



Fig. 1 Aerial Photograph of Ingleborough (1985)  
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For 150 years the archaeological remains on the summit of Ingleborough have been interpreted as an Iron Age hillfort, complete with 'rampart' and 'hut circles'. New research, encompassing aerial photograph analysis and a review of the existing field evidence, suggests it is something entirely different – a hilltop sanctuary probably in use during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C., with possible earlier origins.

This new framework for understanding the site originated in aerial photographic analysis of a particular series taken in snow melt conditions. They revealed the existence of what looked like a sub-circular feature c.40m diameter in the north-west corner of the summit (Fig. 1, top left). Parts of this structure are visible on the ground in the form of a series of silted up linear depressions. Further analysis showed a faint track or pathway, snaking across the summit from this feature and leaving the plateau via a formal break in the embankment.

Subsequent research suggested the 'hut circles' may in fact be ring cairns, the circular stone banks associated with ritual and sometimes funerary deposits found in many parts of upland Britain and generally dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium B.C. The size and shape of these round structures are very similar to many ring cairns found in the Dales. These are frequently of modest size (c.10m diameter),

without embanked orthostats but with entrances. This new interpretation can only be tested through excavation, but it would explain much, particularly the elevated position of these circular structures, their apparent lack of hearths, and the presence of several 'half' structures (duplicated in ring cairn morphology elsewhere in the Dales). The existence of a previously unrecognised small half-circle of orthostats reminiscent of kerb cairn structures in the north-east corner of the summit adds weight to this hypothesis.

Close examination of the physical remains of the 'rampart' also suggests the model of an Iron Age hillfort is inadequate and misleading. The many gaps and breaks in the enclosure have all been ascribed to destruction and decay, but this is at odds with the field evidence, which on the contrary suggests they are planned and original. The nature of the enclosure varies considerably around the perimeter of the summit, and can be reduced to three main categories – (i) non-existent and/or backfilled (north-west corner/ top left in photo) (ii) earth and stone embankment with occasional orthostats, built gaps and *internal* irregular ditch/pits/quarry scoops which crucially mimic the breaks in the enclosure banks i.e. there are adjacent causeways of unexcavated earth (iii) an elaborate linear stone structure, with integral transverse orthostats and intermittent built gaps, without ditch (north-east corner/top right). The latter has been described as a stone 'rampart', but it is restricted to this one part of the summit, and there is no evidence at all that it ever extended any further.

This new interpretation adds to the growing number of early hilltop enclosures now being recognised elsewhere in northern England, and on reflection should not surprise us. It does however suggest that the existing approaches to and frameworks for certain aspects of prehistory in this area are still less than adequate. Although the term 'hilltop sanctuary' does not exist as an established or recognised archaeological category, nor does the idea that the site may crown the summit of a 'sacred mountain' rest on copious quantities of academic literature, this new interpretation highlights the major problems we still have in assessing the role of landscape within prehistoric cognitive schemes and belief systems. Ingleborough, in the new guise of a hilltop sanctuary, exhibits a most sophisticated and elaborate expression of belief systems which patently encompassed and were seamlessly integrated with major landforms and topographic features. If its prime function during certain periods of prehistory was as a major arena for ceremonial and ritual acts, Ingleborough is challenging us to find better methods and more archaeologically sensitive frameworks for identifying and understanding the history of such places.



Fig.2 Ingleborough, North Yorkshire SD 742 746 (723m OD) from the north east in Chapel-le-Dale.