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Wheeler, R. E. M. 1943. *Maiden Castle, Dorset*. Society of Antiquaries

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Welcome to the first instalment of 'Library Gems', a new series in *Archaeology International* that showcases extraordinary books from the Institute of Archaeology Library. Now part of UCL LCCOS,[1] the Library contains world-class materials relating to archaeology, cultural heritage, museum studies and the renowned Edwards Egyptology Library. Some books are best-sellers, well-known, influential and loved; others are esoteric, forgotten, overlooked and contentious. All provide valuable insights, but some are dazzling, illuminating our shared past in unforgettable ways.

Our first 'gem' shines bright in the history of archaeology, and even today influences British prehistory and public archaeology: Mortimer Wheeler's (1943) report on the excavations at the iconic hillfort of Maiden Castle, Dorset (Figure 1).[2] These excavations, which took place between 1934 and 1937, were among the most famous of the twentieth century (Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011, 48; Stout 2008, 167). Mortimer Wheeler (1890–1976), his wife Tessa Verney Wheeler (1893–1936) and Colonel Charles Drew (1883–1956), Field Secretary of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, led them under the auspices of the Society of Antiquaries of London (Carr 2012, 214–15; Wheeler 1943).

Wheeler's report is both the archaeological biography of a site and the historical autobiography of an excavation. It is of particular interest to us because the excavations coincided with the establishment of the Institute of Archaeology by the Wheelers; many of the Institute's pioneering figures were involved. Joan du Plat Taylor (1906–83), the Institute's influential post-war librarian, for example, excavated there (Wheeler 1943, 2). The first Institute Photography Lecturer, Maurice Cookson (1899–1965), took the photographs of the site (Hawkes 1982, 164). Artefacts, excavators, even books moved freely between the two locations, as witnessed by one library copy of the report. This was donated by Veronica Seton-Williams (1910–92), one of the Institute's first students. She worked as a supervisor at Maiden Castle, contributed to the report and left an account of her involvement in her memoirs (Seton-Williams 1988, 21–56; Wheeler 1943, 162–79).[3] Her copy creates a fascinating entanglement of object and memory, person and place, played out on the Library's shelves.

The report, which is itself innovative, reproduces the many innovations in practice undertaken at Maiden Castle. Fieldwork here marked a major advance in techniques

Figure 1 An aerial view of Maiden Castle in Dorset. Major George Allen (1891–1940), Atlas of Hillforts 3598. The Ashmolean Museum's description is 'General view of Maiden Castle taken 12 Oct 1935 (Album Ref 11, 2)' (Source: public domain)

and set new standards (Champion 1993, 204; Sharples 1991, 1). Excavations revealed a long sequence of activity: a Neolithic causewayed enclosure and barrow, a middle Iron Age hillfort, a late third-century AD Romano-Celtic temple and the famous Iron Age 'war cemetery' discovered close to the eastern entrance. This contained many individuals who had met a violent death, including a young man with a 'Roman' spearhead embedded in his backbone (Sharples 1991, 117; Wheeler 1943, 63).

Maiden Castle served as a ground-breaking archaeological field school, largely managed by Verney Wheeler (Carr 2012, 2016, 233; Stout 2008, 218). Each season, there were more than 100 volunteers, including students from China, Sri Lanka, the United States and India. They took the methods and standards that they learnt here across the world (Seton-Williams 1988, 21–2). Many excavators and supervisors listed in the report were women, demonstrating the strong commitment, especially of Verney Wheeler, to training women in archaeological fieldwork (Carr 2012, 232–3; Wheeler 1943, 2).

Mortimer Wheeler, a natural entertainer, also used Maiden Castle to pioneer public archaeology. Visitors were enticed onto the site by an exciting package of education and entertainment: off-road parking, tours, souvenirs, postcards and offprints. As many as 50,000 visitors came in 1936, offsetting around a third of the expenses of the dig. Wheeler provided regular press releases and the site became so well known that it featured in one of the earliest television broadcasts (Hawkes 1982 167; Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011; Stout 2008, 220; Wheeler 1943, 3). This combination of innovative archaeology and clever marketing established both the academic importance of the site and its enduring fame (Sharpes 1991, 1).

The full report of the excavations was written in 1941 and finally published in 1943 (Figure 2; Hawkes 1982, 175). It was not entirely original; it recycled many of Wheeler's

earlier ideas given in lectures and reproduced the content of the interim reports, notably plans, maps, section and artefact drawings and photographs (Stout 2008, 221–2; Wheeler 1935; 1936; 1937; 1943; 1944, 50). As Wheeler acknowledged, it was incomplete, a summary of the vast archive of records and finds written at Britain's lowest point in the Second World War to ensure the survival of the data in the event of German invasion. He commented, 'the wreckage of the present has in these days been more instant to my mind than the wreckage of the past' (Wheeler 1943, xviii). This 'wreckage of the present' included the death of Verney Wheeler. The report, dedicated to her, memorialises the brilliance of their archaeological partnership at its peak: technical rigour, innovation, accuracy and a thrilling narrative designed to grip the public (Carr 2012, 235).

Although a summary, the report was still enormous, weighing in at 4lb with 400 pages, despite war-time paper shortages (Harding 1993, 420; Lowther 1946, 175; Wainwright and Cunliffe 1985, 99). On the surface, it appears modern and familiar. In careful order, it displays, analyses and contextualises excavated features and the astonishing range of artefacts, from Neolithic pottery and flint to Roman coins and pottery, votive figures, human remains, bone tools and beads. There are expert reports, notably by Stuart Piggott (1910–96) on Neolithic pottery and Veronica Seton-Williams on the flint industry (Wheeler 1943, 137–62, 162–79). It is sumptuously illustrated. Cookson's outstanding photographs allow us to see the superb preservation and excavation conditions, although no site supervisor would allow such deep, narrow trenches today (see, for example, plate LXXVIII).

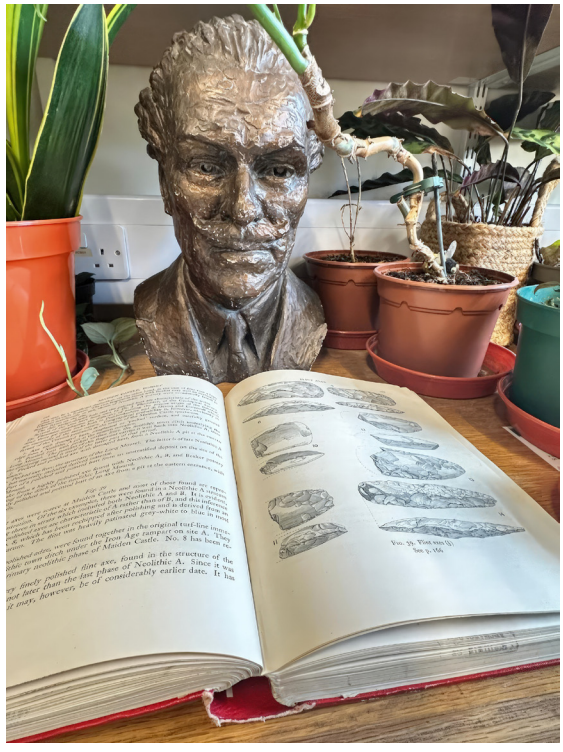

Figure 2 One of the Institute of Archaeology Library's copies of *Maiden Castle*, with the bust of R. E. M. Wheeler by Marjorie Maitland Howard (1898–1983) (Source: Sofina Lias)

Equally, much is unfamiliar in interpretation and presentation. Wheeler presented his arguments within Hawkes's now discredited ABC system of the Iron Age, modelling change through reference to Classical writers, migration and violent takeover, attributing the construction of the towering ramparts to a 'Slingshot-culture' (Wheeler 1943, 48–51). These interpretations render the report a period piece, jamming evidence into an outdated theoretical framework. Beneath the plethora of data, it is short on methodology, notably details of stratification and soil layers, as both his contemporary, brilliant excavator William F. Grimes (1905–88), and the director of the next major excavation at Maiden Castle, Niall Sharples, recognised (Grimes, 1945, 7; Sharples 1991, 46). The section drawings, with their dynamic 'action' figures, are schematic and of limited use.

On publication the report was praised for its clarity and high quality (Hawkes 1943; Lowther 1946). The excavation was lauded as a 'landmark' in Wheeler's archaeological career and the 'wider world of British archaeology generally' (Fox 1944; Grimes 1945, 6). However, it was criticised for its lack of information on technical methods and transparency around trench location choice. Wheeler was accused of choosing locations that emphasised the violent and dramatic aspects of the hillfort's past at the expense of detailed exploration of both the defences and the interior. His once-innovative methods were going out of fashion, supplanted by the open-plan methods introduced to Britain by German archaeologist Gerhard Bersu (1889–1964) and increasing interest in the 'sociological approach' that focused on the reconstruction of past communities (Evans 1989, 436; Grimes 1945; Hawkes 1944; Lowther 1946).

Contemporaries were split over the most contentious element of the report, Wheeler's dramatic reconstruction of the supposed end of Maiden Castle at the hands of the Romans in a barrage of artillery, massacre and violence (Wheeler 1943, 62). Some welcomed the thrilling narrative (Fox 1944; Hawkes 1943), but others were critical of the lack of evidence, expressing concern that 'literary' excavation reports would 'lose sight of the fact that they were concerned primarily with a scientific operation' (Grimes 1945, 9–10). In his defence, Wheeler (1943, 62) was explicit in his story-telling, stating, 'so much for the story; now for its basis'. In placing his dramatic interpretation before the data (Part I: General survey) instead of at the end of the report, Wheeler was attempting a risky innovation, disrupting the well-established format of the 'scientific' excavation report, perhaps to attract a wider readership. The public had, after all, purchased 16,000 of his considerably less sensational interim reports (Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011, 52). Few excavation reports before or since have transgressed so blatantly the convention that 'the reader is to be put first of all in possession of all the facts and materials and the author's conclusions are only a co-ordination, presented to enable the reader to grasp the material' (Petrie 1904, 114). Nonetheless, Wheeler's transgression ultimately secured the importance of Maiden Castle for future research, attesting to the fascination of a good story.

Although Wheeler's interpretations of the end of Maiden Castle were first developed in the 1930s, their masculine and military nature are autobiographical not only of him, but also a beleaguered nation at war. Echoes of Churchill resound (Harding 1993, 420; Stout 2008, 221–2). However, beneath Wheeler's stirring narrative, the voices of the other excavators at Maiden Castle, notably Verney Wheeler are absent. Many were women. In war, women's voices are lost, but in peace too; this is the case here, raising questions about how excavation reports, past and present, are gendered.

Maiden Castle dominated Iron Age studies for decades, challenged only in the 1960s (Sharples 1991, 1) and Wheeler's basic interpretations of the hillfort still stand (Armit 2007; Russell 2019). Recent analysis of genomes from local cemeteries proposes that Iron Age society was matrilocal, but also subject to cross-channel migration at a time of 'high societal violence' (Cassidy et al. 2025, 1141). Despite, or perhaps because of, the dramatic, now discredited narrative, the 'war cemetery' continues to generate debate, re-exploration and research as few historic excavations and reports do (Redfern and Chamberlain 2011; Smith et al. 2025). Wheeler's work in public archaeology and education has also been continued. The report and many of Cookson's photographs are now available open access.[4] Historic England, the custodians of the site, continue Wheeler's tradition of public innovation with its digital Echoscope sounds project.[5] As Wheeler once did, it invites *you* to become part of Maiden Castle's story.

In summary, few excavation reports have had such longevity of influence as Wheeler's report on the excavations at Maiden Castle and it is rare for an archaeological text to inspire ongoing interest among both the public and archaeologists. It is predominantly to Wheeler, once the 'most colourful personality in the field of excavation' (Grimes 1945, 6), and his provocative and innovative report that we owe this inspiration, but also to the silent ghosts who worked with him; Verney Wheeler, the female site supervisors, the students and the local Dorset workmen.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this article.

Notes

1 Library, Culture, Collection and Open Science.
2 UCL Library record. https://ucl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma990006059110204761&context=L&vid=44UCL_INST:UCL_VU2&lang=en&search_scope=UCLLibraryCatalogue&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=UCLLibraryCatalogue&query=any,contains,maiden%20castle%20wheeler&offset=0.

3 UCL Library record. https://ucl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma990001350440204761&context=L&vid=44UCL_INST:UCL_VU2&lang=en&search_scope=UCLLibraryCatalogue&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=UCLLibraryCatalogue&query=any,contains,seton-williams%20road&offset=0.

4 The open-access version of the report, made available by the Society of Antiquities, is available at https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/27681. Cookson's photos, available through Historic England, may be viewed as part of COO05/01. For example, https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/CC82/00127.

5 Echoscape: Sounds and Memories of Maiden Castle. https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/maiden-castle/echoscape/.

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