

Dating Bosigran's prehistoric field systems

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Bosigran's prehistoric field systems

A new study, published in the journal *Antiquity* (<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.138>), has shed more light on the prehistoric field systems at Bosigran, in west Cornwall, by directly dating the earthworks for the first time.

Bosigran, acquired by the National Trust in 1978, has granite-and-earth boundaries forming small fields, dubbed the 'work of giants' and long believed to be prehistoric in origin. A detailed survey carried out in 1981-1983 established relative chronologies that identified six distinct types of field pattern apparently attributable to periods from the 2nd millennium BC to post-medieval times. However, establishing accurate dating of the creation and development of the earthworks has challenged archaeologists for decades.

There are few ancient field systems around the world that have been directly dated, as many of the existing approaches – which include dating artefacts recovered from earthworks, dating through associated archaeological features, and direct dating of ecofacts and sediments using radiocarbon or optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) methods – can be problematic.

The new study of the Bosigran field systems combined conventional OSL dating in the laboratory with practical field profiling methods. Small trenches were cut in selected boundary banks to collect small soil samples along the entire sediment stratigraphy. A portable OSL reader was then used to measure the luminescence signals of these samples in the field, immediately providing a relative chronology for the development of the earthworks that informed the sampling strategy for the larger dating samples. After subsequent laboratory analyses it was possible to create highly-detailed accounts of the earthworks' history, from their construction date to their use and modification over time.

OSL profiling and dating (OSL-PD) confirmed the findings of the 1980's survey that some earthworks date back to the Middle Bronze Age (2nd millennium BC) and Middle Iron Age (400-100 BC). It also revealed however that the Iron Age boundaries, which were assumed to have been fairly substantial by c.AD 500, had in fact remained relatively low until that time, suggesting that the landscape was exploited in the same way from the Middle Iron Age up to the early medieval period, when a change in management practices occurred.

The study has proved the prehistoric origins of Bosigran's fields and changed understandings of the evolution of the landscape over time. It also demonstrates that the OSL-PD method is an effective and practical way of dating earthworks, which could be applied to other sites in the future.