# New radiocarbon dating challenges Maiden Castle massacre narrative



A groundbreaking study published in the Oxford Journal of Archaeology has called into question a pivotal and often romanticized episode in British history. The battle at Maiden Castle, an iconic Iron Age hillfort in Dorset, has long been portrayed as a tragic confrontation between Roman forces and defiant Britons. However, new radiocarbon dating reveals that the remains discovered in what is often labelled a "war cemetery" were interred over several decades, rather than being the aftermath of a single, catastrophic conflict.

The iconic narrative surrounding Maiden Castle has its roots in the discovery made by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s. This excavation revealed numerous skeletons displaying clear signs of trauma, leading Wheeler to suggest they were victims of a brutal Roman siege. His interpretation resonated deeply with British national sentiment, especially in the context of the looming Second World War, framing a story of heroism and sacrifice that has been retold in various media, from documentaries to scholarly works.

However, the new findings spearheaded by Miles Russell, a principal academic in Prehistoric and Roman Archaeology, indicate a different story. Russell’s study systematically employed radiocarbon dating, establishing that the human remains at Maiden Castle were likely buried between the late first century BCE and the early first century CE. This timeline suggests that the deaths resulted from internal strife among tribal groups rather than Roman aggression. “The archaeological evidence now points to a somewhat unromantic reality; it was Britons killing Britons,” Russell noted, challenging the existing historical narrative.

This reinterpretation aligns with previous analyses that have suggested the complexities of violence in the Late Iron Age. Studies have pointed out that injuries found on the bones may not solely reflect siege warfare but could stem from a range of social practices and conflicts within the Britons themselves. Such insights advocate for a deeper exploration of the societal structures and norms of the time, which might have contributed to these violent encounters.

The implications of this revised understanding extend beyond Maiden Castle, stirring discussions within the archaeological community about the interpretative frameworks applied to historical sites across the UK. The long-held notion that the hillfort stands as a memorial to a singular, noble sacrifice is increasingly seen as too simplistic. As Paul Cheetham, a visiting fellow in archaeology, suggested, “This interpretation opens doors to understanding a more nuanced social landscape—one where burial practices reflect complex divisions and hierarchies.”

Moreover, the site of Maiden Castle itself may still hold undiscovered secrets. The limited scope of Wheeler's original excavations implies that many more burials might lie hidden beneath the expansive ramparts, waiting to reveal further insights into the complex human histories carried within the earth. The need for continuous inquiry into these historical narratives has never been more evident, as new methodologies unearth layers of understanding previously obscured by dominant narratives.

In light of these revelations, it becomes clear that history is not a static collection of facts but a dynamic narrative shaped by interpretation and re-evaluation. As archaeologists delve deeper into the past, they are reminded that every discovery not only tells a story but also reshapes our understanding of who we are and where we come from.

### 📌 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://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ojoa.12172)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/dozens-of-human-skeletons-reveal-a-historical-roman-massacre-may-not-have), [[3]](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 – [[4]](https://www.academia.edu/245505/A_re_appraisal_of_the_evidence_for_violence_in_the_late_Iron_Age_human_remains_from_Maiden_Castle_hillfort_Dorset_England), [[5]](https://www.sal.org.uk/archaeology/maiden-castle-dorset/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://archaeologyathull.wordpress.com/archaeology-of-britain/m/madien-castle/), [[7]](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)

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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://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ojoa.12172> - In this 2019 study published in the Oxford Journal of Archaeology, Miles Russell challenges the traditional narrative of a Roman massacre at Maiden Castle. By analysing archaeological evidence, Russell argues that the remains found at the site were buried over several decades, not in a single catastrophic event. The study suggests that the deaths were likely the result of internal conflicts among the Britons, rather than Roman aggression, thereby questioning the long-held belief of a Roman siege and massacre at Maiden Castle.
3. <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 2003 article in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society re-examines the human remains from Maiden Castle, Dorset. The authors, including Martin Smith, argue that the evidence for violence in the Late Iron Age is more complex than previously thought. They suggest that the injuries observed may not be indicative of a single violent event but could result from a range of social practices, challenging the interpretation of these remains as evidence of a Roman massacre.
4. <https://www.academia.edu/245505/A_re_appraisal_of_the_evidence_for_violence_in_the_late_Iron_Age_human_remains_from_Maiden_Castle_hillfort_Dorset_England> - In this 2003 study available on Academia.edu, the authors re-assess the human remains from Maiden Castle, Dorset. They argue that the evidence for violence in the Late Iron Age is more nuanced than previously believed. The study suggests that the injuries found may not be indicative of a single violent event but could result from various social practices, challenging the traditional interpretation of these remains as evidence of a Roman massacre.
5. <https://www.sal.org.uk/archaeology/maiden-castle-dorset/> - This publication by the Society of Antiquaries of London provides a comprehensive account of the archaeological excavations at Maiden Castle, Dorset. It includes detailed descriptions of artefacts, such as pottery and human remains, and outlines the methodologies used in the excavation process. The report offers valuable insights into the site's history and the findings that have shaped our understanding of Maiden Castle.
6. <https://archaeologyathull.wordpress.com/archaeology-of-britain/m/madien-castle/> - This blog post from Archaeology@Hull discusses the archaeological findings at Maiden Castle, Dorset. It highlights the work of Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s, who uncovered an extensive Late Iron Age cemetery containing around 57 burials. The post also notes that Wheeler believed these findings were evidence of a Roman attack on the hillfort, a view that has been questioned by subsequent interpretations.
7. <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 2003 article in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society re-examines the human remains from Maiden Castle, Dorset. The authors, including Martin Smith, argue that the evidence for violence in the Late Iron Age is more complex than previously thought. They suggest that the injuries observed may not be indicative of a single violent event but could result from a range of social practices, challenging the interpretation of these remains as evidence of a Roman massacre.