

# Two Iron Age 'Aggregated' Settlements in the environs of Leicester

Excavations at Beaumont Leys and Humberstone



John Thomas

Leicester Archaeology Monograph 19

# TWO IRON AGE 'AGGREGATED' SETTLEMENTS IN THE ENVIRONS OF LEICESTER

Excavations at Beaumont Leys  
and Humberstone

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# Summary

Two excavations on the outskirts of Leicester at Beaumont Leys Lane, Beaumont Leys, and Manor Farm, Humberstone, have revealed two areas of Iron Age ‘aggregated’ settlement closely associated with long-lived linear boundaries, on opposite sides of the Soar valley.

The occupation at Beaumont Leys dated to the Early Middle Iron Age and consisted of a spread of post-built roundhouses, four-post structures and stock pens. A range of finds including pottery, animal bone and quernstones was recovered. Several ‘exotic’ artefacts hint at the wide-ranging contacts of the settlement. Limited environmental information suggested that the inhabitants were predominantly involved with livestock farming.

Occupation at Manor Farm, Humberstone, consisted of a sequence of large stock enclosures and a linear spread of ‘open’ settlement adjacent to a boundary ditch. This site significantly extends to the west the Iron Age settlement area first revealed in 1998 at the neighbouring Elms Farm. The settlement was evidently long-lived, with occupation beginning in the Early Middle Iron Age and continuing into the Late Iron Age, finally coming to an end in the late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD. An area in excess of 13 ha was occupied, making Humberstone the largest Iron Age settlement yet found in Leicestershire.

The scale and longevity of the occupation is reflected in the finds, including the largest pottery and animal bone assemblages from contemporary sites in the East Midlands. The environmental data suggest that the settlement lay in a largely cleared landscape, with areas of open grassland and probably fields nearby, but also some woodland in the vicinity. Although the inhabitants were involved in mixed farming, an emphasis on pastoralism is suggested. The site was also involved in various craft activities such as metalworking, weaving and bone-working and, like Beaumont Leys, was part of a wide network of trade and exchange.

Together, the two settlements provide evidence of occupation through much of the Iron Age and present a rare opportunity to study sites of similar character in proximity. The similarities are most evident in the close relationship between the occupied areas and the linear boundaries against which each settlement developed, whilst the long duration of occupation has permitted analysis of changing architectural styles, patterns of consumption and deposition of material culture through the Iron Age.

# Résumé

Des fouilles réalisées à Beaumont Leys Lane, Beaumont Leys, et à Manor Farm, Humberstone, ont mis à jour deux agglomérations de l'Age du Fer à la périphérie de Leicester, implantées de part et d'autre de la rivière Soar. Ces habitats sont étroitement associées à des fossés-limites linéaires s'inscrivant sur le long terme.

L'habitat à Beaumont Leys date de l'Age du Fer ancien/moyen. Il consiste en un semis de maisons rondes sur poteaux, de structures à quatre poteaux et d'enclos de parage. Parmi les découvertes, la céramique, les ossements d'animaux et les meules dominent, mais plusieurs objets 'exotiques' indiquent que l'habitants possédaient des contacts à plus large échelle. Les informations environnementales suggèrent que les habitants étaient principalement engagés dans des activités d'élevage.

L'occupation à Manor Farm, Humberstone, consistait en une rangée de grands enclos de parage et une zone d'habitat ouverte longeant un fossé-limite. Le site étend de façon significative l'aire d'habitat découverte en 1998 à Elms Farm, située immédiatement à l'est. L'habitat s'inscrivait de façon évidente sur la longue durée, avec une occupation commençant au début de l'Age du Fer moyen et se poursuivant durant l'Age du Fer récent, pour se finir dans les dernières décennies du premier siècle avant notre ère, ou au début du 1er siècle après. Une surface de plus de 13 ha était occupée, ce qui fait de Humberstone le plus large habitat de l'Age du Fer connu à ce jour dans le Leicestershire. Le mobilier, y compris les ensembles céramique et faunique les plus grands des sites contemporains de l'East Midlands, témoigne de l'échelle et la durée de l'occupation. Selon les données environnementales, l'habitat se situait dans un paysage largement défriché, avec des prairies et sans doute des champs à proximité, mais également quelques zones boisées. Bien que les habitants pratiquaient l'agriculture mixte, une emphase sur l'élevage semble probable. Les fouilles laissent voir également d'évidence de diverses pratiques artisanales telles que la métallurgie, le tissage et le travail de l'os, ainsi que, comme à Beaumont Leys, d'un réseau d'échange étendu.

Ces deux sites de l'Age du Fer fournissent une rare opportunité d'étudier deux agglomérations voisines de caractère proche. Ces similitudes sont les plus évidentes du point de vue des relations étroites entre les zones occupées et les limites linéaires qui ont structuré le développement de chacun des habitats, tandis que la durée de l'occupation a permis l'analyse de l'évolution de l'architecture, la consommation et la déposition de la culture matérielle à travers l'Age du Fer.

# Zusammenfassung

Zwei Ausgrabungen am Stadtrand von Leicester an der Beaumont Leys Lane, Beaumont Leys, und Manor Farm, Humberstone, haben zwei Areale eisenzeitlicher Siedlungen ergeben, die mit lange benutzten, linearen Begrenzungen assoziiert sind und an zwei gegenüberliegenden Seiten des Tales der Soar liegen.

Die Siedlung in Beaumont Leys datiert in die mittlere Eisenzeit und besteht aus einer Reihe aus Pfosten gebauter Rundhäuser, Vierpfostenbauten und eingezäunten Flächen für Vieh. Eine Reihe von Funden wurde geborgen, darunter Keramik, Tierknochen und Mahlsteine. Mehrere exotische Artefakte deuten auf weitreichende Kontakte der Siedlung hin. Die wenigen verfügbaren Daten zur Umweltgeschichte sprechen dafür, dass die Bewohner der Siedlung hauptsächlich von Viehhaltung lebten.

Die Siedlung in Manor Farm, Humberstone, besteht aus einer Reihe großer Einhegungen und einem offenen Siedlungsgebiet neben dem begrenzenden Graben. Diese Fundstelle erweitert das eisenzeitliche Siedlungsgebiet, das zuerst 1998 in in der benachbarten Fundstelle Elms Farm entdeckt wurde, signifikant nach Westen. Der Siedlungsplatz war offensichtlich mehrere Generationen hindurch belegt, mit einer Siedlungsdauer von der frühen mittleren Eisenzeit bis in die späte Eisenzeit. Das Ende der Siedlung kam entweder im späten 1. Jh. v. Chr. oder im frühen 1. Jh. n. Chr. Ein Gebiet von über 13 ha war besiedelt, was Humberstone zur größten eisenzeitlichen Siedlung in Leicestershire macht, die je gefunden wurde.

Die Größe und lange Besiedlungsdauer des Platzes wird auch durch die Funde betont, die die größte Sammlung von Keramik und Tierknochen zeitgenössischer Siedlungen in den East Midlands darstellen. Daten zur Umweltgeschichte sprechen dafür, dass die Siedlung in einer gerodeten Landschaft lag, mit offenem Weideland und vermutlich einigen Feldern, aber auch mit Wald in der Nähe. Obwohl die Einwohner sowohl von Ackerbau und Viehzucht lebten, dürfte der Schwerpunkt auf der Viehhaltung liegen. Die Siedlung war auch in verschiedene Handwerkszweige, wie Metallverarbeitung, Weben und Knochenbearbeitung eingebunden und war, wie Beaumont Leys, Teil eines Netzwerks von Handel und Tausch.

Zusammen belegen die beiden Ansiedlungen eine durchgehende Siedlungstätigkeit über den Großteil der Eisenzeit, und bieten die seltene Gelegenheit, Fundstellen ähnlichen Charakters in nächster Nähe zu untersuchen. Die Ähnlichkeiten sind offensichtlich durch die enge räumliche Beziehungen und die linearen Begrenzungen, entlang derer sich beide Siedlungen entwickelten. Die lange Benutzungsdauer des Siedlungsgebietes ermöglicht eine Analyse der Architekturentwicklung sowie der Muster von Konsum und Deponierung materieller Kultur während der Eisenzeit.