

The Ridgeway and Vale Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2004.

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Introduction to the Ridgeway and Vale Project

The background to the project and site has been detailed in previous interim reports in South Midlands Archaeology (Lock et. al. 2002; Lock et. al. 2003; Lock et. al. 2004). As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation for Oxford University students, and is committed to education in the widest sense. Education Officers were on-site throughout the month of excavation and gave tours to many visitors including groups from local schools and community organizations. Various activities were organized for National Archaeology Day when c. 2,000 people visited the site and talks are given throughout the year.

The 2004 excavation season

The 2004 excavations had five main goals: 1) further investigating the large circular structure¹ which involved extending existing trenches, as well as opening a significant area running from the wall and bank into the centre of the feature [trenches 1, 8b, 9, & 17]; 2) further investigating the structures in trench 18; 3) locating the entrance to the temple *temenos* wall [trenches 15, 19, & 22]; 4) clarifying the nature of the eastern end of the large rectangular structure in trenches 2 and 23; and 5) continuing with the program of environmental work. In addition, one trench [21] was also excavated across a palaeochannel running south from the circular structure and this revealed archaeological features of Romano-British date, but unknown type. As part of this, work resumed in a number of existing trenches, with extensions made to facilitate our research goals, as well as in several new trenches. In all areas, the initial stripping of turf and/or removal of backfill was assisted by machine shovel, with work continuing by hand once archaeological deposits were reached. The 2004 field season focused largely upon the Romano British components of the site, and little if any prehistoric material was encountered. This report will briefly present an overview of the progress made for each trench and discuss the results.

The Temple Precinct and Associated Structures (Trenches 15, 18, 19, & 22)

The presence of the Romano-British Temple in the garden of the Noah's Ark public house has long been established (Bradford and Goodchild 1939). However, until our excavations little has been known about the wider temple precinct and immediate environs. Geophysical survey and excavations in previous seasons have demonstrated the presence of a number of Romano-British structures lying in close proximity to the east of

¹ Also referred to as 'arena' in the text. While both terms are used interchangeably at this stage, no final determination has been made about the exact nature of the feature.

the temple, as well as several segments of the *temenos* wall which demarcates the area of the temple compound. Investigations in this area during the 2004 season focused upon further understanding the nature of the structures around the temple, establishing their relationship with the temple, and finding the formal entrance to the temple complex. These are discussed by trench, starting with the search for the entrance.

In 2003, geophysical survey work was carried out along and around the eastern edge of the *temenos* enclosure to establish the location of the east wall of the temple precinct. The northern boundary wall had been detected in two places during the 2002 excavations (trenches 6 and 16 - Lock et. al. 2003). The survey showed a number of anomalies which were considered worth investigating. To do so, three small trenches were opened in 2004. Trench 19 produced no evidence of archaeological activity to explain the anomalies on the survey; trenches 15 and 22 were more productive.

Trench 15

Trench 15 was opened as a long narrow slot designed to cut across the precinct wall. While an area of cobbling was encountered in the area exposed, the wall itself was not found. The trench was extended to the south, increasing its size to 15m x 13m, and linked it to trench 18. In the extension to trench 15, the remains of the *temenos* boundary were apparent as a ghost wall or robber trench 1.2m wide, with the wall stopping just south of the initial boundaries of the trench. It seems that first slot went straight through the entrance to the precinct, and therefore missed the walls.

Just inside the temple enclosure was evidence of a room joining the precinct wall. The exact purpose of this extension is not known. Outside the temple enclosure a single wall extended to the east possibly indicating that there had been a structure on this side of the entrance.

There was evidence of substantial gravel metalling to the south of the building in the temple enclosure. There was also evidence of extensive cobbled surfaces outside the enclosure. This surface might be part of a path that led from the gate. Tesserae, glass, copper fragments, large tiles, and large nails of a type used with substantial timbers were recovered from the area. A coin of Domitian (AD 81-96) was sealed in the top of an earlier ground surface, below where the floor of the room would have been. Furthermore, the remains of an almost complete Savernake-ware pot of the first to early second century AD was found sealed within the cobbling outside the temple entrance. Therefore it would be reasonable to place the construction of the temple precinct somewhere between AD 81 to about AD 120.

The 2004 excavations have resolved some of the questions about the entrance into the precinct, but by no means all of them. Further work needs to be carried out in the area in 2005.

Trench 18

Trench 18 was re-opened and extended in continuation of work begun in 2002 and 2003 (Lock et. al. 2002; Lock et. al. 2003). The main aims of the 2004 investigations were 1)

to finish the excavation of the building in the southern half of the trench ('southern building') with particular emphasis upon understanding the spatial layout in plan, and the vertical sequence of floor surfaces evident both inside and outside the structure; 2) to establish the relationship between the 'southern building' and the temple *temenos* wall; 3) to relate the 'southern building' with the open 'courtyard' between the two buildings in the trench; 4) and to uncover the full floor plan of the structure in the northern half of the trench ('northern building'). The 2004 excavations were successful in all four of these main aims.

'Southern Building'

The entire floor plan of the southern building was uncovered, using an excavation strategy that allowed us to both reveal the extent of all structural components, and sample the deposits without having to fully excavate the entire structure. As can be seen in (Figure 1), the building runs east/west and consists of two 'rooms'. The two main walls [18006] and [18123] both lie on natural, but that does not always mean on solid bedrock, as the underlying limestone is rather irregular and undulating.

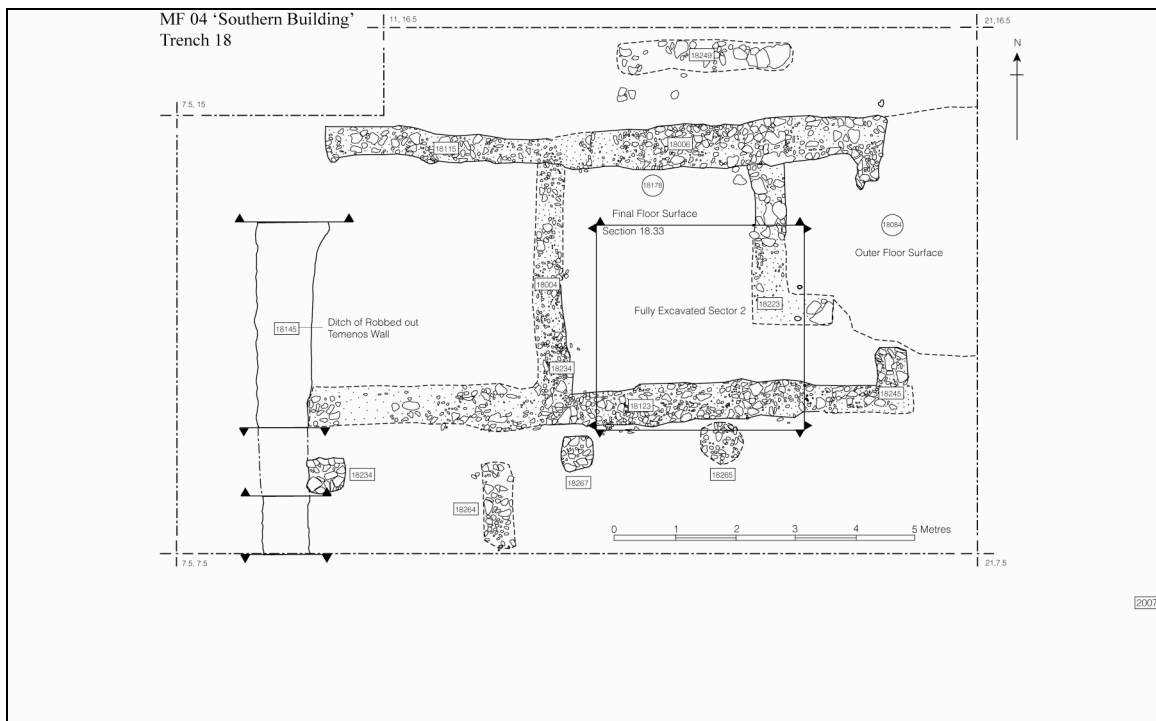


Figure 1: plan of southern building Trench 18

A further wall [18004] seems to be a later addition which runs north/south and divides the building into an east and west room. As was suggested in the 2003 report, there is no evidence for a substantial eastern wall to the structure. This has been further reinforced by the discovery of a slight 'vestibule' consisting of a partial wall just inside the east opening. This feature seems to have divided the outside and inside of the structure, and the sequence of constructed floor surfaces associated with each area (18084).

Detailed excavation, coupled with micromorphological investigation within the eastern room has shown that there was a complex sequence of laid and constructed floor surfaces. While it is hoped that the on-going program of micromorphology will add substance to the interpretation of this sequence, the initial field observations suggest that the accumulated deposits represent a combination of both well constructed floor surfaces, as well as patches of material that might have been used to level out worn areas, or laid as part of a series of minor renovations.

The south-western part of the trench was extended 3m to the west to determine what relationship, if any, existed between the southern building and the temple precinct. Fortunately, there turned out to be a very clear and indisputable direct physical relationship between the temple *temenos* boundary and the building. Excavations revealed the ditch of the robbed out *temenos* wall [18145] (which is consistent with what was found in trench 15 discussed above), which prior to destruction served as the western wall of the building. The western ends of the walls of the southern building clearly butted back onto the *temenos* wall.

Immediately south of the building, a wall, several possible hard clay floor surfaces and three well-built 'pads' of small stones were found [18234, 18267, 18265]. The shape and location of these could suggest that they were part of the building, but of a more ornamental than structural nature; possible the base foundation for standing pillars or statues.

'Courtyard'

During the 2004 season the excavation of the area between the two buildings was completed. It seems that the courtyard doesn't reach as far as the walls of the buildings, but rather is surrounded by its own boundary. On the northern and southern sides the walls are evident. The eastern side wall is more ephemeral in keeping with the pattern established with the stone structures; its layout and circumstantial evidence suggest that this was perhaps a wooden fence rather than a stone wall. The western courtyard wall has not been uncovered as yet, and like the structures, most likely extends under the western bulk of trench 18. As the walls are low and not well grounded, and there are no clear associated post holes, it seems most likely that the area was not roofed. The earliest Roman layer is a floor consisting of gravel, containing fine pottery (including parchment ware and terra sigillata), some vessel glass, bone, and shell fragments. Overlying this floor level were two possible middens which may have been contemporary with each other, but composed of different materials.

'Northern Building'

As the 2004 priority was to complete the excavations of the southern building, only limited excavation was conducted in the northern building. We restricted efforts to the removal of several layers of building material that covered the main walls. The floor plan consisted of three main walls which were well-mortared. As with the southern building, there was no evidence for a substantial eastern wall, leading us to conclude that neither structure possessed one, and both were part of a similar logic of construction. The

deposits covering the walls consisted mainly of a mix of mortar and large limestone blocks, and are almost certainly the destruction rubble of the building. This material was laid directly on top of a cohesive and substantial very dark floor surface which covered the interior of the building. Interestingly, a hearth was found overlying this floor surface, but the exact relationship of between the two is as of yet unknown.

Trench 22

Trench 22 uncovered part of the remains of a two-cell building (Figure 2). The main and earliest phase of the structure was a square room which contained a well-preserved oval hearth [22006]. Beneath the hearth, a series of stake-holes, cut from various levels, was found. The second room, which was rectangular in shape, was butted against the west wall [22002] of the first room.

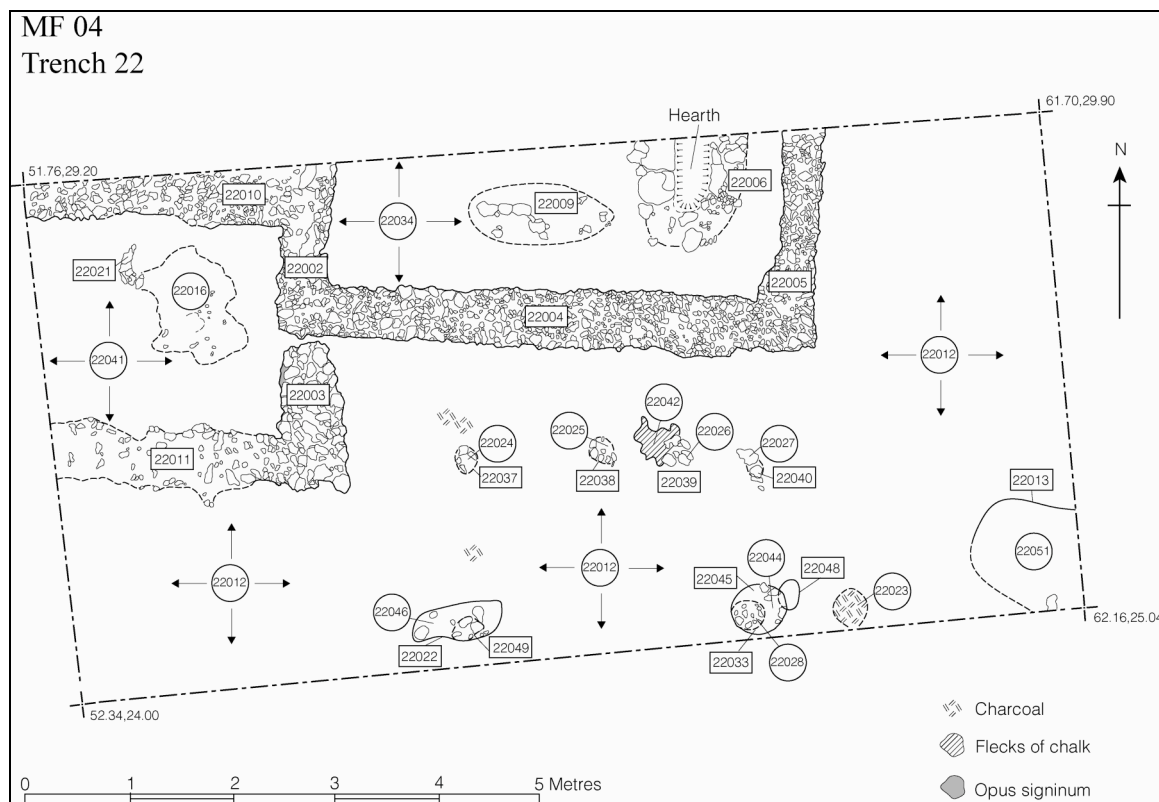


Figure 2: plan of Trench 22

On the south side of the first room there was a series of post-holes, recognised from the remains of their stone packing [22037-22040]. This may have supported a veranda. A series of ephemeral features were found to the south of the veranda, some of which seem to be the stake-holes of a fence line. Due to the number of cuts in the area it is possible that this boundary had been replaced at least three times. Due to the paucity of material culture recovered, significant dating evidence for this building was not obtained, nor was its use determined. However, it should be noted that at least two other similar hearths were found in near-by trenches 12 and 18.

Further work

We can say that we are dealing with two buildings, probably open-fronted to the east, but butting the *temenos* wall to the west, with a courtyard between. In 2005 the excavations at the northern building will be completed, further exploring the possible floor surfaces; the trench will be extended to determine the relationship with the building and the temple *temenos*; and the stone surfaces that have been discovered in previous seasons to the east of the building will be excavated, with a sampling strategy developed to determine how far to the east these extend, and to see if some connection can be established between the Trench 18 structures, and the large rectangular building investigated in Trench 2.

The Rectilinear Building (Trenches 2 and 23)

Extensive excavations during the previous three seasons have almost completely exposed the layout and floor plan of the large rectilinear structure located between the temple and the circular feature. In 2004 the decision was taken to reopen only the eastern extension of the rectilinear building in Trench 2 to look at the building itself and to establish if any link existed with the circular structure. In 2004 attention focused both on the interior to see what further clues there might be to the building's structure and function, and on the extra mural cobbled surface which extended eastwards beneath the unexcavated area. It was thought this cobbled surface might form a link to the circular structure sited to the north – northeast. A small extension trench measuring 10m x 2m was therefore opened in week 1 extending eastwards from the northeast corner of the main trench to examine the extent and direction of the cobbled surface. A further 10m x 3m trench - Trench 23 – was then laid out at roughly a 45 degree angle to it in the direction of the circular structure.

Trench 2

The extra-mural cobbling to the east of the main building was separated from it by a shallow gully running the full length of the eastern side. At this extreme south end the continuation of the gully to the west showed the narrow wall at the south-east corner of the main building to be entirely separate. Whether this wall formed part of an ancillary building or dated from a separate building phase was not clear, but it was well built with a finished end.

Attention then turned to the east end of the building itself. The foundation level of the walls were of a similar construction and dimension to those in the rest of the building, although more massive here than elsewhere. The walls to the north and the east were extensively robbed out, but a line of mortar to the south and west respectively indicated the inner face of the walls had been mortared. This mirrors evidence found last year in the central/western sector of the building. The robbed out remains of the east wall were of particular interest since its relationship to the cobbling implied a possible entrance way.

Work on the interior of the building began with excavation of the spread of burnt limestone revealed last year and interpreted as a possible hearth sited almost centrally in the eastern extension, possibly a later episode. The interior of the building was largely sterile of finds except for the odd fragment of pot, bone or tile. There was no evidence whatsoever of the huge burning so apparent in the central/western sector of the building nor the rich tile/jaw bone/pot material so distinctive in the north-western sector.

During the final week excavation concentrated on the central area and it was here below the hearth and bedded directly into the bedrock, that a linear feature was found - in parts fragmentary, formed by small stones tightly compacted in a sand and grit matrix. Its orientation and size suggests that it was a load-bearing wall. No feature of a similar nature has been found in any other part of the building, although a building of this size must have had some internal supports. A diagnostic rim sherd dating to the second century AD was recovered from where the linear was bedded into the bedrock and may provide an initial date for this feature. In common with the rest of the building, no recognisable floor surface was discovered even though the trench was excavated down to bedrock in places.

The cobbling at the eastern end of the building did not, at first sight, appear to be a surface upon which one could easily walk, being formed from large irregular limestone blocks. However, with smaller stones on top it would have created a level surface. It extended eastwards into the newly opened extension trench and can be seen as an extension of it. However, as excavation continued eastwards, a lower layer comprising much smaller limestone fragments with tile and bone between them was uncovered. This continued for about three quarters the length of the extension trench where the cobbling broke down into random pockets of irregularly placed limestone blocks. It was anticipated that the cobbling immediately adjacent to the building would reveal a similar lower layer of cobbles but when a sample 1m square was lifted, an entirely different underlying 20cm layer of pea gravel was exposed, which did not extend into the gully. This could have been a levelling surface upon which a floor might be laid.

The full extent of the cobbling is unknown without further excavation but is only found at the east end of the building and might have formed a path, with at least three phases. A number of small finds were recovered including some coins which appear to date to the late 4th century above a lower level. This pathway (if it is a path) might be a late feature in the history of the site.

Trench 23

This 10m by 3m trench was placed at approximately 45 degrees to the extension trench running in the direction of the circular structure, Figure 4. The intention was to reveal any connection the cobbled surface might have with the arena's perimeter. The upper topsoil was stripped by machine and the lower topsoil taken off by hand. Apparent limestone rubble was revealed almost immediately in the extreme south western corner nearest Trench 2 extension and a few 4th century coins were recovered from the lower topsoil. However, on excavation the limestone blocks further to the east revealed themselves as an extremely well constructed single length of wall (23000) running south-west to north-east. The orientation of the wall is at odds with both the building in Trench 2 and the amphitheatre and its purpose is currently unknown. Extension of the trench to the north and south in 2005 should reveal whether it forms part of a building or perhaps some type of boundary feature. Its placement between the rectilinear building and the amphitheatre is suggestive and it has the distinction of being the best constructed wall yet found on the site.

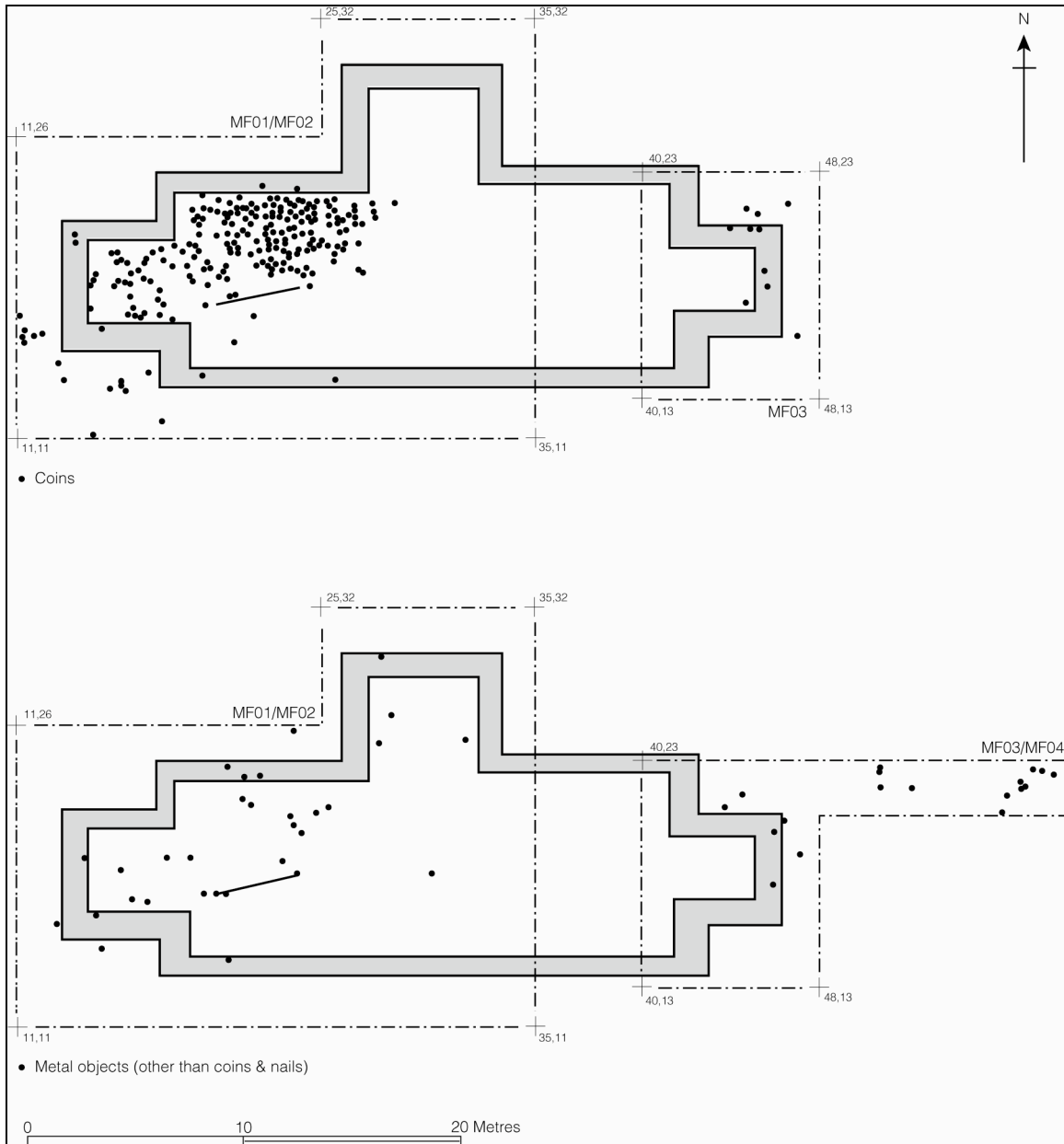


Figure 3: the distribution of coins and of metal objects other than coins and nails in Trench 2

The 2004 excavation produced both supporting evidence for previous interpretations and threw up some surprises. The symmetry of the wall positions, the consistency of their width and the massiveness of the lower foundations onto bedrock supports the argument that this was an important building. The difficulty remains in discerning its primary and possibly secondary phases. Large sectors of the building interior have been generally sterile and this has been borne out by examination of the finds distribution from the last four years, Figure 3 shows coins and metal objects other than coins and nails. The results are striking and show the main area of activity as predominately the western sector, but it also emphasises how consistently these finds, mostly coins, respect both the walls and the

beam slot. This argues for both being present before this deposition. The distinctive context of tile/animal jawbone/pot, from which the finds in the western sector came, is not present in the eastern extension or elsewhere. The finds from the east are generally to be found outside the walls. If then, the positioning of the finds in the western sector suggest secondary use, the building is largely sterile of finds in its primary phase.

The complete lack of small finds and very limited amounts of pottery and bone fragments found in the central, northern and southern sectors of the building might support a hypothesis that the original building had a suspended floor which prevented finds from dropping to the ground, particularly as no evidence of any other type of floor was found. Such an interpretation would be supported by the discovery of the central linear feature in the east end and by the fact that the distribution of metal objects largely matches that of the coins.

The Circular Structure/Arena (Trenches 1, 8b, 9, & 17)

Larger-scale excavations than previously were carried out on the large circular structure during the 2004 season, Figure 4. The main trenches from previous seasons were reopened and a number of significant extensions were made. Efforts were made to better understand the construction of the walls and bank at the north and east ends of the feature, as well as to uncover the floor surfaces and drainage features encountered in previous seasons by opening a large section of the interior.

Trench 1

Trench 1 was located on the suspected eastern entrance of the arena. In 2001-3 a stretch of arena wall was uncovered with a two metre wide deliberate break in the top courses at the most easterly point. A matching break in the bank extends east beyond the wall. Excavation in 2004 uncovered more information about the nature of this break in both the wall and the bank which is increasingly inconsistent with an entrance to the arena at this point. New interpretations suggest that rather than an entrance, the gap may relate to a platform, or viewing point above the floor of the arena. The eastward extension of the trench was halted by the unexpected discovery of a group of burials at the rear of the bank.

Investigations behind the lower part of the wall in 2003 revealed a series of rubble deposits which were interpreted as a possible ramp and entrance associated with the break in the encircling bank. Despite further investigation in this area, convincing evidence for entrance structures, either in wood or stone, has yet to be discovered. No evidence has been found for steps, or a slope, reaching from the lower wall to a surface within the arena (unprecedented in amphitheatre design), or for a practical way of negotiating the vertical and horizontal gap between the steep slope in bedrock and the lowered section of arena wall [1136] and the arena floor. Excavation in 2004 of the northern half of this 'entrance' area has raised a third possibility: that rather than providing a physical entrance into the arena this area provided a visual entrance with a flat surface/platform/viewing point overlooking the arena. There are indications from cuts in the bedrock and construction of the wall at this point that at some point there would have been some sort of platform positioned across the width of the gap and extending back behind the wall for over a metre. If we consider the possibility of a stage or podium

at this point rather than an entrance this could explain why we have found no evidence of structures that would have enabled entrance into the arena. The break in the bank behind would then serve as an approach to the rear of the platform.

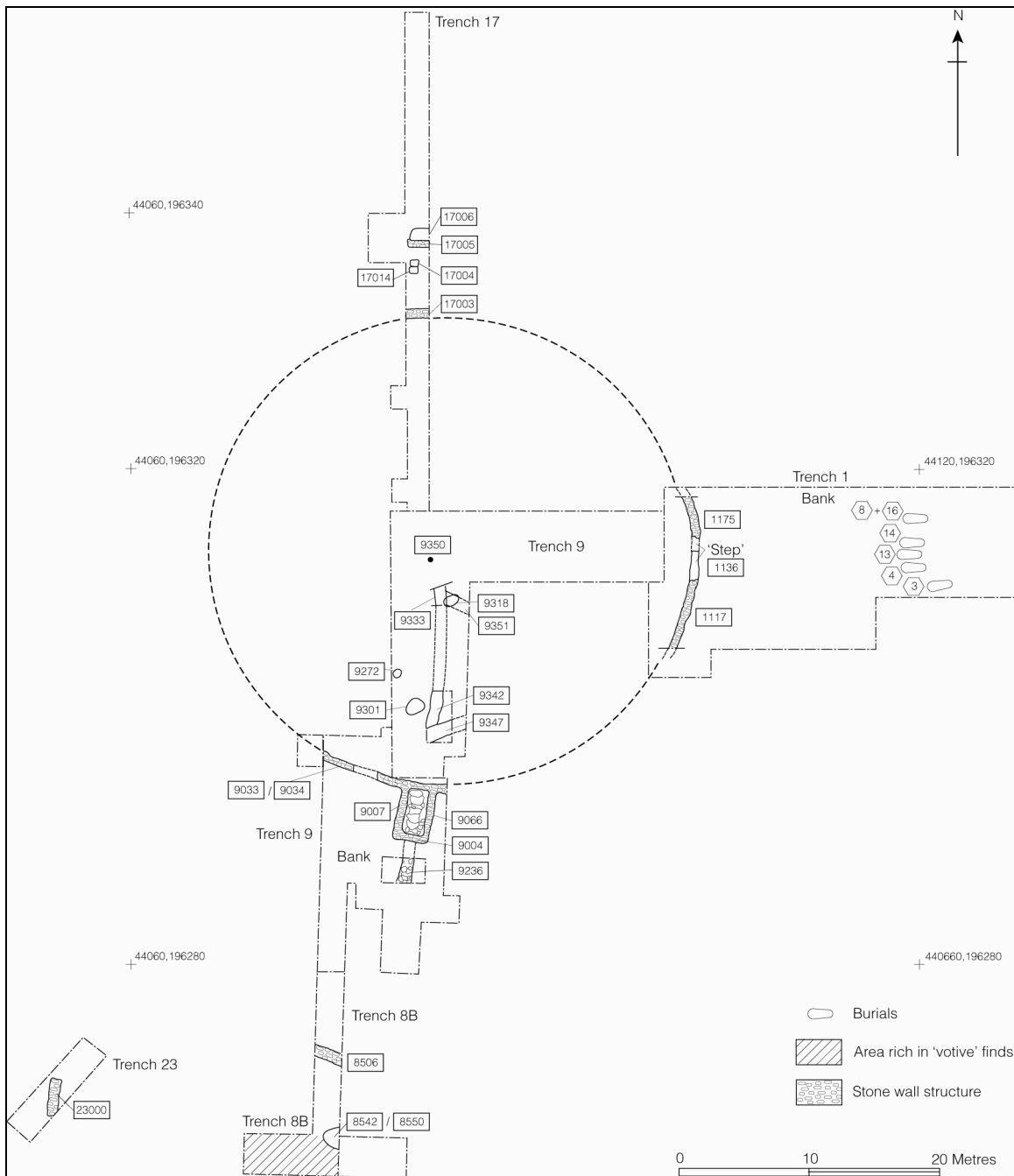


Figure 4: schematic plan of trenches 1, 8B, 9, 17 and 23: the 'amphitheatre'

Investigations of the wall provided further evidence for multiple phases in the configuration of this part of the arena wall and bank. The wall may always have included a lower eastern section but it was reconfigured at some stage when the wall ends were

built up and heavily re-mortared (Possibly to support a platform as discussed above). The top few courses below the gap were also re-mortared in the same way to create the 'step' between the wall ends. Interestingly in this mortared surface of the 'step' we found a footprint (toes pointing west toward the arena), probably of a child or woman. Dating of any phase remains difficult, but contexts associated with the final phases of the arena's use have included several late 4th century coins in good condition.

Bank

The 2004 excavations revealed much more about the nature of the bank in the eastern side of the arena. The break in the bank is far wider than previously thought and considerably wider than the geophysical survey suggested and the bank to the southern side of the gap is problematic. The gap appears to be 'fan shaped', narrowing to a focused point by the 'step'. The bank was clearly never meant to support rows of seating, or even sufficient grassed slope for a sizeable audience. The profile of the bank is whale-backed in shape and does not appear to have undergone as much erosion as previously thought. The steep profile of the front of the bank appears to have been preserved almost intact with the back sloping gently to meet the natural ground level, a certain depth, though no more than 0.5m, has been disturbed from the very top of the bank, probably through agricultural practices. The shape of the bank means that anyone approaching the arena would see nothing of the interior until it was revealed quite suddenly as they reached the top of/gaps in the bank.

In the gap in the bank towards the eastern limit of the trench a thin gritty surface was identified. This appeared to be in line with the break in the bank and could be traced in section to about half way between the back of the bank and the arena wall where it appeared to have been truncated by more recent activity. The stratigraphic relationship with the bank material is unclear, however it does appear to continue up to the rear of the bank and could be contemporary with one of the phases of the bank, possibly representing some sort of construction surface or a 'path' surface for access to the gap in the final phase of use of the arena. In most instances the grave cuts for most of the burials were only clearly identified where they cut this gravel layer.

Burials

Six near complete, articulated adult skeletons, all aligned east-west, were found in the east of Trench 1 either immediately outside or just into the top of the bank (Figure 4). Very little dating evidence was found but they are believed to be of late Roman date from a combination of a lack of grave goods, the prone position of one of the bodies, the east-west alignment and a single corroded Roman coin found within the fill on one grave cut.

Clear cuts were found for only two of the graves; the most northerly contained two skeletons on top of each other, while the neighbouring burial had stone markers positioned around the head and feet. Three further burials were marked by only traces of grave cuts; one of these was prone, a position often interpreted as being associated with wrongdoing in Late Roman practice. All of the grave cuts were extremely shallow. The most southerly burial had no trace of a grave cut and may have been lain on the gravel surface discussed above and then covered. There were also remains of an infant although

no grave cut could be identified and these were unarticulated and poorly preserved. All of the skeletons show signs consistent with being bound/wrapped in shrouds before burial (although no shroud pins were found): the feet bones were extended, shoulders hunched and hands tucked up around the necks.

All but the most southerly skeleton, which lined up with the break in the bank, seemed to have been dug into the bank to some degree and to have been buried at the end of the use of the arena or shortly thereafter. This raises the intriguing possibility that the burials may have been associated with a ceremony marking the closure of the arena. The extent of the burial ground is unknown and it may be that these inhumations represent the western edge of a larger cemetery continuing to the east. The other possibility is that a similar arrangement of inhumations continues along the edge of the bank to the south. The burials do not appear continue to the north.

Trench 9

Excavations in Trench 9 in 2004 represented the first large-scale investigations of the interior of the circular structure. A complex drainage network was partially uncovered and formed the earliest archaeology identified in the season. This drainage network was sealed by a 0.2 m – 0.4 m thick sand deposit that was bedded to the east on a hardcore rubble deposit. Natural water channels cutting through the sand deposit mark the end of the functioning of the drainage network, probably in the 4th century AD. At this point the interior of the circular structure seems to have become a boggy, pond-like area used for the dumping of rubbish as evidenced by the late clay layers and the numerous artefacts retrieved from them.

Trench 9 was an L-shaped trench located inside the ‘arena’ area of the ‘amphitheatre’ structure; it extended 22.5 m north from the previous seasons’ Trench 9 and 23 m west from wall (1175/17) of Trench 1 (Figure 4). The earliest features recorded during this season were recorded in two slots in the north-south leg and comprised a drainage network extending north from the drain [9236] exposed further south during 2003, which seems to postdate the construction of the arena wall. The main drain [9342/9333] was oriented on a north-south alignment, but seems to have had a slightly meandering course. Both sections of these drains revealed possible feeder drains from the east [9347 into 9342 and 9351 into 9333]. None of these features was fully excavated, but some tentative suggestions concerning the construction technique of the drain are possible.

Dry stone construction seems to have been used along the drain’s course. Limestone slabs varying in size capped the drain. The drain seems to have been constructed by the digging of a trench through probable natural clay, but no cut was seen through these deposits. It is possible that these clays represent natural palaeochannel deposits.

To the west of drain [9342], however, a series of dark blackish brown sandy patches was revealed in the clay layer; it is not clear what created these patches, whether they relate to the drain or whether they represent an earlier phase of activity in this area. The vertical sides of the drain were constructed by stacking smaller horizontal limestone slabs on top of each other; five courses to the west and three courses to the east, creating a channel 0.4

m wide. Excavation of the exterior walls of [9342] suggest that the drain was constructed from the inside and that these courses were pressed into the soft clay on either side of the cut, thus explaining the lack of any visible cut for the drain. The base of the drain was not seen at any point in the 2004 season, though part of the eastern side of drain [9342] seems to have been placed directly on top of bedrock.

A stone feature in the centre of the arena was first exposed, though not recognised, during excavations of an evaluation trench in 2003 and may have been the northernmost extent of drain [9342/9333], but no clear channel was revealed during excavation. The linear feature cut the possibly natural layer and was filled by layers of limestone slabs laid horizontally as well as mid greyish/yellowish brown sandy clay layers. The feature seems to be associated with wooden stake (9350) that was exposed during the 2003 season and radiocarbon dated to 1910 ± 60 BP (Beta – 182615), which calibrates to 30 BC – AD 245 (at two standard deviations), which probably puts the date within the early Romano-British period (Plate 1). Wooden stake [9350] was 0.45 m long and circular in cross-section at the top (50 mm in diameter) tapering to a rectangular cross-section at the bottom (20 mm x 10 mm). The stake was driven into a laminated natural clay layer and may have been driven from a higher level, but no relationship was recorded in the 2003 evaluation. The angle at which the stake was driven seems to reflect that of the sides of the cut for the central stone feature which suggests that the stake was connected with its construction, but the exact relationship between the two features is to be further examined.

Two other possible drain features with similar limestone capstones were recorded in plan in the slot through the east-west section of trench 9 and seem to be running on a north-south alignment. The proximity of one to wall [1175/17] raises the possibility that this drain runs inside the perimeter of the ‘arena’ as has been observed at other Romano-British amphitheatres, for example Silchester (Fulford 1989). This drain was overlain by a deposit of rubble; this layer was not fully excavated in the 2004 season. A c.0.2 m thick deposit of mid brownish yellow to mid brownish grey sand overlay the rubble deposit. It is possible that the rubble formed hardcore bedding for sand, which may then arguably be a floor surface within the ‘arena’. It is also noteworthy that a possible mortar moulding butting against the arena wall overlay the rubble deposit. No rubble deposit has so far been identified in the north-south area of trench 9.

A clear stratigraphic relationship was provided by the section through pit [9318], in which it is obvious that structure [9333], that ran under cut [9318], must have existed before the pit was cut through sand. This pit was filled with a homogenous, organic dark brownish black deposit in which several pieces of preserved wood were found as well as some oyster shell, which points to a Roman date. The pit seems to have been filled in one event prior to the deposition of the overlying clays (see below), but its exact function is unclear. A circular posthole [9272] was cut through sand layer and a fragment of a glass vessel was recovered from its fill pointing to a Roman or post-Roman date. No evidence was found of the post, which given the good wood preservation at this level suggests that it was removed before the posthole was filled. Stones at the base of the secondary fill may have functioned as post-packing.

Natural series of water channels also seem to have cut through the sand deposits. These irregular linear features were on a northwest-southeast alignment. All of these features had a single dark greyish brown sandy clay fill. No finds were retrieved from these fills, but medium-sized limestone pieces were found which seem to be too large to have been carried by the water in the channels and it is more likely that they have sunk into the soft clay fills and derive from the dumping episodes into the overlying clay layers (see below). Two linear features in the east-west leg also seem to have been natural water channels and were very similar in nature to those in the north-south section.

A series of clay layers overlay the features cut into the sand deposits. All of these deposits were very rich in artefacts (pottery, animal bone, ceramic building material, coins, a 2nd-century AD zoomorphic brooch and had a high number of rubble inclusions). The pottery seems to date from the 4th century and provides a *terminus ante quem* for the deposition of sands. These clay layers seem to have formed during the same episode or series of episodes that mark the end of the life of the circular structure with its original function. The number and nature of the finds within these deposits suggests that the circular feature was used as a dumping ground in the 4th century. This was overlain by a 0.5 m thick medieval/post-medieval plough soil, which was in turn overlain by modern topsoil.

Further Work

The 2004 excavation season has raised several further questions that need to be addressed in the subsequent season(s) of work in order to answer the central excavation question: what was/were the function(s) of the large circular structure? This year's excavations have provided a useful relative chronology for the life of the circular structure, but more absolute dating is required in particular pertaining to the date of the drain structures and their relationship with the construction of the 'arena' wall, the date of the overlying sand deposits and the date when the drainage network fell into disrepair. Full excavation of several sections of the drain network, including the channel fills, should help solve this as well as clear up questions concerning the construction technique of the drain. We also need to find out what the drainage network is draining, how much is being drained and for what purpose. The drains in the east-west leg that seem to run north beyond the centre of the 'arena' area make it increasingly unlikely that it is just the central area that is being drained. In connection with this, it is necessary to work out how the drains in the east-west leg relate to and potentially connect with those found in the north-south leg of the trench. Other questions over the drainage system include: how many drains exit the circular structure; to where does the network drain outside the structure; are there any feeder drains coming from the west and if not, why not?

The purpose of the sand deposits discovered this season also requires further investigation. If the sand deposit is acting as a floor surface as suggested by the hardcore bedding in the eastern area, why do we not seem to find this hardcore deposit in the southern area? How far does the hardcore rubble deposit extend to the north and south? If the rubble deposit does not act as a bedding deposit for a sand surface, what is its

purpose? If the sand is not a floor surface, what is its purpose and why does it not extend into the central area of the 'arena'?

Trench 17

Initially excavated last season as part of the trench 9 extension, trench 17 was re-opened to confirm the presence of features lying to the north of the circular structure, Figure 4. As outlined in last season's report on Trench 9, excavations originally uncovered the north extent of the arena wall along with a second wall crossing the trench from east to west to the north of the arena wall. Further work this season has revealed details on the construction of the arena wall and the second wall [17005], as well as several other features.

Beginning from the southern end of the trench and moving northwards, the arena wall [17003] was found to consist of at least three components. The first is the wall itself, which contains a series of regularly spaced limestone blocks arranged to form a smooth surface on the south facing side upon which a mortar surface was applied. The mortar used on the arena-facing surface of the wall is the same as those seen in trenches 1 and 9, consisting of a light yellow sandy mortar upon which red painted lines, possibly added to mimic finer stone or brick construction, was applied. The north face of the arena wall appears to also have been built to form a regular surface, although excavation between the wall and bedrock was limited in scope. Between these two faces is a fill of rubble and mortar, and the visible stones along the top of the exposed wall suggest that at least some of these internal stones may have been placed at angles or vertically within the wall packing in order to better consolidate the wall. The wall itself has been constructed very near the bedrock, with the top of bedrock used to help mark the top of the wall itself.

The western end of a second wall was also uncovered [17005], extending east-west across the trench some 5m north of the arena wall. Unlike the arena wall, this structure was constructed using drystone as well as mortar. The wall consists of two courses of drystone arranged in a distinctive herring-bone pattern followed by a 10cm thick layer of mortar which appears to consolidate an upper course of flat stones, much of which has been lost to ploughing. The wall itself appears to have been built on a slight angle, sloping slightly downward from north to south. The western corner of the wall consists of a single, much larger block of limestone with packing stones placed near vertically around its outer edge and a coursing of flat stones to support its base. Extending north from this second wall is a layer of rubble mixed with mortar and yellow sandy clay [17006]. The rubble and mortar appears to rest atop the sandy clay layer, and extend some 7-cm north of the second wall and into the eastern trench edge. Given that the topmost course of the second wall appears to have been removed by ploughing, it is quite possible that these deposits represent scattering of material from the wall.

At least one, possibly two square 60cm x 60cm stone structures were also found between the arena wall and second wall, lying approx 1m south of the second wall at the interface of topsoil and lower soil [17014], [17004]. If these features are considered alongside the presence of the northern wall and mortar surface above the bedrock extending from the arena wall, it is possible that these features together form part of a deliberate platform

overlooking the north side of the arena. Further excavation is therefore necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

The northern half of the trench was opened in order to explore any possible bank material, but unlike the eastern and southern halves of the circular structure, no clear bank deposits were found. A thin lens of yellow sandy clay mixed with small stones was found some 10m north of the north baulk and this may form part of multi-phased activity associated either with the circular structure or with nearby, as yet unknown structures.

Trench 9 Drain

Excavation of the drain south of the walled enclosure [9007] (or 'royal box') was continued this season in order to better understand the phasing of construction of the drain, the enclosure and the bank. A cut into underlying sterile yellow sand was found last season and this was followed in order to trace the extent of drain construction and its relationship with neighbouring layers and structures. The cut was made to take in the drain with the upper stones of the drain resting on the surface of the sterile yellow sand. Furthermore, as it extends northwards toward the south wall of the enclosure, the cut widens considerably both eastwards and westwards. Interestingly, it was found that the cut to place the drain appears to have been made at the same time as the cut to lay the south wall of the 'royal box', as only one cut event is apparent in the associated fill material. In considering the sequence of structures along the south end of the circular structure, it thus suggests that the addition of the drain and enclosure occurred at the same time, and that the break evident in the arena wall over the drain as it extends into the 'royal box' is therefore also likely to be part of the same single construction event.

Understanding the relationship between the drain cut, its fill and any bank construction, however, remains unclear. Large quantities of yellow sandy clay cap the drain and extend eastward beyond the trench edge. This layer, as well as considerable amounts of other darker tips cover the cut in a slope downwards from south to north, as part of a deliberate attempt to completely cap the drain hole. The relationship between the bank and the drain needs clarifying to see whether the bank existed before a gap was cut in it to take the drain. However, it seems clear that the gap in the bank is much smaller on this south side, than that found to the east.

Trench 21

Trench 21 was located in the middle of the palaeochannel running south from the circular structure and was dug to explore the nature of the channel deposits. However, a number of cobbled surfaces were uncovered adjacent to a large ditch, pit or well. This might be a causeway with adjacent ditch, but further excavation is need in 2005 to ascertain the date and function of these features.

In addition, a number of deposits were examined on the banks of the River Ock on the southern boundary of the field and these appear to range in date between early prehistoric and the Medieval period, including Romano-British finds. Further dating and field recording is necessary to uncover the nature and extent of these complex deposits. A programme of geomorphological and micromorphological sampling was carried out, which will be reported in more detail elsewhere.

Discussion

A number of issues have been clarified through work in the 2004 season. The buildings in trench 18 seem to be broadly contemporary with the *temenos* wall and were open at their eastern end. They might have been small public buildings of some kind, such as shops. They lay immediately south of the entrance into the *temenos*, although this entrance has probably been extensively robbed and will need careful excavation in future years. This may have been laid out in the last first century AD. The relationship between the *temenos* area and the large central rectangular building is still unknown and will need investigation in future years, although we know that at least one discrete building existed in trench 22.

The situation at the eastern end of the large rectangular building has been clarified. The distribution of finds at the western and eastern ends of the building is very different, with many more coins and other finds in the west. Whether these relate to the primary phase of the structure's use or some late re-use is still unknown, although we suspect the latter possibility. The finds distributions show a more dispersed scatter outside the west and east ends, lending support to these two areas as likely entrances.

Further, reference to the Romano-British temple (sited to the north east) and excavated in the 1930s records a substantial entrance pathway to its east, comprising three consecutive layers of metallurgy overlain by a thin dark soil from which 78 4th/5th century coins were recovered (Bradford & Godchild 1939, 31-2).

“It is difficult to believe that these coins from the temple pathway owe their origin purely to normal losses by worshippers going to and from the Temple, more especially in view of the absence of coins on the surface of the first and second paths. One is indeed tempted to suggest some ritual significance, although its exact nature is a matter of pure conjecture. A possible analogy is provided by the temple in Insula XVI at Verulamium, where the black layer sealed by the 5th century reconstruction contained equally numerous Theodosian coins. Whether the pagan ritual of the latest period involved the frequent handling or offering of coins is a question which deserves consideration” (Bradford & Goodchild 1939,32-3).

The evidence begins to suggest that more of the site than just the rectilinear building were in use in the late to post-Roman period. There is good evidence for a late fourth century pagan revival in the west of Britain that produced temples such as Maiden Castle, Nettleton, Uley and Lydney (Rahtz & White 1979). Some of these sites are connected with significant deposits of coins assumed to have had some ceremonial purpose. Such an end date seems to correlate with the latest deposits from within the circular structure and probably also the burials found on the eastern side of the circular structure. At the least we can say that there was large-scale depositional activity in the fourth (and possibly into the fifth) century and that this represents the last large-scale deposition on the site, running in parallel with the cemetery excavated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There is clearly going to be a complex relationship between the rectangular building and the circular structure, as the cobbled spreads to the east of the rectangular building and the well-constructed wall in trench 23 indicate, as well as the wealth of small finds found in trench 8b in previous years. Larger-scale excavation in 2005 will attempt to untangle some of these relationships.

The situation within the circular structure is gradually becoming clearer, although there are still significant unknowns. The drain system is complex, being found together with probable natural channels, and was cut into probable natural clays within the palaeochannel. On the eastern side these clays and the drains were overlain by a cobbled layer which was in turn overlain with sand. This is the best possibility we have found so far for an interior surface, an arena. It has so far only been found in this eastern quadrant and it might be no coincidence that this is also the area where a platform might have been set into the arena wall. These two elements suggest that the eastern quadrant was at least one focus for activity. There is a wide gap in the bank here behind the wall and it is still not clear if this was original or part of a later phase. The significance of the eastern quadrant is reinforced by the discovery of six late burials let into the gap in the bank. These might be roughly contemporary with an upper clay layer within the 'arena' which probably represents a post-use phase of silting in the interior into which the fourth century finds were deposited. The radiocarbon determination from a wooden stake in the middle of the circular structure might indicate a first century phase of early use, which, if confirmed, would show that the structure was in use through most of the Romano-British period. The existence of low walls and post pads on the northern side of the structure, back from the walls might indicate another support for a wooden structure. We have suspected that the rectangular enclosure on the south side might also have supported such a structure. The relative lack of bank on the north side might be due to fact that the natural ground surface is higher there, obviating the need for a bank. More investigation will take place next year in this area. On the south side work continued on the deposits above the drain to the south of the rectangular structure. There is evidence here that the drain and the rectangular structure were constructed at the same time, which might also be broadly contemporary with the arena wall. The other key relationship here, between the bank and the drain, needs further work to elucidate more clearly.

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