# Radiocarbon dating reshapes the story of Maiden Castle’s Iron Age deaths



A recent investigation published in the Oxford Journal of Archaeology has dramatically reinterpreted a pivotal moment in British history once characterised by tales of valour and brutal conflict. The Maiden Castle site, an imposing Iron Age hillfort in Dorset, had long been revered as the scene of a legendary battle between Roman forces and local Britons, effectively marking the end of the Iron Age. However, new evidence suggests that this much-celebrated narrative, as told over decades, requires a fundamental reevaluation.

The historical significance of Maiden Castle was largely based on the excavations conducted in the 1930s by renowned archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler. During these excavations, Wheeler uncovered a collection of skeletons that exhibited signs of severe trauma, leading him to postulate that they represented a mass grave resulting from a fierce Roman assault. This interpretation resonated with the public consciousness, especially as Britain teetered on the brink of the Second World War, creating a powerful myth of courage in the face of imperial aggression.

However, the study spearheaded by Martin Smith, an associate professor in Forensic and Biological Anthropology, employs advanced radiocarbon dating techniques to challenge this established view. Smith notes, “The find of dozens of human skeletons displaying lethal weapon injuries was never in doubt, however, by undertaking a systematic program of radiocarbon dating we have been able to establish that these individuals died over a period of decades, rather than a single terrible event.” This suggests that the conditions leading to their deaths were more complex and likely resulted from internal conflicts rather than an external Roman incursion.

This perspective aligns with emerging insights regarding the site itself. Other archaeological analyses indicate that prior to the Roman conquest, Maiden Castle may have been abandoned, raising questions about the context of the injuries found. Instead of a singular heroic confrontation, interpretations now suggest the deaths may reflect a series of violent encounters within tribal factions. This nuance introduces a broader understanding of Iron Age sociopolitical dynamics, which may have involved a constellation of cultural identities and conflicts.

Paul Cheetham, a Visiting Fellow in the project, remarked on the potential complexities of the burial practices at Maiden Castle: “Here we interpret [the findings] as either a number of distinct cultures living and dying together, or we can understand this as burial rights that were determined by complex social rules or hierarchical divisions within this Iron Age society." The potential for undiscovered burial sites surrounding the fort further hints at a rich and intricate history that remains to be uncovered.

The implications of this study extend beyond Maiden Castle and cast doubts on the narratives surrounding other archaeological findings across Britain. As these interpretations gain traction, they compel the academic community and the public alike to reconsider long-held beliefs and assumptions about a defining period in British history. The enduring myth of heroic resistance against Roman invasion may not only need to be nuanced but also fundamentally rewritten.

Overall, this revelation at Maiden Castle underscores the dynamic nature of archaeology as a discipline—perhaps reminding us that history is rarely a clear-cut tale of victors and vanquished but rather a tapestry woven from a multitude of human experiences, conflicts, and narratives yet to be spun.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/dozens-of-human-skeletons-reveal-a-historical-roman-massacre-may-not-have), [[2]](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/maiden-castle/history/roman-invasion)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/dozens-of-human-skeletons-reveal-a-historical-roman-massacre-may-not-have), [[6]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-prehistoric-society/article/abs/reappraisal-of-the-evidence-for-violence-in-the-late-iron-age-human-remains-from-maiden-castle-hillfort-dorset-england/82FEA2DF7E556F0D151C1B7CC235A7FF)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/dozens-of-human-skeletons-reveal-a-historical-roman-massacre-may-not-have), [[6]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-prehistoric-society/article/abs/reappraisal-of-the-evidence-for-violence-in-the-late-iron-age-human-remains-from-maiden-castle-hillfort-dorset-england/82FEA2DF7E556F0D151C1B7CC235A7FF), [[3]](https://prehistoric-britain.co.uk/iron-age-hill-fort)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/dozens-of-human-skeletons-reveal-a-historical-roman-massacre-may-not-have), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden_Castle%2C_Dorset)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/dozens-of-human-skeletons-reveal-a-historical-roman-massacre-may-not-have> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/maiden-castle/history/roman-invasion> - This article from English Heritage discusses the history of Maiden Castle, Britain's largest Iron Age hillfort. It highlights the 1930s excavations by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who discovered numerous skeletons with signs of trauma, leading him to suggest a Roman attack. However, subsequent research has questioned this interpretation, suggesting that the site may have been abandoned before the Roman conquest and that the injuries could have resulted from internal conflicts or other causes.
3. <https://prehistoric-britain.co.uk/iron-age-hill-fort> - This article examines the archaeological findings at Maiden Castle, challenging the traditional narrative of a Roman massacre. It points out that the burials were not mass graves and that many bodies showed no direct evidence of violent death. The presence of numerous slingstones near the entrances suggests they could have been used for hunting or other purposes, rather than solely for defense against the Romans.
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden\_Castle,\_Dorset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden_Castle%2C_Dorset) - The Wikipedia page on Maiden Castle provides a comprehensive overview of the site, including its history, archaeological investigations, and findings. It details the excavations by Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s, the discovery of a 'war cemetery,' and the subsequent re-evaluation of these findings using modern techniques like radiocarbon dating, which have led to a reassessment of the events that took place there.
5. <https://www.academia.edu/80723302/Victims_of_a_17th_century_massacre_in_Central_Europe_perimortem_trauma_of_castle_defenders> - This academic paper examines the human remains excavated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler from Maiden Castle, focusing on the osteological evidence for trauma. It employs bioarchaeological, clinical, and forensic methods to identify and interpret skeletal evidence for fractures, blunt-force cranial trauma, and sharp and blunt projectile injuries, providing insights into the nature of violence during the Late Iron Age.
6. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-prehistoric-society/article/abs/reappraisal-of-the-evidence-for-violence-in-the-late-iron-age-human-remains-from-maiden-castle-hillfort-dorset-england/82FEA2DF7E556F0D151C1B7CC235A7FF> - This article offers a re-appraisal of the evidence for violence in the Late Iron Age human remains from Maiden Castle hillfort. It discusses the findings of previous studies and presents new interpretations, suggesting that the injuries observed may not be indicative of a single violent event but rather reflect multiple episodes of intra- or intertribal warfare over several decades.
7. <https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/maiden-castle-0013059> - This article reports on a study that challenges the traditional narrative of a Roman massacre at Maiden Castle. It presents evidence that the skeletons found were buried over a period spanning decades, rather than in the aftermath of a single tragic event, and suggests that the injuries were likely inflicted by fellow Britons rather than the Roman army.