, share some traits with the territorial *oppida*, notably the presence of clay pellet moulds, which are often (but perhaps

incorrectly) seen as evidence of minting. The late Iron Age centres at Baldock, Braughing-Puckeridge, Canterbury, Leicester, and Old Sleaford all fall into category. Whether or not we choose to call them *oppida*, they were important regional foci and probably had some of the same roles, so it makes little sense to draw an arbitrary line to separate them. Given the clear differences in nature of late Iron Age societies across Britain and the essentially personal nature of power, it would be surprising if the leading centres of the day did not show considerable variations.

Further Reading

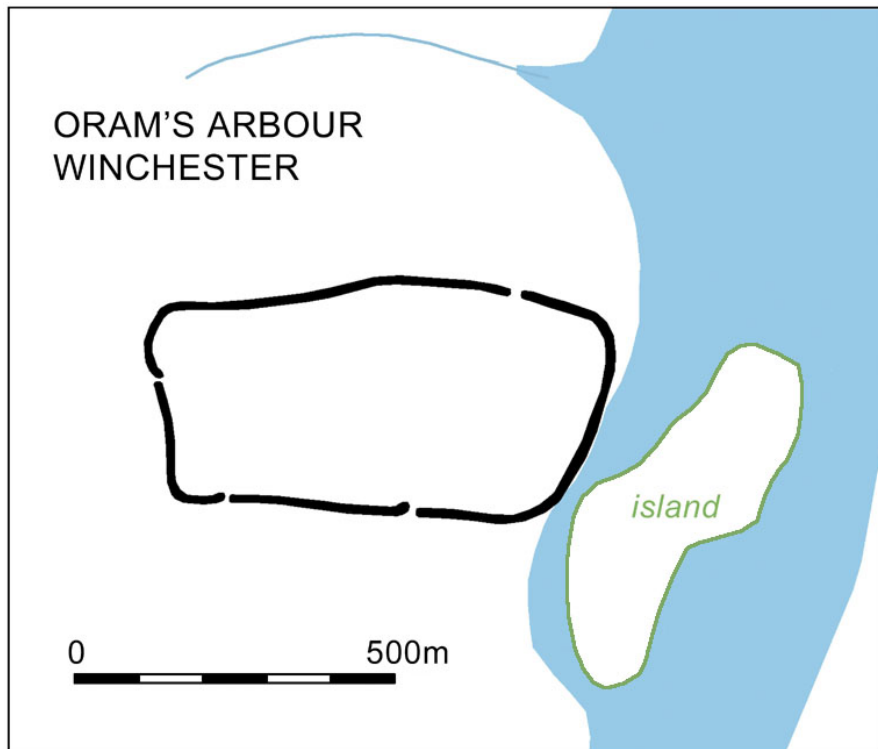
- Bryant, S.** 2007. Central places or special places? The origins and development of ‘oppida’ in Hertfordshire. In C. Haselgrove & T. Moore (eds), *The Later Iron Age in Britain and beyond*, 62–80. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Cunliffe, B. W.** 2004. *Iron Age Britain*. Revised edition. London: English Heritage
- Haselgrove, C.** 2009. The Iron Age. In J. Hunter and I.B.M. Ralston (eds), *The Iron Age*, in J. Hunter and I.B.M. Ralston (eds), *The Archaeology of Britain: an introduction from earliest times to the twenty-first century*, 149–74. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.
- Moore, T.** 2012. Beyond the oppida: polyfocal complexes and late Iron Age societies in southern Britain, *Oxford J. Archaeology* 31.4: 391–417

A good overview of continental oppida also covering British sites is provided by:

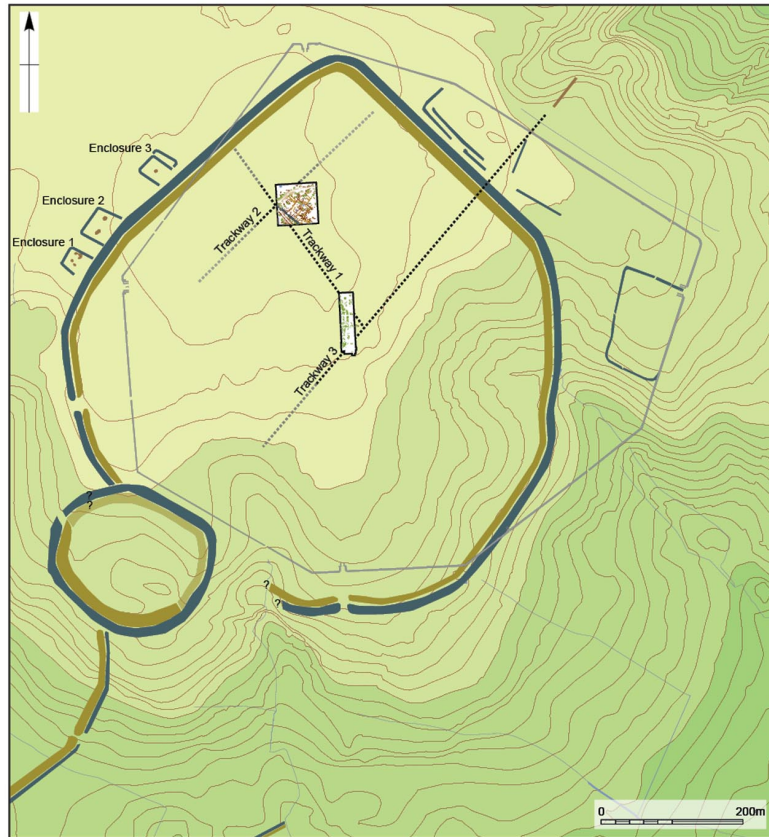
- Fernández-Götz, M.** 2017. Urbanization in Iron Age Europe: Trajectories, Patterns, and Social Dynamics. *J. Archaeological Research* 26, doi 10.1007/s10814-017-9107-1



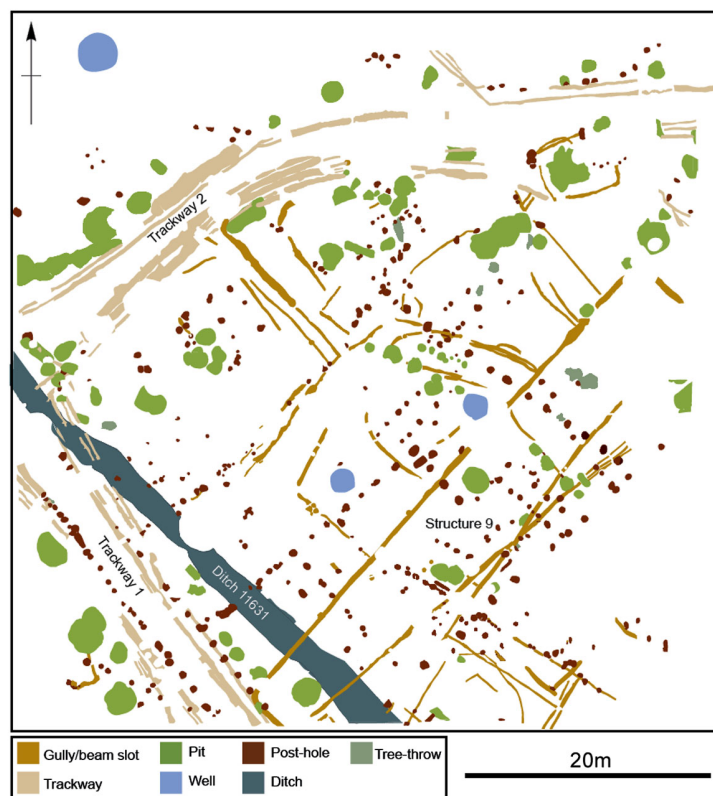
Map of selected British oppida and related sites



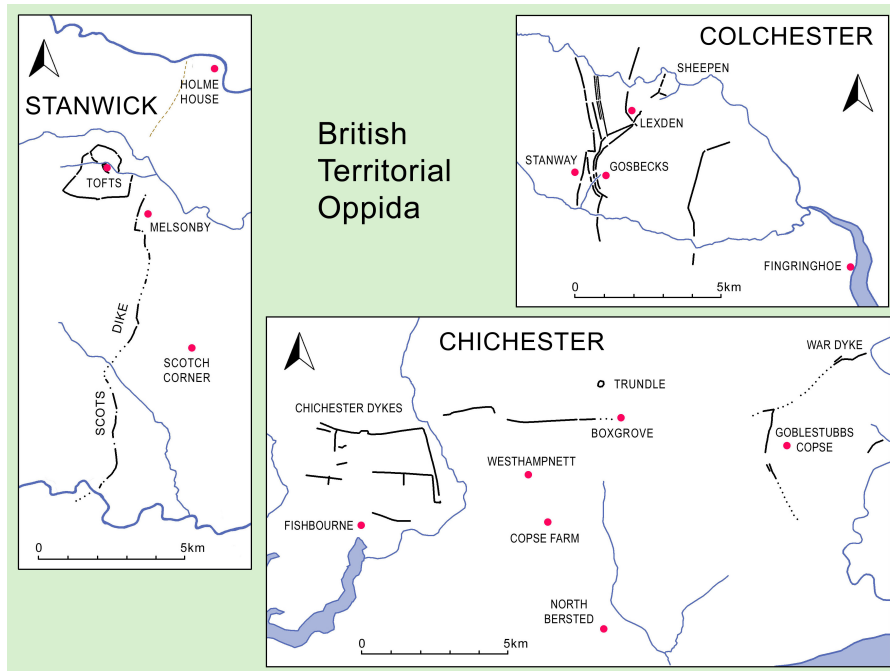
Oram's Arbour enclosure, beneath the Roman city of Winchester



Enclosed oppidum at Silchester, showing evidence of planned layout (courtesy Professor Mike Fulford)



Plan of late Iron Age features beneath Insula 9 at Silchester (courtesy Professor Mike Fulford)



Plans of British territorial oppida



Part of monumental circular structure under excavation in the Tofts, Stanwick (photo Colin Haselgrove)

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Colin Haselgrove (University of Leicester)

The Prehistoric Society is a registered charity (no. 1000567) and company limited by guarantee (no. 2532446). Registered Office: University College London, Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY. Date published: 10/2019.

ⁱ *Commentary on the Gallic War V, 21.* Caesar is describing what archaeologists would call a hillfort. According to the Roman general, this stronghold was in a place of great natural strength, protected by woods and marshes and excellently fortified. New fieldwork for a Leverhulme-funded project on examining the archaeological evidence for Caesar's invasions of Britain has identified the low-lying fortification at Wallbury on the river Stort in Essex as the most likely candidate.

ⁱⁱ Some other linear earthwork complexes such as Gussage Cow Down (Dorset) have affinities to the territorial *oppida*, but lack the compelling evidence of royal associations that characterise the main group of sites.