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THE LLŶN HISTORIES

BOOK 2 OF 5

Hillfort Country

Iron Age Llŷn and the age of the forts



c. 800 BC – 4th century AD

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THE DIGITAL HEART OF THE LLŶN

THE LLŶN HISTORIES

Book 2: Hillfort Country

Iron Age Llŷn and the age of the forts

c. 800 BC – 4th century AD

Chapter 1

A peninsula of forts

Why Llŷn has one of the densest hillfort concentrations in Wales

Walk any of the higher ridges of Llŷn and the forts announce themselves. From the eastern peaks of Yr Eifl the eye travels west along a chain of igneous hills, each carrying stone or earth ramparts. Tre'r Ceiri crowns the highest and most dramatic summit. Garn Boduan dominates the land above Nefyn. Carn Fadryn rises in the centre of the peninsula. Smaller enclosures occupy lesser hills and coastal headlands. On the south-western slopes of Mynydd Rhiw the double-ringwork of Meillionydd sits quietly among earlier monuments. At the western tip Castell Odo occupies a modest rounded summit with views across the whole end of the peninsula. Together they form one of the densest concentrations of later prehistoric defended settlements in Wales.

The density is not accidental. Llŷn's topography — a spine of hard volcanic and igneous hills rising from coastal plains and fertile lower ground, with long views to the sea and inland to Snowdonia — offered natural defensive positions, control of pasture, and visual command of the land below. The same hills that had attracted Neolithic tomb-builders and Bronze Age cairn-builders (the story told in Book 1) were still the obvious places to live, to gather, and, when necessary, to defend.

The Iron Age in Britain is conventionally dated from roughly 800 BC until the Roman conquest, though in Wales the story continues well into the Roman period and, on some sites, beyond. On Llŷn the most visible monuments belong mainly to the later Iron Age and the Romano-British centuries. Earlier origins are harder to see on the surface. Some sites began as open settlements or lightly defended enclosures in the Late Bronze Age or earliest Iron Age; others were built or massively strengthened later. The great stone-walled forts of the north and centre of the peninsula are among the best-preserved in Britain. Their ramparts still stand several metres high in places; their internal roundhouses remain legible as rings of tumbled stone.

Why so many forts on so modest a peninsula? Several factors coincide. Llŷn is relatively isolated by land yet open to the Irish Sea. Its upland pastures, coastal resources, and

sheltered valleys could support substantial communities. Competition for those resources, the need for communal identity, and the prestige of visible power all played roles. The forts were never simply military bases. They were places where people lived year-round or seasonally, herded cattle, stored produce, worked metal and stone, gathered for ceremonies, and displayed their ability to organise labour on a large scale. Some continued in use, or were deliberately re-used, long after the traditional end of the Iron Age. Garn Boduan and Carn Fadryn carry later stone citadels that most scholars now place in the late Roman or early medieval period. Tre'r Ceiri shows clear Roman-period occupation and modification of both houses and defences.

This chapter only sets the scene. The following chapters examine the major sites in turn, moving from the highest and most spectacular to the smaller but archaeologically crucial enclosures, before returning in the final chapter to the wider questions of how and why the forts were used. The story begins on the summit that still feels closest to the world of the giants.

Visitor orientation

The best single viewpoint for understanding the density of forts is the ridge of Yr Eifl itself, or the summit of Carn Fadryn on a clear day. From either place the relationship between the major sites becomes obvious. Always carry a map; the *Ancient Llŷn* interactive resource is designed precisely for this kind of landscape reading.

Key sources

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust historic landscape characterisations (especially Areas 10 and 12); Coflein hillfort records across the peninsula; Frances Lynch, *Gwynedd* (Cadw, 1995); general surveys of Welsh hillforts in the RCAHMW inventories; Julian Maxwell Heath, *From Hunter-Gatherers to Early Christians* (2023) for broader chronological context.

Chapter 2



Tre'r Ceiri: the town of giants

Yr Eifl hillfort — ramparts, roundhouses, occupation into the 4th century AD

The name means “town of the giants” (*tre'r cewri*). Stand on the easternmost peak of Yr Eifl, between 450 and 485 m above the sea, and the name feels earned. A massive dry-stone wall, still standing close to its original height of 3.5–4 m in many places, completely encircles an elongated summit. An outer wall of massive blocks strengthens the more vulnerable north-western side. Inside the ramparts are the foundations of more than 150 stone buildings. On a clear day the views take in the whole of Llŷn, the mountains of Snowdonia, Anglesey, the full sweep of Cardigan Bay, and the Irish Sea toward Ireland.

Tre'r Ceiri is one of the best-preserved stone-walled hillforts in Britain and one of the highest. The main rampart is continuous, roughly 620 m in circuit, 2.3–3 m thick at the base, and equipped in places with a walkway fronted by a breastwork wall, reached by sloping ramps. The principal entrance on the north-west is an oblique, walled passageway more than 15 m long that forces any approach into a controlled corridor between the outer and inner walls. Four smaller entrances also exist; one is a narrow covered passage through the rampart on the north side — an unusual and sophisticated feature. The highest point inside the fort is marked by a Bronze Age cairn that was already centuries old when the Iron Age ramparts were built. That cairn, and the earlier prehistoric activity on the wider massif of Yr Eifl, remind us that this summit had been special long before the first stone of the fort was laid.

The history of investigation is long. In 1894 the Cambrian Archaeological Association already warned that the site was being destroyed stone by stone for local building. Systematic excavation began in 1903 when Sabine Baring-Gould and Robert Burnard cleared 32 huts. Harold Hughes returned in 1906, produced the first accurate measured plan, and examined further structures. Mid-century work by A.H.A. Hogg, working with W.E. Griffiths and the Royal Commission, completed a full contour survey and selective excavation. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries a major conservation programme funded by Cadw and Gwynedd Council, led archaeologically by David Hopewell of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, consolidated collapsing sections of rampart and entrance, cleared and partially rebuilt selected houses, and recovered crucial dating evidence without large-scale new excavation.

The structural sequence is now reasonably clear even without a full suite of radiocarbon dates. The earliest substantial occupation belongs to the later Iron Age. Large roundhouses — perhaps two dozen originally — were built within the newly completed or still-developing ramparts. In the Roman period, from the second century AD onward, the settlement was re-occupied and transformed. The original roundhouses were subdivided by internal walls; scores of smaller, irregular, sub-rectangular and conjoined buildings were added, bringing the total number of structures to around 150. Many of these later buildings cluster in dense groups. Roman pottery, including a late second-century jar recovered from the base of a remodelled section of the north-west entrance, a bone comb of late Roman or early medieval character, glass beads, iron tools, a gold-plated bronze fibula, and other small finds show occupation continuing into the fourth century AD. Population estimates at peak have ranged up to 400 people, though some scholars, following John Davies, have suggested that the high, exposed location may also have served seasonal upland grazing, with winter dwellings on lower ground.

The absence of a full radiocarbon series remains a significant gap. Chronology still rests primarily on artefacts and on the structural relationship between large early roundhouses and the later, smaller buildings. Tre'r Ceiri lacks the compact stone citadel seen at Garn Boduan and Carn Fadryn; its strength lies in the completeness of the Iron Age and Romano-British remains. Walking the rampart walk today, looking down on the dense clusters of huts and out across the peninsula, one understands why successive generations invested such enormous labour in stone. This was not a temporary refuge. It was a lasting statement of community, visibility and control.

Visitor note

The climb from the nearest parking is steep and exposed in all weathers. Allow at least three to four hours for a proper visit. Paths exist but the interior is fragile; keep to established routes and do not climb on the walls. The site is managed; the conservation work of the 1990s and 2000s is still visible in the carefully rebuilt sections (new stones

are marked). The best light for photography is often early morning or late afternoon when the ramparts cast strong shadows.

Key sources

Coflein and GAT records (PRN 613, SAM CN028); Hogg's surveys and the Caernarvonshire Inventory; Hopewell and Gwynedd Archaeological Trust conservation and management reports; Internet Archaeology papers by George Smith and David Hopewell; Bangor University accessible virtual-tour materials; Baring-Gould & Burnard 1904 and Hughes 1907 for the early excavations; synthesis in Lynch 1995 and Heath 2023.

Chapter 3

Garn Boduan: from hillfort to citadel

Large Iron Age enclosure later re-used as a princely stronghold

Garn Boduan rises to 279 m a short distance inland from Nefyn, a prominent rocky hill formed by an igneous intrusion. Its summit plateau, roughly 10 ha in extent, is enclosed by successive and somewhat divergent stone-walled ramparts. Surveys in the 1950s recorded the traces of about 170 circular stone-walled structures; around 100 remain visible on the ground today as collapsed rings of stone, generally 5–8 m in diameter. Estimates of the population that could have lived here range from 100 to 400 people. Two freshwater springs on the hill would have made prolonged occupation possible even in dry seasons.

The defensive sequence has at least two clear Iron Age phases. The lower, outer rampart is the original enclosure. A later, better-built and more substantial upper rampart was added, particularly visible on the north-eastern side. On the highest eastern crag a third and quite different structure appears: a small, strongly constructed “citadel” enclosing an area of roughly 60–70 m by 30 m. Its walls are up to 3.5 m thick, well-built with a steep external batter, and of a different character from the earlier ramparts. Both the large enclosure and the citadel had two entrances; one of each was blocked in antiquity.

Excavations directed by A.H.A. Hogg in 1954 examined sections of the defences and four of the roundhouses. The houses produced little in the way of finds, but the citadel and associated layers yielded Roman coarse pottery, a second-century AD mortarium sherd, and glass beads dated by experts to the fifth or sixth century AD. The sequence therefore runs from a large Iron Age hillfort, through Romano-British occupation, into a smaller, more defensible stronghold of late Roman or early medieval date. Some writers have linked the later fort to the legendary figure Buan (whose name is preserved in the place-name) or to the turbulent centuries after the Roman withdrawal, when local power centres re-emerged. The comparison with the summit citadel on Carn Fadryn is close and deliberate; both sites show the same pattern of a broad Iron Age enclosure later focused onto a tight, well-built stone stronghold on the highest point.

Garn Boduan’s visual dominance of the surrounding lowlands, its proximity to the later medieval centre of Nefyn, and its command of routes along the north coast underline its long-term strategic value. The same hill that supported a substantial prehistoric community was still worth holding, and worth refortifying, centuries later. Standing inside the citadel walls today, with the wind coming off the sea and the whole of northern Llŷn spread below, one feels the continuity of power that the stones were meant to express.

Visitor note

Access is from the B4354 a short distance from its junction with the A497. A forestry gateway gives onto a track that climbs through trees before emerging onto the open hill. The summit is exposed and can be very windy. The citadel walls repay close inspection; the roundhouse rings are best appreciated in low light when their outlines stand out against the grass.

Key sources

Coflein NPRN 95271; Hogg's 1954 excavation and subsequent publication in *Archaeological Journal*; RCAHMW Caernarvonshire Inventory; Gwynedd Archaeological Trust historic landscape characterisation; comparative discussion with Carn Fadryn in Lynch 1995 and later summaries.

Chapter 4



Carn Fadryn: twin summit, twin history

Bivallate hillfort and its later medieval citadel phase

Carn Fadryn (also written Garn Fadryn or Carn Fadrun) rises to 371 m in the geographical centre of the Llŷn peninsula. It is a true Marilyn, with a drop of more than 150 m on all sides, and on a clear day the views stretch to Anglesey, Snowdonia, the length of Cardigan Bay, and even the Wicklow Mountains in Ireland. The hill carries two clear phases of Iron Age fortification and, on its highest crag, a later medieval stone citadel that links the age of the forts directly to the age of the princes.

The first phase of fortification, conventionally dated around 300 BC, enclosed the summit and an area of some 5 ha (about 12 acres). A second phase, around 100 BC or a little later, enlarged the defences northward and southward to roughly 10–11 ha (26 acres). The second-phase rampart is better preserved. Entrances lie to the north and south; both are designed as narrow, oblique approaches that would have funnelled attackers into vulnerable positions. Inside the fort and thickly scattered on the steep slopes below are the remains of numerous stone-walled buildings — some round, some rectangular, some irregular — a number of them with small attached yards or gardens. Activity here almost certainly continued through the Roman period.

On the highest point of the summit, a narrow rocky platform falling steeply to the west was used as a ready-made motte. A trapezoidal or simple looped wall of drystone construction forms a small citadel roughly 75 m by 16 m. There are no surviving internal buildings. In 1188 Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), travelling through Wales with Archbishop Baldwin to preach the Third Crusade, recorded two newly built stone castles.

One was at Deudraeth; the other, “in the head of Lleyrn,” belonged to the sons of Owain and was named Karnmadrun. The summit structure on Carn Fadryn is the only plausible candidate. It belongs to a small but significant group of early native Welsh stone castles built at the end of the twelfth century, at a time when many Welsh strongholds were still of timber and earth. Gerald himself remarked on the unusual use of stone.

The site therefore bridges two worlds. The same hill that supported a substantial Iron Age and Romano-British community later became a symbol of princely power in the generation after the death of Owain Gwynedd (1170), when his sons divided and defended their inheritance. The continuity is not merely topographic; it is political and symbolic. The princes of Gwynedd chose to re-occupy and re-fortify the ancient strongholds of the peninsula. Standing on the citadel today, with the Iron Age ramparts spread below and the whole of Llŷn visible, one sees the deep roots of medieval power.

Visitor note

Parking is available near the church on the south side of the hill. The ascent is straightforward on clear paths but steep in places. The medieval citadel occupies the most dramatic part of the summit; allow time to walk the full circuit of the Iron Age ramparts as well. The views are among the finest on the peninsula.

Key sources

Coflein NPRN 95275; Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Kambriae* (1188 reference); Gwynedd Archaeological Trust historic landscape characterisation (Area 10); Castle Wales and Gatehouse Gazetteer summaries; Lynch 1995; comparative material on early Welsh stone castles.

Chapter 5

Castell Odo: three forts in one

Excavated sequence — open settlement to double-embanked fort

On the modest, rounded summit of Mynydd Ystum (about 146 m) near Aberdaron stands Castell Odo, a small, nearly circular bivallate enclosure only 50–56 m in diameter. Compared with the great stone walls of Tre'r Ceiri it looks unspectacular. Yet it is one of the most important excavated sites on the entire peninsula, because it preserves a clear, dated sequence from open settlement to defended enclosure.

Limited excavation by C.E. Breese in 1929 examined several houses and recovered flint, stone tools and crude pottery, but could not establish a firm date; for a time the site was even considered early medieval. The decisive work was carried out by Leslie Alcock in 1958 and 1959, with a small supplementary excavation later. Alcock identified four phases of activity.

Phase 1 was an unenclosed hilltop settlement of at least two timber-walled roundhouses, each probably about 9 m in diameter. Charcoal from this phase produced radiocarbon dates centring between the sixth and third centuries BC. A timber palisade was then added on at least the western side (Phase 1b). Later still the defences were rebuilt in earth and stone as a double-banked (bivallate) enclosure. Stone roundhouses replaced or succeeded the timber buildings. Pottery of Late Bronze Age to earliest Iron Age character was recovered from the early levels, making Castell Odo one of the earliest dated defended sites of its type in north-west Wales. A medieval pillow mound (rabbit warren) was later constructed inside the enclosure, a reminder that the hill continued to be used long after its Iron Age life had ended.

Castell Odo demonstrates that the great stone forts of the later Iron Age did not appear suddenly. They grew out of earlier traditions of hilltop settlement, progressive enclosure, and the gradual replacement of timber by stone. Its modest size and clear stratigraphic sequence make it a key reference point for understanding the development of defence and community on Llŷn. The same pattern of increasing enclosure and monumentalisation can be seen, on a larger scale, at sites such as Meillionydd.

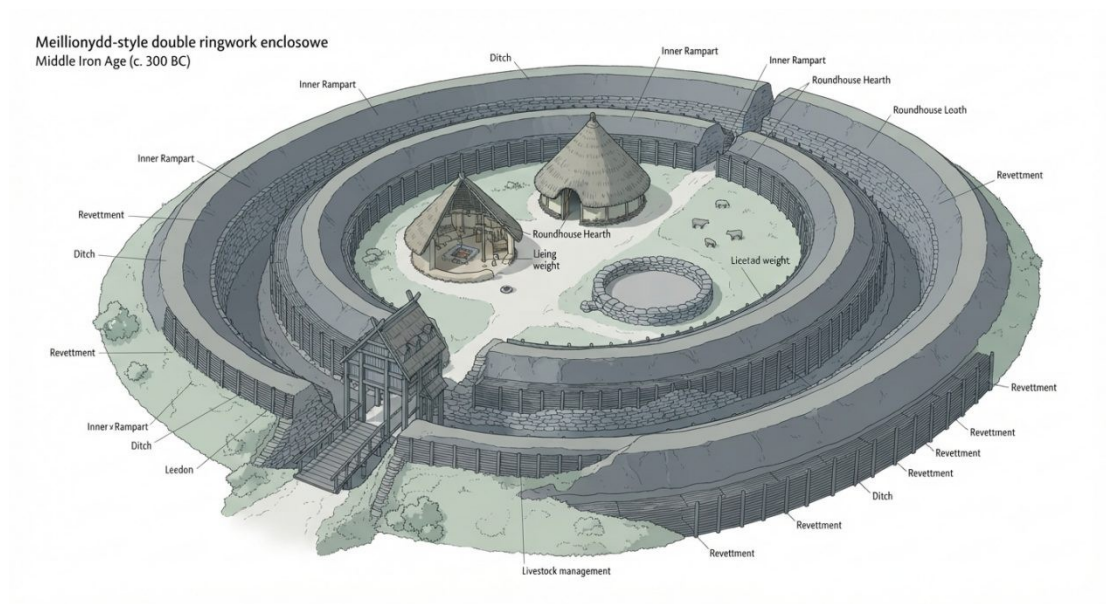
Visitor note

The site is easily reached from the B4413 a little over a mile from Aberdaron. The earthworks are subtle — low banks and scarps rather than towering walls — so a plan or the *Ancient Llŷn* map is almost essential for interpretation. The views over the western tip of the peninsula and toward Bardsey are wide and rewarding.

Key sources

Leslie Alcock, "Castell Odo: an embanked settlement on Mynydd Ystum, near Aberdaron, Caernarvonshire," *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 109 (1960); Coflein NPRN 95305; Gwynedd Archaeological Trust records; Internet Archaeology summary by George Smith; radiocarbon and ceramic discussions in Alcock and later reviews.

Chapter 6



Meillionydd and the double-ringwork mystery

A settlement type found almost only on Llŷn; ongoing Bangor University excavation

On the south-western slopes of Mynydd Rhiw, not far from the Neolithic axe factory and the tombs of Tan y Muriau and Bron Heulog, lies Meillionydd. It is a double-ringwork enclosure — two concentric circular banks of earth and stone enclosing a handful of roundhouses — and it belongs to a settlement type found almost exclusively on the Llŷn peninsula. These sites sit on low hilltops rather than the highest summits. They appear to have been the permanent homes of several family groups and, at the same time, places where larger communal gatherings could take place.

Since 2010 Bangor University has conducted a sustained programme of excavation and analysis directed by Kate Waddington, Raimund Karl and colleagues. The work has transformed our understanding of the type. Geophysical survey had already shown a roughly circular enclosure about 105 m by 85 m with strong internal anomalies. Excavation revealed a complex, deeply stratified sequence more than a metre deep in places.

The site began as an open or only lightly enclosed settlement with timber roundhouses in the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age. Radiocarbon dates indicate activity from at least c. 800–400 BC. A timber fence and ditch were then constructed. Later still the enclosure was rebuilt with substantial stone-faced earth banks, creating the classic double-ringwork form. Stone roundhouses succeeded the timber ones; at least one large stone roundhouse was incorporated into the outer bank itself. Occupation continued into the Middle Iron Age (c. 400–200 BC). The repeated rebuilding of houses on the

same spots implies a strong desire to maintain continuity and a sense of place across generations.

Meillionydd sits in a landscape already rich in earlier monuments. The decision to settle and then to enclose this particular hilltop cannot be separated from the long ceremonial history of Mynydd Rhiw. The double-ringwork form may represent a distinctive local response to the social and economic changes of the first millennium BC — a way of creating monumental, permanent settlements without necessarily adopting the high, heavily defended model of Tre'r Ceiri. Other examples of the type exist on the peninsula (Conion and Castell Caeron among them), but Meillionydd is by far the best excavated. Post-excavation analysis is still ongoing; the full publication will refine the chronology and the material culture still further.

The site is a powerful reminder that not every important settlement in Iron Age Llŷn was a towering stone fort on a mountain top. Some of the most revealing evidence comes from quieter hills where families lived, rebuilt, and gradually enclosed themselves over centuries.

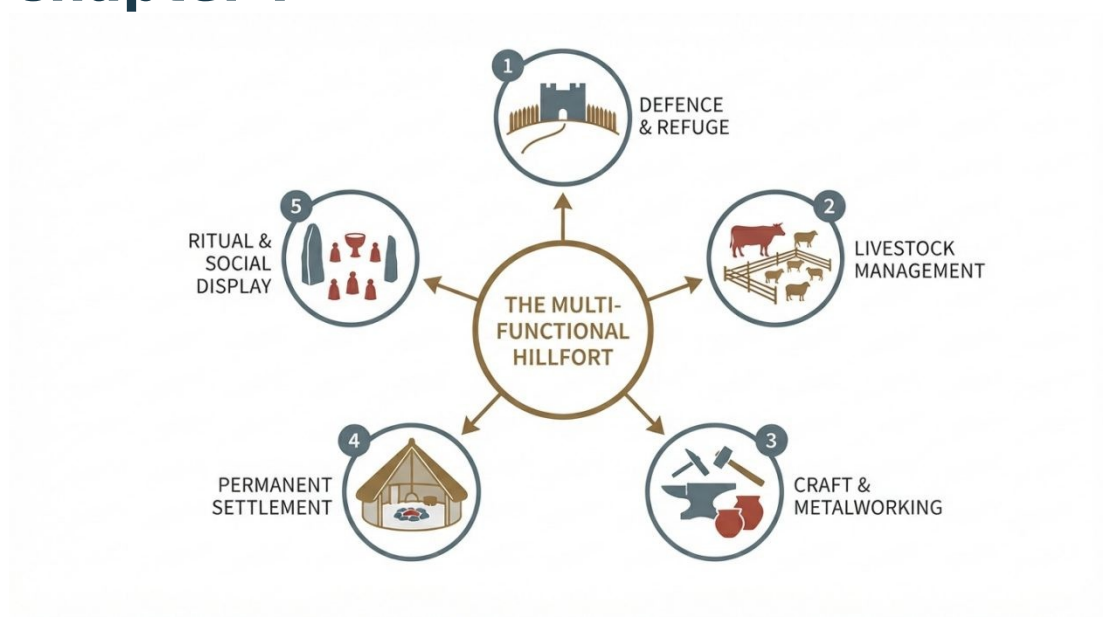
Visitor note

Meillionydd lies on private land and remains an active research landscape. Public access is limited and should not be assumed. The surrounding Rhiw area, with its concentration of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites, is accessible and forms the natural wider context. Check current information via Bangor University or local heritage bodies before any visit.

Key sources

Bangor University Meillionydd project interim reports and stratigraphic accounts (Waddington, Karl, Möller et al., 2010–2016 and later); project booklet and website; radiocarbon summaries in project literature; comparison with other Llŷn double ringworks; National Trust and GAT landscape context for Mynydd Rhiw.

Chapter 7



Cattle, raiders and summer pasture

How and why the forts were actually used

The forts of Llŷn were not all the same, and they were not used in only one way. Any honest account must begin with that diversity.

Tre'r Ceiri's dense internal settlement, elaborate entrances and high, exposed position suggest a major communal centre that could house a substantial population and, at the same time, serve seasonal upland grazing. The subdivision of large roundhouses into smaller units in the Roman period may reflect changing household structures or simply more people living within the same walls. Garn Boduan and Carn Fadryn combine broad enclosed areas suitable for people and livestock with later, tighter citadels that look more purely defensive or symbolic — statements of power in the uncertain centuries after Rome. Castell Odo and Meillionydd show smaller communities progressively enclosing themselves, moving from open settlement to palisade to earth-and-stone banks. Across the peninsula the forts controlled views, routes, water sources and pasture. Cattle were central to Iron Age economies in western Britain; the ability to protect herds, to display that protection, and to organise the labour required for massive stone walls all mattered.

Defence against raiders was certainly real. The oblique, controlled entrances at Tre'r Ceiri, the multiple ramparts, the choice of steep ground, and the sheer investment of labour all speak to the need for security. Yet many of the forts show long, continuous occupation rather than short-term refuge use. They were places of everyday life —

roundhouses with hearths, evidence of craft activity, storage — as well as strongholds. Roman-period finds at Tre'r Ceiri and Garn Boduan demonstrate that life continued, adapted, and in some cases intensified under new political conditions. The later citadels on Garn Boduan and Carn Fadryn suggest that the symbolic and practical value of these particular hills persisted into the early medieval centuries, when they became useful to the emerging Welsh principalities. The princes did not invent the idea of fortifying the high places of Llŷn; they inherited and re-shaped it.

We still lack fine-grained data on many central questions. Few large animal-bone assemblages or detailed environmental analyses have been published for these sites. The absence of a full radiocarbon series for Tre'r Ceiri remains a significant gap. We cannot yet say with precision how seasonal the occupation of the highest forts was, or how the communities of the double ringworks related to those of the great stone forts. What the monuments themselves tell us clearly is that later prehistoric communities on Llŷn were willing to invest enormous, sustained labour in stone and earth to create lasting statements of presence, identity and control. Those statements still dominate the skyline. They link the deep-time world of Book 1 to the medieval world of Book 3, and they remain some of the most powerful prehistoric places in Wales.

Key sources

Synthesis of all preceding chapters and their cited works; wider British and Welsh literature on hillfort function (pastoralism, defence, social display, specialised production); Gwynedd Archaeological Trust and RCAHMW surveys; comparative material from other Welsh stone-walled forts; discussion of post-Roman re-use in Lynch and later writers.

End matter

Collected source note

All factual claims are drawn from the sources listed at the end of each chapter. The principal collections and works are:

- Coflein / RCAHMW individual site records and aerial photography.
- Cadw scheduling descriptions and management information.
- Gwynedd Archaeological Trust / Heneb Historic Environment Record, conservation reports (especially Hopewell on Tre'r Ceiri), and historic landscape characterisations.
- A.H.A. Hogg's surveys and excavations; Leslie Alcock 1960 on Castell Odo; Bangor University Meillionydd project publications (Waddington, Karl, Möller et al.); Frances Lynch, *Gwynedd* (1995); Julian Maxwell Heath (2023); Gerald of Wales for the 1188 Carn Fadryn reference; Internet Archaeology papers by Smith, Hopewell and others.

A full bibliography with page and figure references will appear in the final illustrated edition. Where evidence is incomplete or open to more than one interpretation, the text has said so explicitly.

Further reading

The Meillionydd project interim reports are essential for the double-ringwork type. Hopewell's conservation work and the GAT management plan for Tre'r Ceiri are the best modern accounts of that site. Lynch 1995 remains the most convenient single-volume introduction to the wider Gwynedd evidence. Heath 2023 provides the broader prehistoric narrative.

Connection to the range and to Ancient Llŷn

Book 1 established the deep-time foundation of tombs, axe factories and cairns. Book 2 shows how later prehistoric communities transformed the same hills into a landscape of forts. The citadel phases at Garn Boduan and Carn Fadryn hand on directly to the medieval story told in Book 3, *Princes and Castles*. Every site discussed here appears on the standalone interactive map *Ancient Llŷn*, written at GCSE-accessible length with key facts and a self-test question. The map is organised by category, not by book chapter, and continues to grow independently of the publishing schedule.

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