The Ridgeway and Vale Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2002.

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The work at Marcham/Frilford fits in with the wider aims of the Hillforts of the Ridgeway Project in exploring the three sites of Uffington White Horse Hill, Segsbury Camp and Alfred's Castle, all on the downs south of the Ridgeway in southern Oxfordshire. This is the second season of excavation within the Vale of the White Horse aimed at providing comparative information to articulate with that from the downs. The background to the excavations, including references, are given in last year's interim report (Lock *et. al*. 2002). As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation for Oxford University students and is committed to education in the widest sense. An Education Officer was on-site throughout the month of excavation and gave tours to many visitors including groups from local schools and community organisations. Various activities were organised for National Archaeology Day when c.2,500 people visited the site and talks are given to groups throughout the year. Figure 1 shows the location of trenches over the two seasons of excavation. The geophysics was published in last year's interim.

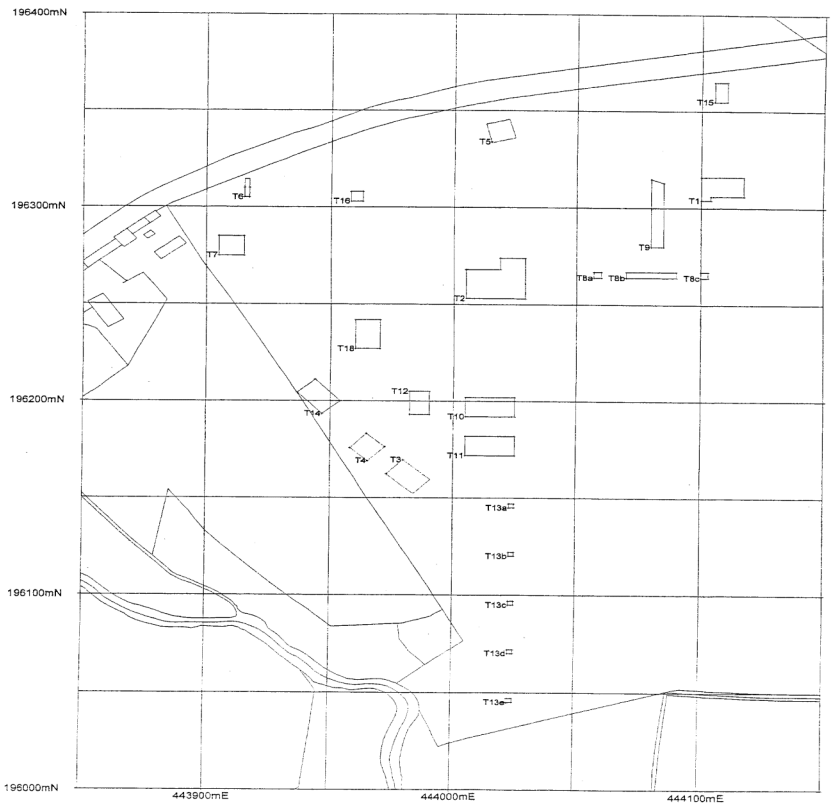

Figure 1. The excavation trenches of 2001 and 2002 (Oxford Archaeotechnics).

Brief report on the excavations in 2002.
Based on last years excavations, and those in the garden of the Noah's Ark in the 1930's (Bradford and Goodchild 1939), the south-western area of the site shows a high concentration of Iron Age activity. This will be described first.

Trenches 10 and 11.
These two trenches continued the prehistoric focus of Trenches 3 and 12 in the 2001 season. Two large open area trenches (each 10 m x 20 m) were placed to explore the area to the east of the two enclosures that were excavated in 2001 and, in part, located to investigate crop marks seen during that season. Furthermore, these trenches were not based upon the presence of geophysical survey anomalies, but rather provided a test of an area that did not show anomalies. Both trenches were stripped down to the natural using a machine to remove the plough soil, and then the sub-soil was excavated by hand. The natural was an awkward mixture of sand and badly decayed limestone. In both trenches a number of features was visible cut into the natural, and all of these were excavated in section.

Trench 10 contained six pits, five of which were clearly archaeological in nature. All had a similar general sequence of deposition, with initial layers of sand, covered with a mixture of limestone rubble and soil. In fact, the composition of the upper fills made the features very difficult to distinguish from the surrounding limestone that they were cut into. All of the pits were well shaped, and regular in construction, and all were rather small. Pit 10025 is the largest and has the most complex stratigraphy. Interestingly, not a single element of material culture was recovered from any of the pits excavated, making further discussion of purpose or chronology impossible at this point. However, due to the obvious similarities between them, it seems reasonable to suggest that all the features were associated in some way.

All of the features in Trench 11 turned out to be, following excavation, natural, with most of them being tree throws. No positive archaeological evidence was recovered from this trench.

Trench 14.
This remains unfinished and will be continued during the 2003 season so only a brief description is provided here. Located on a group of very strong positive magnetic anomalies close to the area of the 1930's excavations, this trench measured 10 m x 15 m. Covering approximately one third of the trench area was a Romano-British deposit best described as being formed from midden-like material. The layer was a maximum of 0.3 m thick and composed of much animal bone, pottery and some metal artefacts within a dark organic matrix. Where excavated at its eastern extent it was deposited onto bedrock, while its western edges remain to be excavated and here a stone structure appears to underlie it. It thins and disappears towards the north.

Underlying this deposit, and extending over the eastern half of the trench that has so far been excavated, is a series of inter-cutting Iron Age pits cut into the bedrock. The small number that have been half-sectioned have revealed poorly formed pits, although

substantial in size, filled with a variety of deposits containing a range of Iron Age material including probable Early to Middle Iron Age pottery and bone. Many more pits have been identifying and await excavation in 2003.

It seems that the combination of the midden deposit overlying a high concentration of Iron Age pits was sufficient to create the series of large positive magnetic anomalies which are so clear in the geophysical survey.

The remaining trenches are focussed on the Romano-British activity at the site which is located to the north of the Iron Age features described above, along the east to west axis created by the temple and amphitheatre. Excavations continued from 2001 on the large public building (Trench 2) situated between these two major structures and on the amphitheatre itself. New trenches were opened to investigate the character of the temenos wall and its interior area (Trenches 6, 7 and 16), and on another area of major public buildings to the west of Trench 2 (Trench 18).

Trench 2.
This trench, begun in 2001, covers part of a large stone structure (or 'building'), circa 30m by 15m, with its long axis lying E-W, which was identified by geophysical survey in 2001. On the west, north and east sides there are smaller rectilinear extensions or side-chambers, with pits and areas of rubble within the walled area. The 2001 season examined the central area of the building, parts of this area were re-opened and extended westwards in 2002 to cover its entire western extent (Figure 2).

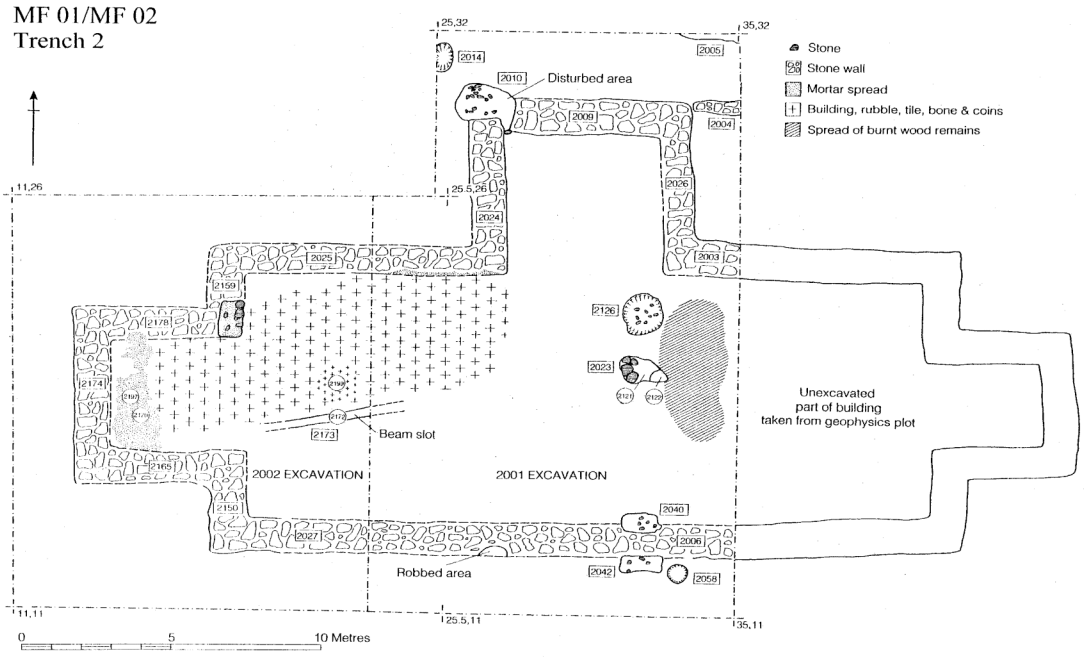

Figure 2. Trench 2. The large central building.

The deposits in Trench 2, including the linear limestone rubble features which comprised the building, are extremely fragile and extensively robbed and plough-damaged. These stone features can be best interpreted as wall-foundations rather than the lower courses of true upstanding walls, built against the sides of shallow linear cuts into the underlying Iron Age soil. Evidence of plough striations and some damage on top of the stone features show that their upper surface defines the base of the ploughsoil, although in the softer deposits in the centre of the building the plough has cut slightly deeper.

The main stone wall features comprising the western area of the building were numbered sequentially by segment running anticlockwise around the trench [2025, 2159, 2178, 2174, 2181, 2165, 2150, 2187]. Within these there was little significant variation in dimension or depth, but the density and quality of the remaining stonework was variable with e.g. [2150] being a lot more solid and void-free than e.g. [2174]. This may possibly imply differential plough damage.

Discontinuous yellow crumbly mortar spreads were observed across much of the western area, in some places lapping over the top of the walls, e.g (2197), (2198). This accords with the observations made in 2001, especially over wall [2025]. Some mortar patches, such as the rectangular block at the internal NW corner, are apparently degraded architectural features, and may represent parts of a floor surface screed. Beneath and beyond the surviving traces of the yellow mortar was a spread of Roman tile rubble, distinguished by large numbers of disarticulated animal bones (particularly sheep and goat mandibles), Late Roman pottery sherds and very numerous finds of 4th-century copper coins and iron hob nails. It is now clear that the layer observed in 2001 with all these characteristics (2070) was merely part of a much more extensive spread which covers most of the western area of the building. So consistent in character was this deposit, that despite being given a series of separate context numbers for sampling purposes, it provides a good unified stratigraphic benchmark with which to build a phasing framework for the central/western area of the trench.

New information on the extent of the tile rubble spread was obtained: it appeared to be bounded by a dark linear mark running SW-NE from just within the SW internal corner; during excavation it became clear that this was a beam-slot [2173], on a slightly different alignment to the walls. The discovery of the beam slot led to a re-investigation of the boundaries of the tile rubble in the 2001 trench (2070), which was further investigated in 2002 and was shown also to be bounded by [2173], although this eastern part of the beam slot had not so easily been detectable in 2001. From above, it was just perceptible that the oblique line of the beam slot may possibly have had a parallel counterpart boundary crossing the northern walls and excluding a small corner of the interior just within the NW corner of the interior at the junction of walls [2025]-[2159], where the tile rubble was less evident.

The tile rubble in the area of the 2001 trench was wholly removed in 2002, revealing a thin spread of crushed limestone (2217) above a clean surface of reddish orange soil (2068) , which was consistent with the 'Iron Age soil' surface observed beneath the plough horizon across the rest of the 2001 trench. In 2003, the rest of the tile rubble

exposed in 2002 will also be removed. A crushed limestone and mortar feature with large pieces of limestone rubble (2199), stratigraphically beneath, but showing through the tile rubble as a low dome (and interestingly located on the central E-W axis of the building), began to be exposed in 2002. The traces of related mortar and stones underneath the tile rubble in the 2001 trench area (2217) confirmed that these features belong to a phase earlier than the tile rubble, and may represent primary aspects of the use of the building, and given their position may be part of the building's structure (a major internal post support is one possibility). Further excavation of these deposits will take place in 2003.

Magnetic susceptibility mapping within the 2001-2002 areas of the building interior, showed a dense area of burning along the inside of the main north wall [2025], which is also marked by pink limestone on the inner wall edge: magnetic readings suggest that this episode seems to have primarily affected the wall and the clean soil beneath the tile rubble. The rubble did not show the same consistent burning, so was in all likelihood deposited after the burning took place.

In the east/centre of the 2001 trench was a slightly-raised platform of burnt clay and mortar [2023] which may represent a hearth, or alternatively a burnt architectural feature such as a large post-pad. Around this raised area (which survived plough destruction, perhaps due to the harder texture of the burnt clay deposits) was preserved a slight trace of possible surviving floor surface. This was subjected to excavation and sampling for archaeo-magnetic dating in 2002. Unfortunately the burnt layers had not been fired to a sufficiently high temperature for this technique to yield any useful results. Work on the charred timbers found in this part of the 2001 trench (which may have resulted from the same episode as the severe burning elsewhere) is still ongoing at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology, University of Oxford, where dendrochronological and radiocarbon dating is being carried out. A substantial circular rock-cut pit nearby [2126], begun in 2001, was fully excavated in 2002 revealing Roman pottery in its lower fill.

The continuing preliminary interpretation is that the area of Trench 2 saw considerable Iron Age activity, characterised by numerous small pits discovered largely in the 2001 season. At some stage in the Later Roman period, stone foundations (perhaps designed to support the sill-beams of a large timber building) were cut into this Iron Age soil. The building may not have lasted long before it was destroyed by fire. Another, more ephemeral timber structure seems to have been built within the area of the stone building, most probably of rectangular plan laid out at an angle across the NW sector, and was floored with Roman tile rubble with a screed of loose mortar on top to even out the surface. Some similarities between the dates of the coins found in this tile rubble and in the Late Roman cemetery excavated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries across the main road from the Noah's Ark (Akerman 1865; Calkins 1978; Dudley-Buxton 1920; Rolleston 1869; 1880), have given rise to suggestions that this phase may have been closely linked to the creation of the burials. On present indications, activity seems to have extended to the very late Roman period but there is little evidence for any subsequent presence. These will be reviewed during further excavation in 2003.

Trench 18

This was opened over an area on the geophysical survey that showed a collection of possible structural remains although it shed little light on the extent and definition of any such structures. It should be noted that as Trench 18 was opened late in the season, only a minimal level of progress was made during 2002. However, this was enough to show that there were at least three different types of standing walls within the trench (of a yet unknown relationship to each other). The very limited work conducted so far, which consisted of removing the top soil and subsoil, as well as three small exploratory slots excavated down to the natural to confirm and identify the nature of structural remains has produced a very rich assemblage of finds, including painted wall plaster, a range of ceramics, coins, and a number of significant well crafted metal artefacts. Trench 18 will be re-opened and excavation will continue in 2003 field season.

Trenches 6, 7 and 16

Trenches 6 and 16 were located to investigate the temenos wall of the temple precinct which showed in places on the geophysics. The wall ran east-west through Trench 6 and turned through a right angle in Trench 16 heading south (Figure 3). The foundation trench of the wall was all that survived, being about 0.7 m wide and cut into subsoil to a depth of approximately 0.3 m. It was packed with mortared limestone rubble and was possible of supporting a substantial stone wall.

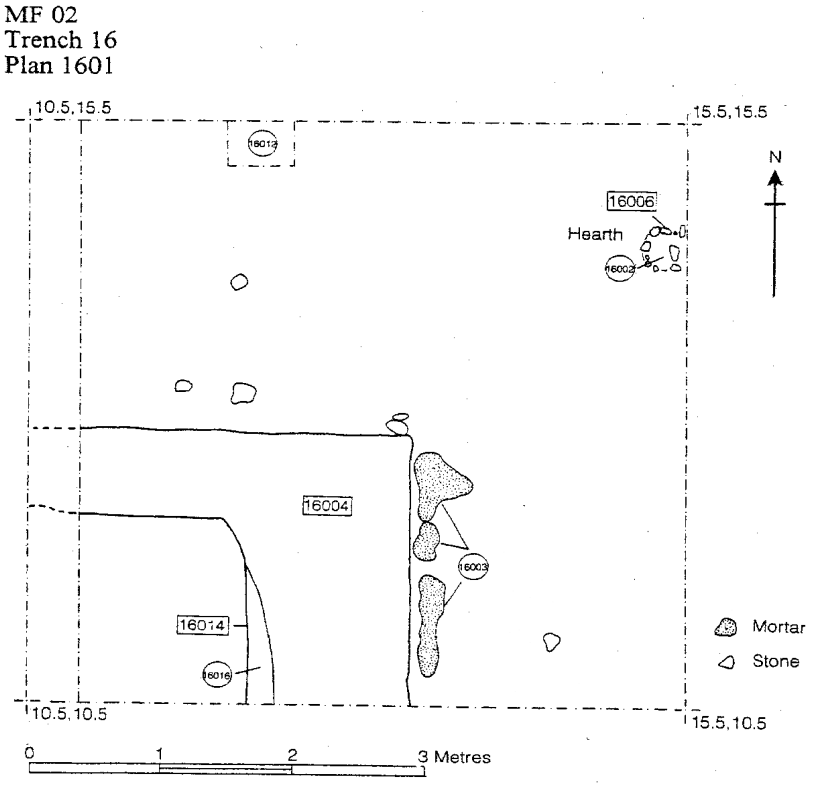

Figure 3. Plan of trench 16.

There was evidence for structures outside the temenos wall in both trenches. In Trench 6 a cobbled surface had Romano-British pottery and artefacts upon and within it together with areas of mortar and seems to have been a building backing onto the temenos wall. The evidence within Trench 16 was more ephemeral could have represented a wall and hearth.

Trench 7 was located within the temenos area on a geophysical anomaly and measured 10 m by 10 m. It contained nothing other than two possible small tree-throws in an east-west line on the long axis of the temple. These could have been planting hollows for small trees or shrubs within the temple precinct and garden perhaps associated with the pathway into the eastern side of the temple discovered in the 1930's excavations (Bradford and Goodchild 1939).

Trench 1.

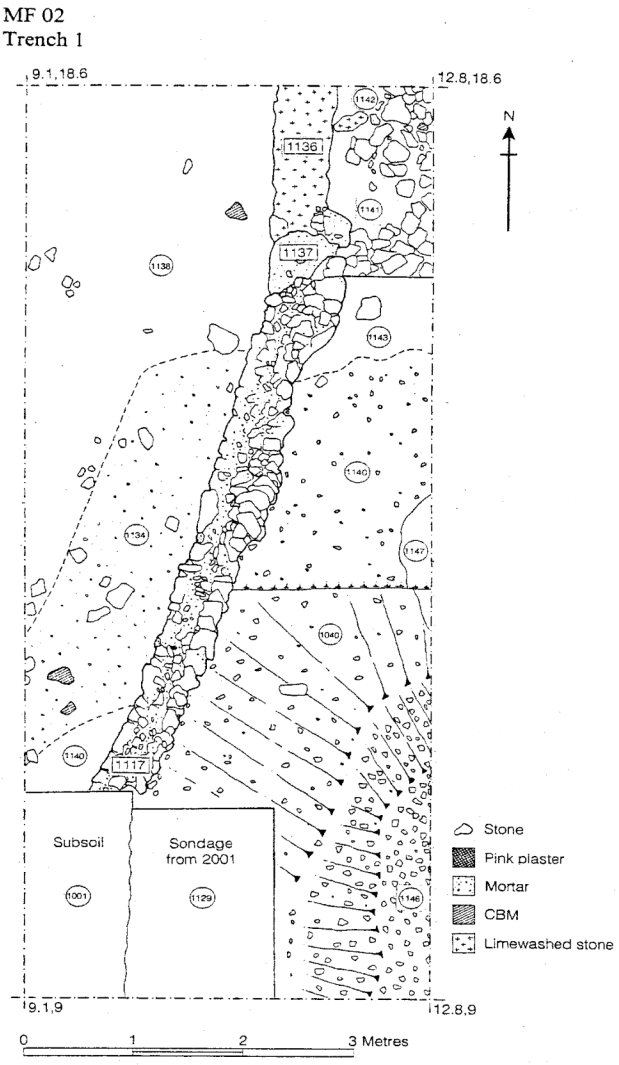

Figure 4 (left). Trench 1. Plan of wall and 'entrance'.

At the east end of the site was a round structure some 60m in diameter, which we have thought of as an amphitheatre. As the 2002 season progressed we became less certain about the nature of this structure, for reasons we will explain below. Trench 1 was begun in 2002 and located over what might be an entrance-way to the circular structure. Initial efforts concentrated on exposing the wall and the area inside the structure. To this end a number of layers of sandy clay was removed from within the wall. These were presumably part of the collapsed bank and also included mortar spreads which had eroded from the wall. The bottom of the deposits was not reached. The wall was made from dressed chalk blocks held in place by mortar. A break in the wall was also revealed with a broad step set into the wall some courses lower than the top of the wall. This step was partly covered in tumble (Figure 4). The surface of the wall was still covered in its upper sections with

mortar or coarse plaster which still retained traces of red paint to pick out the brickwork (Figure 5).

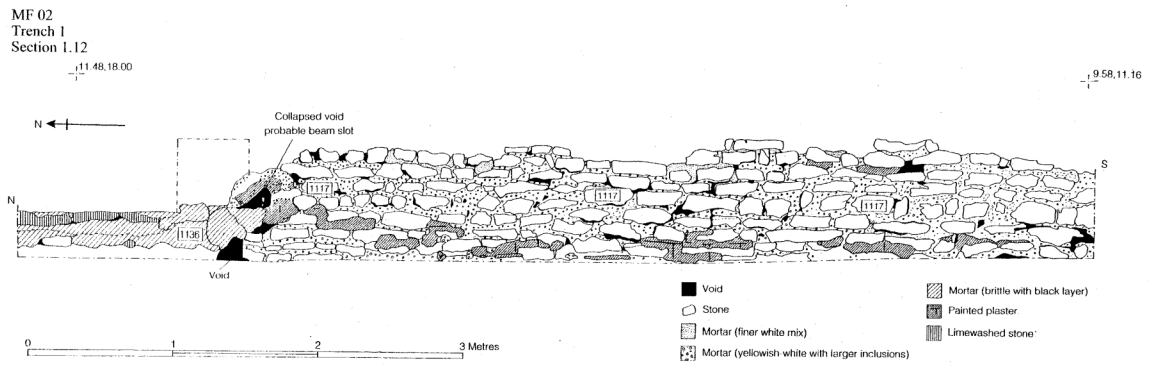

Figure 5. Section drawing of the wall in trench 1.

Much work is still needed in the 2003 season to uncover the full nature of the possible entrance-way and its relationship with the surrounding bank. An understanding of this area will help greatly in our interpretation of the structure as a whole.

Trench 9.

Three areas were targeted in trench 9 following excavations last season: we aimed at a full cross-section of the bank of the structure; investigations continued within the stone-walled structure on the south side of the structure and a limited probe was made within the 'arena' to look at the deposits there. A long section was cut through the bank (Figure 6) from the 'arena' wall in the north to the back end of the bank at the south.

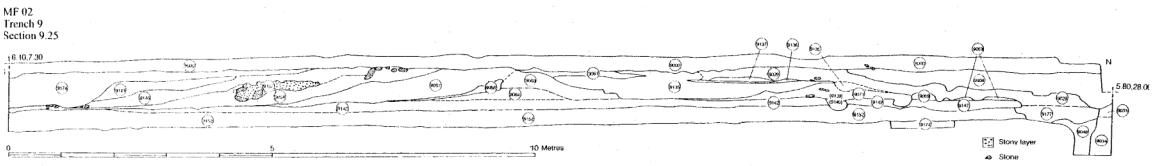

Figure 6. Western section through the bank in trench 9.

A series of clay and sand layers was found to be sitting on top of a probable buried soil (9142) containing small pieces of (probably) Iron Age pottery. This sits in turn on a subsoil (9152) which also contains prehistoric pot. These are thought to be the surfaces on which the structure was constructed. At the northern end and centre of the bank is a number of thick clay layers with a possible posthole (9139) cut through them, which may have contained timbers to support the bank. At the southern end of our trench the bank slopes down and overlying it is a series of waterlogged deposits with mineral staining which might possibly be part of a ditch fill at the south end of the bank. We will extend

the trench further to the south next season to test this possibility. In its centre the bank is missing its original apex, presumably removed by ploughing. However, it looks as though the bank were gently rounded at the tope and not especially high, a fact which is important for our overall interpretation.

Abutted onto the southern side of the wall of the main structure is a walled enclosure which was partially excavated in 2001. In 2002 we removed more fills of sand and clay with variable amounts of finds. Towards the end of the excavations we started to uncover the foundations deposits for the walls, especially on the southern side. In these lowest layers there are hints of channels cut into the lowest deposits and a void under the southern wall. More excavation is needed to reveal whether these have any pattern, with the possibility that the may have been to do with water regulation (see below).

To the north of the 'arena' wall we excavated a small sondage (roughly 2 x 1m) to see if we could find the base of the 'arena'. We removed a series of sand and mortar layers , which are probably due to the erosion of the bank and some of the structure of the wall. Under these was a red plaster layer which may have fallen from the wall or may have been laid where it was found. This was within sediments thought to be waterlain and underlying this was a series of muds of varying colours overlying rock, both muds and rock being below the present water table. The basal rocks did not look natural, but neither did they form any obvious pattern. Further excavation on a larger scale next season is needed to ascertain the nature of the deposits in this area.

Trench 8b

This was a small trench (c2mx2m) excavated to the south of trench 9 to investigate the nature of the coomb deposit in this area. The layer beneath the topsoil here contained very large numbers of bronze, glass and iron objects of Romano-British date which were probably deliberately deposited, but not connected with any convincing evidence of structures. They are apparently evidence of a previously unsuspected set of activities being carried out just outside the bank of the circular structure.

Sequence and significance

The major puzzle is the circular structure at the eastern end of the site. We started excavating the 'amphitheatre' reasonably happy with this interpretation, but as we proceeded doubts have accumulated. Before excavation we were aware that the overall shape of the structure is round not elliptical, differing from most amphitheatres. Two seasons of excavations revealed a 1.5m depth of wall in front of the bank, but the bank itself never appeared to be massive enough to hold a substantial audience. At the back on the bank to the south an extra trench revealed a large number of bronze, glass and bone finds which looked as if they had been deliberately deposited, which we could not quite equate with amphitheatre activity. The front retaining wall may be of two phases of use. The upper part of the wall is plastered and this has been painted in red to give a false masonry effect, but no plaster is found below the first 50 cm or so and this may not be due to differences in preservation. Once the base of the wall was reached we started to hit water and it was here that doubts really set in. The rectangular structure is still in the

process of excavation and we are not sure of its purpose, an uncertainty linked our doubts about the structure as a whole.

The structure is situated at the northern end of a natural coomb, which shows up as green linear feature on aerial photographs, so obviously retains water to some degree. It is possible that there is a natural spring or runoff deeper than we have dug so far and that the Romano-British population enclosed the upper end of the coomb to create a pool. The rectangular structure, which might be a special viewing area if it were an amphitheatre, or some means of regulating the water, if it turns out to be a pool. At present we tend towards the idea that this might be a pool, enclosed by a shallow bank and with votive deposits round the outside of the bank. What exists in the middle we hope to discover next season. A compromise solution is possible, with an early pool feature silting up, the upper part of the walls being plastered and the whole used for meeting, theatre or ritual. One advantage of the pool interpretation is that it gives unity to the site as a whole, with a temple at one end, a pool at the other and a number of large buildings in between and it may be that the temple was built because the pool was there. The other Romano-British structures on the site all appear to date to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, as did the burials excavated in the nineteenth century. There are indications that the circular structure may have had a longer span of use, with finds from the first and second centuries. Whether there was any Iron Age use of this end of the site still remains to be discovered, as do any possible continuities between the Iron Age and Romano-British phases.

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