The Vale and Ridgeway Project:
Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2001

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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 Ridgeway in southern Oxfordshire as both a physical entity that could act as a conduit for movement and as a cultural barrier separating the chalk downlands from the Vale of the White Horse. After seven seasons of work on the Berkshire Downs we now have an understanding of the character of occupation from the Later Bronze Age through the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Information is available from the three sites excavated, White Horse Hill in 1994 and 1995 (Lock *et al* In press), Segsbury Camp in 1996 and 1997 (Lock and Gosden 1997; Lock and Gosden 1998) and Alfred's Castle, 1998 to 2000 (Gosden and Lock 1999; 2001; Lock and Gosden 2000), and also from wider research including GIS-based integrated landscape research (Bell and Lock, 2000; Daly and Lock, forthcoming), the results of the English Heritage National Mapping Programme and our own geophysical surveys.

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 over a thousand visitors including groups from local schools and community organisations. Various activities were organised for National Archaeology Day and talks are given to groups throughout the year.

Marcham/Frilford provides an opportunity for further geophysical survey, targeted excavation, wider landscape survey and the collection and collation of existing evidence including aerial photographs and unpublished fieldwork in the area. This should provide a finer resolution of the results from earlier work at Frilford and enable a better understanding of the economic and social articulation in the Vale during these periods, the effects of Romanisation on the late Iron Age settlement pattern, and a valuable comparison with the evidence from the Downs.

Previous work at the site started with the recognition and partial excavation of a late Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Akerman, 1865; Calkins, 1978; Dudley-Buxton, 1920; Rolleston, 1869; 1880). A Romano-British temple and underlying Iron Age structures in the gardens of the ex-Noah's Ark pub were excavated in the 1930's (Bradford and Goodchild, 1939) and re-interpreted in the 1960's (Harding, 1987). These, together with considerable aerial photographic evidence for a series of enclosures, are now scheduled and will not be part of the current fieldwork. This will concentrate in the field to the east of the temple where Hingley has shown the presence of an amphitheatre (briefly published in 1985), which together with extensive surrounding material produced by fieldwalking, suggests a major Romano-British religious centre. Our work will explore the character, dating and extent of this settlement through large-scale geophysics and targeted excavation.

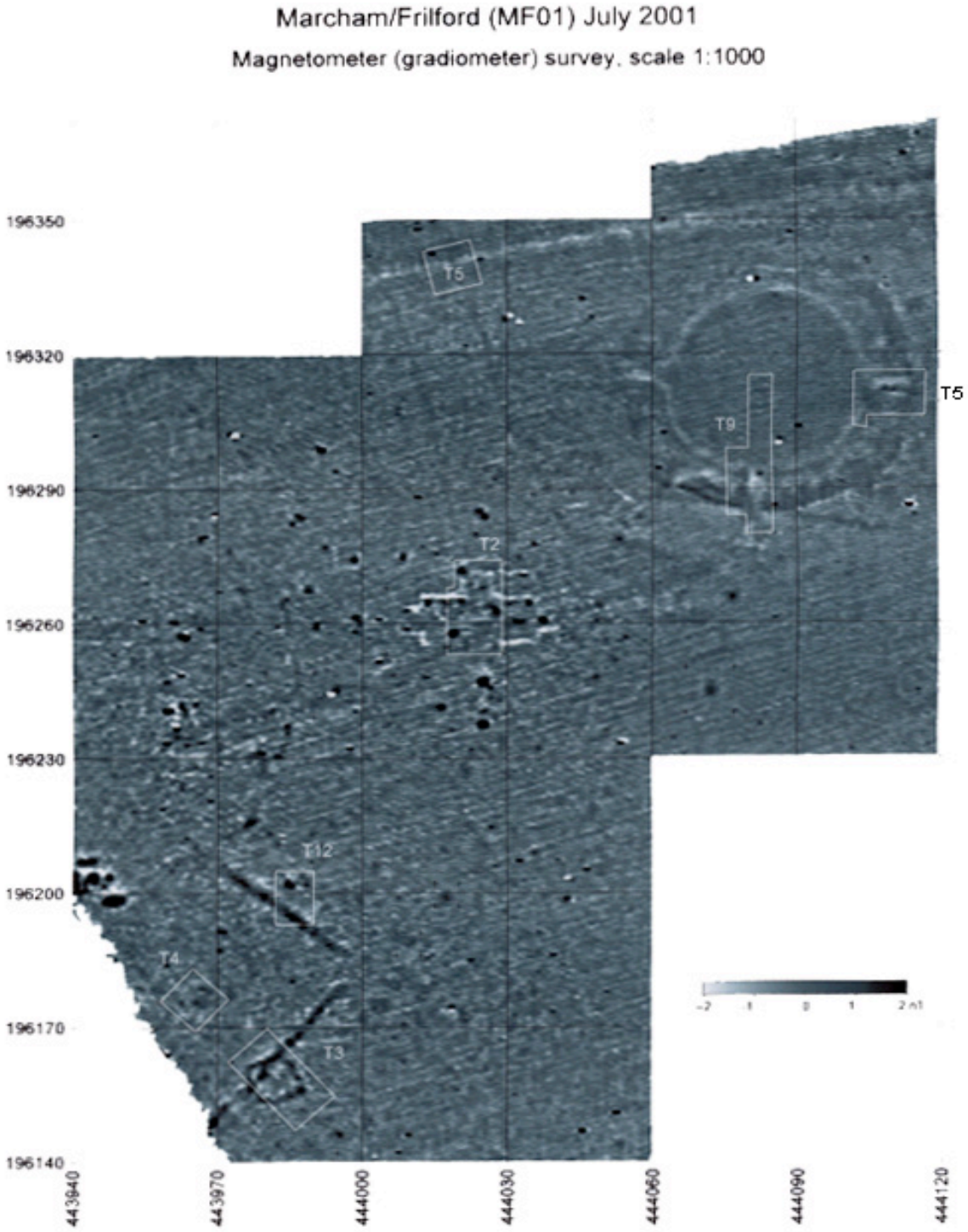

Figure 1. Results of the magnetometry survey at Marcham/Frilford, June 2001 showing the excavation trenches, (Oxford Archaeotechnics).

Figure 1 shows the first phase of the geophysics (magnetometry), approximately 4 hectares, carried out by Oxford Archaeotechnics in June 2001. It can be seen that the

detail within the geophysics is quite remarkable and provided an accurate guide for the positioning of exploratory excavation trenches. The grid established for the geophysics was used for the precise location of the trenches.

Brief report on the excavations in 2001.
Trenches 1 and 9 are located on the amphitheatre, the former on the eastern entrance and the latter on a geophysical anomaly to the south which coincides with the previous excavations of Hingley. Both of these trenches are unfinished and will continue in 2002.

Trench 1.
Figure 2 shows the main features of the amphitheatre's eastern entrance in schematic form as many issues are yet to be resolved in Trench 1 and excavation will continue in 2002. The amphitheatre was positioned within a dry valley which contained thick deposits of sandy loam, a material relatively easy to work with not found anywhere else on the site. The arena was cut down through bedrock in places, as shown by cut [1116] in the south-western corner of Trench 1. Just inside this cut the arena wall was constructed enclosing an area of approximately 47 m diameter, [1117]. The top of the wall was also identified as it approached the entrance passage, [1125], although this has yet to be excavated.

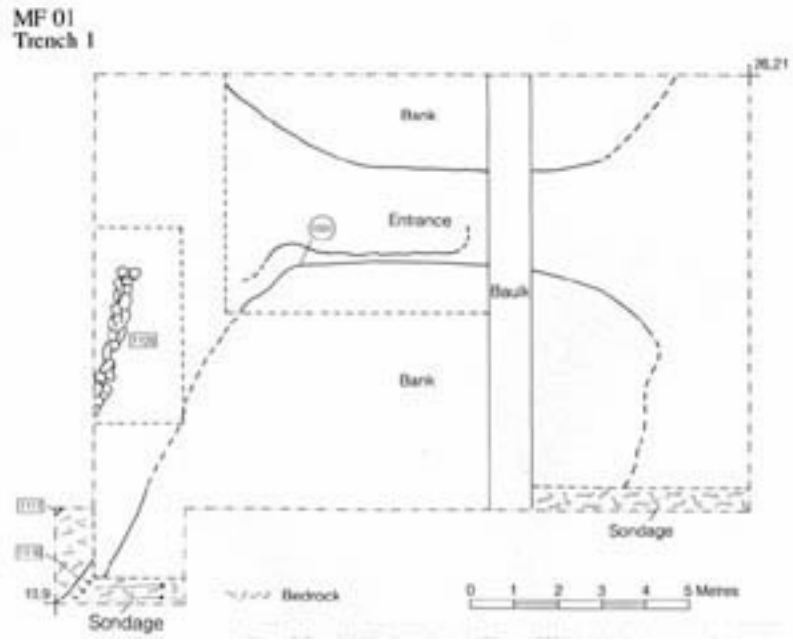

Figure 2. Trench 1. A schematic plan of the amphitheatre's eastern entrance showing the arena wall and the banks.

Material excavated from the arena filled the gap between the arena wall and the bedrock cut and was heaped up to create the bank approximately 15 m wide. At least one layer of local stone and clay was incorporated within the bank probably as a stabilisation mechanism as the sandy loam is not inherently stable. Sondages through the bank show that little of it remains, 0.2m maximum, truncation finishing at the lowest layer of stone

and clay. The rear of the bank has yet to be fully excavated but there is a suggestion of a stone and turf revetment. The geophysics also suggest some form of rear revetment for most of its circuit. No evidence for seating structures on the bank has yet been found such as postholes or timber slots, and it may be that people stood.

The eastern entrance passage is defined by a gap through the bank and is indicated on the geophysics by a strong negative anomaly. Complex stratigraphy fills the entrance passage which has yet to be resolved and shows considerable activity within the passage when it was filling. A distinct context could define a wooden revetting wall on the southern side [1031], probably covered with pink plaster as suggested by pieces found within the fill of the entrance. Nothing found so far offers an interpretation for the geophysical anomaly although the entrance passage probably slopes down into the arena and the arena floor could be at least a metre deeper at the inner end of the passage where the top of the arena wall has been identified. The anomaly, therefore, represents something at a lower level within the entrance passage, perhaps a paved floor or stone from a collapsed bank revetment.

As yet there is no dating evidence from Trench 1 and nothing to suggest more than a single phase of construction.

Trench 9.
At the southern side of the amphitheatre excavation within Trench 9 explored the stone structure first discovered by Hingley (1985) in order to understand more about the construction of the bank, the arena wall and base, as well as the stone structure itself. Hingley's trench was located and re-opened, revealing the top of the arena wall and part of the stone-built structure. As with trench 1 all conclusions are preliminary. The trench as a whole stretched from the centre point of the arena to the back of the bank (as determined from the geophysical plot). In the interior of the arena we removed the topsoil but did not excavate, concentrating our efforts on the area from the front of the arena wall to the back of the bank (Figure 3 shows part of the area of the trench). At the southern end of the trench the back of the bank was revealed, but so far no rear revetment has been found. The bank is composed of clay and sand in discontinuous layers and so far no evidence of structures have been found in terms of either post holes or stonework to support the bank. No evidence of seating is preserved. A strip was excavated through the bank at the southern end of the trench and it is possible that there is both a buried soil (of Iron Age date?) and some structural evidence in the form of postholes beneath the bank, but this requires confirmation through further excavation.

Adjacent to the arena the bank dips down to meet a revetment wall, preserved to almost a metre in height. The wall [9034] is a well-built stone and mortar structure, composed of well-dressed limestone blocks. On the southern side, supporting the bank, is a less well-laid wall [9033] composed of poorly dressed limestone blocks, most of which are not set in mortar. It is not clear at this stage whether these walls are of a single phase. At a depth of around a metre from the top of the outer wall is the arena floor, composed of well-packed gravel. We have just revealed the top of this floor and can say no more about its composition and structure as yet.

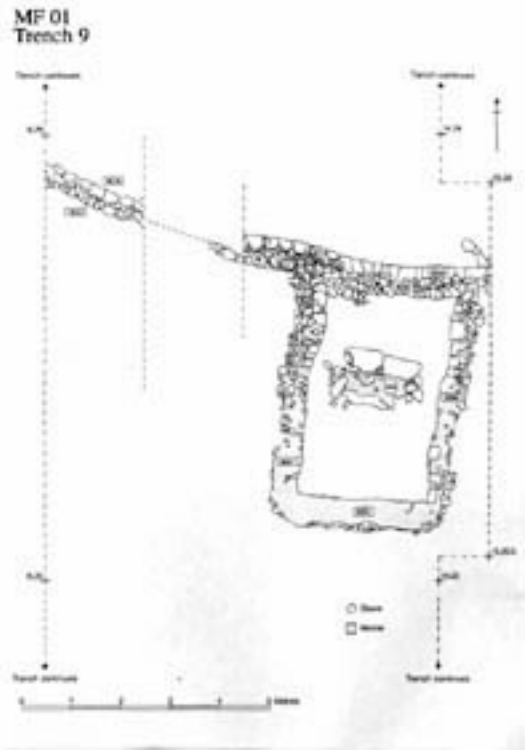

Figure 3. Trench 9. The southern area of the amphitheatre showing the stone room and the arena wall.

The most striking feature on this part of the site was a small walled room let into the bank on the southern side of the wall. It is composed of three walls [9004, 9007, 9066] with the arena walls forming a fourth side. The room is roughly 2.5 metres east-west and just over 4m north-south. Exactly how it relates to the amphitheatre wall and the bank needs to be confirmed, but at the present the following sequence can be posited. The bank was constructed first and then the retaining wall at the front was built. The room was then let into the bank which had been removed in this area. Sediments then accumulated within the room, eventually filling it to the remaining height of the walls. Once this infill was completed a roughly rectangular structure [9006] made of large dressed blocks was placed on top of the sediment, Figure 3. Around this structure a relatively large number of coins and a fibula with embossed decoration were recovered. We have sectioned the internal deposits removing those from the western half of the structure, but this needs to be completed in 2002. Only then will it be possible to say more about the construction sequence and possible function of this structure. Similar structures have been found at other British amphitheatres, for instance at the military amphitheatre at Caerleon and that outside the town of Calleva Atrebatum (modern Silchester). In neither case is it clear what function the structures performed.

In all, trench 9 has started to reveal important evidence on the structure and history of construction of the amphitheatre, evidence that needs clarification through further excavation.

Trench 2.
This trench was positioned over the central area of a large rectilinear magnetic anomaly which seemed to represent a large stone structure (or 'building'), circa 30m by 15m, with its long axis lying E-W. On the west, north and east sides there appeared to be smaller rectilinear extensions or side-chambers, and there was evidence of probable pits and areas of rubble or disturbance within the walled area.

Within a day of beginning the excavation, it became clear that the deposits in Trench 2, including the linear stone features which comprised the 'building', were extremely fragile and extensively robbed and plough-damaged. The shape of the two main stone 'wall' features crossing the trench area E-W, [2027 - 2006] (S) and [2025-2003] (N), including the square northern extension [2009, 2017, 2026], was quickly determined, Figure 4. Subsequent cleaning and recording showed these main 'walls' were in fact very shallow flat features made up of small oolitic limestone rubble stones, laid against the sides of shallow flat-bottomed trenches. Hence these 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.

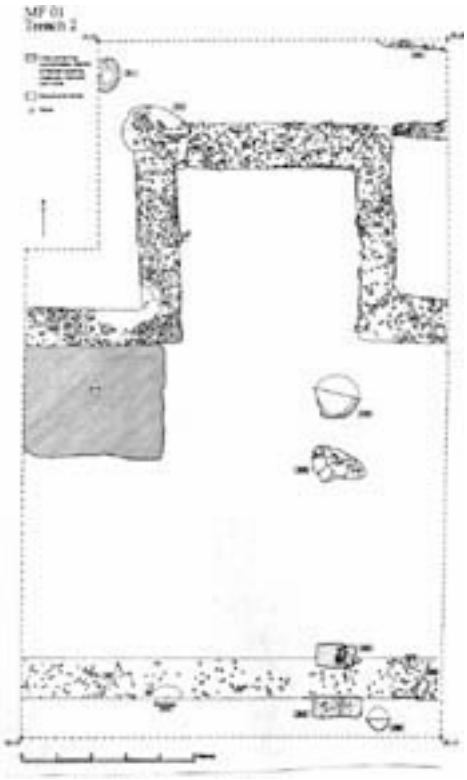

Figure 4. Trench 2. Part of the late Romano-British building.

Along the southern 'wall', robbing and plough-damage had resulted in much of the stone being removed, although the outline of the former wall or foundation trench was clearly visible and filled with a dark secondary deposit. There was also a line of decayed mortar remaining on the inner (N) edge of [2027]. Two opposed pairs of mortar plinths on either side of the southern 'wall' defined the sides of a probable entrance [2040, 2042]. In addition, in the northern part of the trench, a secondary rubble wall [2004], with a probable parallel wall in the trench edge to the N [2005] were discovered leading E from the NE corner of the square extension [2009/2026]. Of very poor construction, these may represent a later phase external to the main enclosed area. No finds were discovered *within* the matrix of the stone features.

Within the area enclosed by the main 'walls' was a complex series of discontinuous deposits which reflected very substantial plough-damage. In fact, any Roman-period or later occupation surfaces in the centre of the 'building' had been all but ploughed away, with only a speckled trace of powdered ceramic material, some late Roman coins and the occasional Roman metal object such as nails or bracelet fragments remaining in the base of the ploughsoil. Within the rest of the 'building' where Roman material had been ploughed-out, the layer which remained beneath the ploughsoil, a mottled brown/orange layer, seems to represent an Iron Age soil. In the east-centre of the trench, traces of burnt wood survived at the interface between the lowest ploughsoil and the surface of: this seemed to point to the remains of a Roman-period burning (?destruction) layer comprising the fallen and burnt remains of structural timbers which had subsequently been almost erased by ploughing. The few surviving pieces of burnt timber were sampled. An identification of oak was made, but further analyses, including scientific dating, have yet to be completed.

Several pieces of Iron Age pottery were found when cleaning the surface of the Iron Age soil, and into it were cut a variety of stake-holes, small pits or post-holes (one of which had a stone quern fragment apparently deliberately deposited in it), and at least one large circular Iron Age bowl-shaped pit cut through to the limestone bedrock. The NW corner of the square extension to the main north wall [2009-2017] was built over an in-filled Iron Age pit [2010]. The general pattern of Iron Age stakeholes, small pits and postholes (which were difficult to interpret in structural terms), extended with little variation over the whole trench, both within and outside the area of the 'building'. In the extreme northern extra-mural zone, one small pit contained a piece of human cranium, another [2014] had a fine polished bone weaving pin and a small semi-complete carinated bowl of possible early Anglo-Saxon or alternatively Iron Age date (yet to be subjected to specialist analysis).

There were two significant exceptions to the general loss of Roman and later deposits within the 'building'. In the east/centre of the trench was a slightly-raised platform of burnt clay and mortar [2126] 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.

In the western side of the trench, layers of mortar mixed with burnt soil, animal bone and extensive Roman tile rubble were excavated [2070]. With its upper part actually overlapping part of the base of 'wall' [2025], this layer appears to represent a secondary occupation deposit within the 'building'. A particular feature of this series of linked deposits was the discovery of over 200 stratified low-denomination Late Roman copper coins. A number of coins (some of which were cut) dating to the periods AD 300-48 and 365-78, with five post-dating 378, seem to indicate moderate coin use on the site extending to very late in the Roman period. The rest of the coins discovered in this area of the site, comprising circa 75% of the total, were *Fel Temp Reparatio* copies dating to the period AD 350-65. Some of these were unusually small, and were only retrievable with continuous pre-excavation monitoring by metal-detector. The *Fel Temp Reparatio* series are probably from a dispersed hoard. A further unstruck coin blank is possible evidence of coin production at the site.

The layer producing the majority of coins [2070] were also notable for numerous sherds of Oxfordshire colour-coated Roman pottery (late 3rd/ early 4th century) and the large quantity of Roman hobnails retrieved. A preliminary analysis of the tile suggests that it is extremely varied in type, and therefore less likely to be the result of an in-situ roof collapse than a dump (or dumps) of tile rubble brought in from elsewhere. This would seem to indicate a secondary floor was laid in this part of the 'building'. Its full extent and depth is yet to be determined, but its eastern edge extends no further than the interior 'wall' corner [2017/2025]. The southern edge is harder to define as it gradually thins out over an Iron Age soil.

A very preliminary interpretation is that the area of Trench 2 saw considerable Iron Age activity, characterised by numerous small pits. 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, and the interior was subsequently partly re-floored with Roman tile rubble. On present indications, activity seems to have extended to the very late Roman period but there is very little evidence for any subsequent presence. These preliminary interpretations will be reviewed during further excavation.

Trench 3.
The excavations at Trench 3 were placed to investigate two distinct features visible from the geophysical survey: a small, sub-circular enclosure, and part of a larger rectangular enclosure at the point where both features intersect, Figure 5. Before excavation the evidence suggested a smaller prehistoric enclosure cut by a Roman ditched enclosure. Based upon a preliminary assessment of the features and material culture recovered, a number of episodes of activity have been identified, four of which have a definite chronological sequence based upon excavated relationships.

1st Phase: The earliest evidence of activity was found in the bottom layers of the large enclosure ditch. This ditch, initially thought to be Roman, actually consisted of two distinct phases, Figure 6, the earlier of which has been clearly dated by the presence of an almost complete Middle Bronze Age bucket urn found broken and laid, seemingly

deliberately, on its bottom [3113]. The profile is approximately V-shaped, a little over a metre deep, cutting through about 0.5m of limestone bedrock before entering into fine sand. The fills of the ditch that remained were mainly composed of a mixture of sand and gravel, not overly distinguishable from the natural soil it cut through. In fact, its identification as a distinct feature might have been missed entirely if not for the ceramic finds.

Figure 5. Trench 3. The complex of ditches and pits ranging in date from middle Bronze Age to Romano-British.

2nd Phase: A roughly circular arrangement of small pits that were largely truncated by the smaller enclosure ditch of the next phase [including pits 3079, 3096, 3045], Figure 5. While it was not possible to excavate any completely, the fills that survived contained moderate quantities of ceramics, faunal remains, and small finds. A preliminary assessment of the material suggests an early Iron Age date.

3rd Phase: The pits were difficult to identify because the sub-circular small enclosure ditch cuts through them largely disturbing most of their original fills. This ditch [3095] varies slightly in dimensions and shape, but was mainly flat bottomed, rather narrow and steep sided, cut no deeper than 0.8m into the subsoil. A number of sections were excavated through the ditch, showing that there were between 3 and 4 main fills, Figure 7. A great deal of ceramics, faunal remains, and small finds were recovered from these fills, a preliminary assessment again indicates an EIA date.

4th Phase: The sequence was further complicated because the Bronze Age ditch, which had been cut by the EIA pits and enclosure ditch, was then partially re-dug, [Cut 3091], Figure 6. The fills of this later cut were mostly homogenous, and very distinct from the Bronze Age fills. A few sherds of pottery were found within the main fill of this later cut, and a field assessment of this material indicates a Roman date.

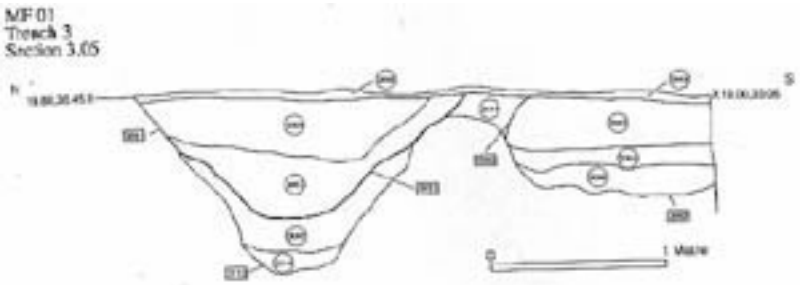

Figure 6. Trench 3. Section across the middle Bronze Age ditch [3113], recut in the Romano-British period [3091].

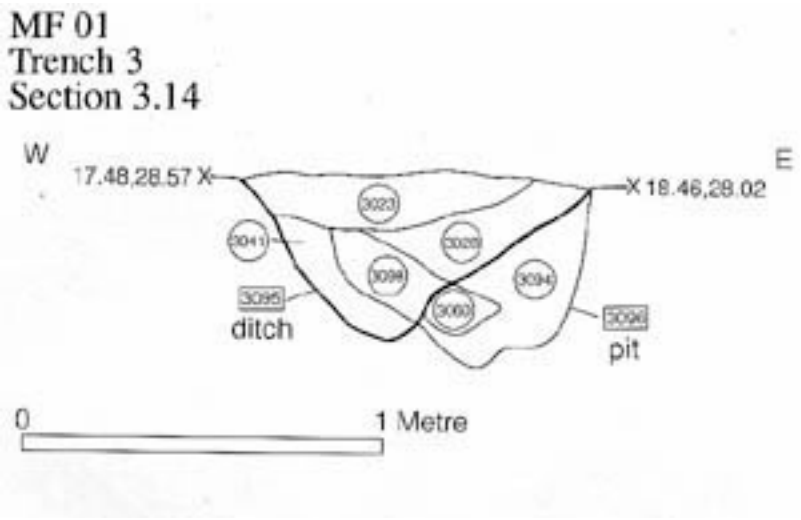

Figure 7. Trench 3. Section across the Iron Age ditch [3095].

Within the circular enclosure, but not stratigraphically related, are a number of postholes. They suggest that perhaps several phases of timber structures existed. However, it was not possible to identify a clear and articulated outline of any distinct structure. A limited amount of EIA pottery was recovered from the fill of several postholes. It is thought likely that the timber structures were related to either the 2nd or 3rd phase of activity outlined above.

Trench 4.

Trench 4 was opened within the interior of the larger rectangular enclosure, to ascertain if any archaeological evidence existed therein. Two features were found and excavated in

full. While a slight amount of material culture was found, including a Roman coin, the features are tree-throws. Trench 4 did show that the centre of the larger enclosure did not play host to any activities that required features cut into the underlying geology.

Trench 12.
Trench 12 was excavated to verify that both sections of the larger enclosure ditch were part of the same feature, a number of other cut features were also excavated.

A new excavation methodology was experimented with during the excavation of Trench 12. The idea was to devise a strategy that would capture, in a digital format, fine resolution information from the archaeological deposits excavated. The project was designed not merely to probe the possibilities and capacities of digital data capture (as they have already been demonstrated elsewhere), but to develop new ways to use digital tools (such as total stations, digital cameras, on-site databases, etc.) to obtain more information about the complex relationships between objects, contexts, and features. Furthermore, an additional aim was to collect this information in a way suitable for publication within an electronic format.

The basic unit of the recording strategy was the individual artefact. Each artefact was assigned a unique identifier and recorded separately. The exact position of each artefact was recorded by total station, and if deemed necessary, the artefact photographed (digitally) in situ. A database of all objects was compiled on site. On site photography used digital cameras within a geo-referenced grid so that all photos could be geo-referenced. The same technology, coupled with detailed micro-topographical survey of the features using a total station was used across the entire trench. This procedure resulted in data that can be interpolated into a surface model, with the geo-referenced photos 'draped' on it, creating a realistic 3D model of each feature, at all stages of its excavation. The process of horizontal photography and micro-topographical survey was conducted at the interface of all contexts, and within contexts if there was clustering of artefacts. The final product allows for the micro-topographical surveys and digital images to be fitted together to re-create the features, including the 3D positioning of all artefacts.

Trench 12 contained a variety of features, most of which were not stratigraphically related, Figure 8. A layer of tightly packed, fist sized stone cobbles was found during the removal of the topsoil, in the southwest portion of the trench. This surface [12017] was densely covered in oyster shells, and a rich assortment of Roman artefacts, including terra sigillata tesserea, and pottery. A metre wide section was dug through the tail end of this surface, and into the ditch [12052] that lay directly underneath it. The ditch follows the same alignment as the surface, and it seems likely that the surface was intentionally laid over the upper fill of the ditch to consolidate it. The ditch, thought to be part of the same large rectangular enclosure as that found within Trench 3, contained three instances of re-cutting, Figure 9. The first cut was a V-shaped ditch [12052], of similar dimensions to that found in Trench 3, with two additional cuts made subsequently [12033 and 12053]. While it is not identical to the ditch in Trench 3, it does seem to have been part of the same sequence of construction.

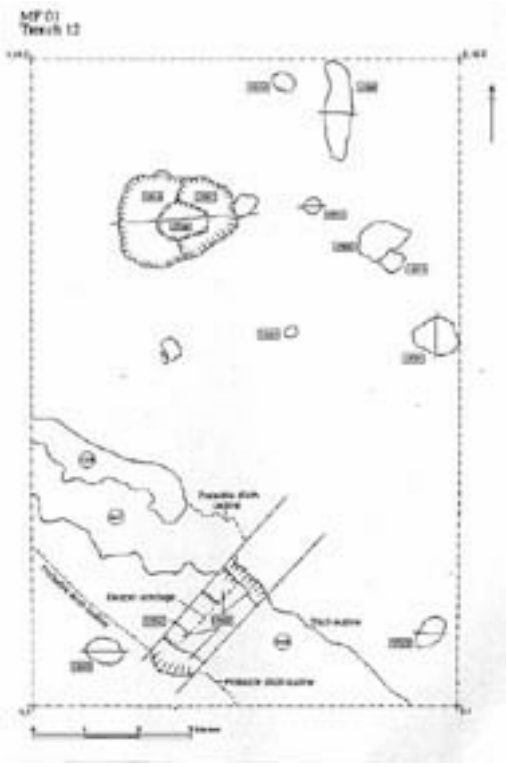

Figure 8. Trench 12. Features ranging in date from middle Bronze Age to Romano-British.

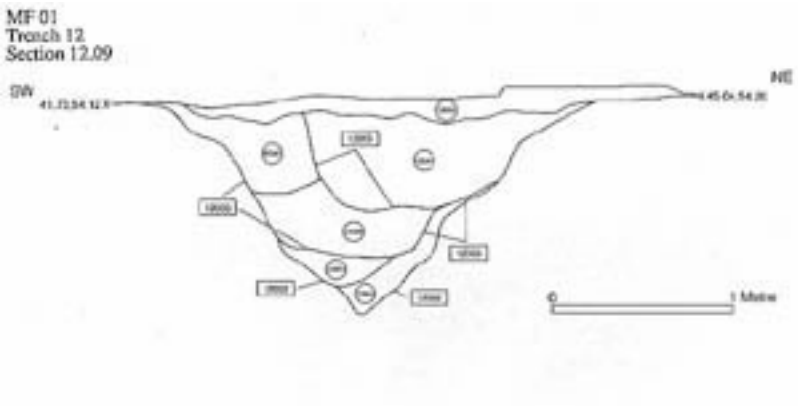

Figure 9. Trench 12. Section across the ditch showing two re-cuts [12033 and 12053].

A number of pits and postholes were also excavated. It is not possible to distinguish the layout of any structures from the arrangement of the postholes, and two out of the four excavated were little more than shallow scoops in the bedrock. The pits were much more prolific. A cluster of three inter-cutting pits was found in the northern portion of the trench. The earliest pit [12046] was subsequently cut by [12047], and in turn both were cut by [12048]. At the bottom of the latest pit several large mammal bones were deposited against the sides. The fills that remained from these pits did not contain a large amount of artefacts, but the ceramics recovered strongly indicate an EIA date for these

features. A smaller pit was found in the east of the trench [12021] containing numerous finds, including most likely deliberately deposited faunal remains and Iron Age pottery, capped by a tightly packed layer of small limestone cobbles.

Nearby, a shallow oval depression, [12015], contained a coarse Bronze Age urn, in poor condition, but mostly complete, and deposited upright in situ. The entire block was removed by a conservation specialist and the interior of the vessel has not been excavated yet. This feature was cut by a sub-rectangular pit, [12003] with upper fills containing ash and burnt material, and some skeletal material, which was not possible to identify in the field. In lower levels, a large amount of very well preserved, and almost complete ceramic vessels were found, possibly Saxon in date. It is possible that this feature was some sort of cremation, but no skeletal material was recovered to positively identify it as such.

Just to the north was a narrow rectangular feature, [12002]. Traces of firing were visible on the surrounding limestone, and burnt material, half formed bits of metalwork and slag where found, indicating that this feature was used as a small furnace of sorts. A fair amount of Roman ceramics was also found within this feature.

Finally, a spread of badly decayed and truncated human remains was found in a radius of about 1 metre, just southwest of the three inter-cutting Iron Age pits. The remains were found within a barely perceptible dip of the bedrock, and seem to have been that of a child. The burial lacked any grave goods, or clear association with any features, artefacts, or hints of formality of disposal, therefore no speculation can be made about the date.

Trench 5.

The geophysics show a linear anomaly running across the Northern side of the site on an approximately ENE-WSW trajectory, Figure 1. Trench 5 was positioned where this feature gave its strongest readings, but also where it could be observed to intersect a second linear shadow running perpendicular at NNW-SSE. This second possible feature is far less distinct on the survey and any chronological relationship between the two is unclear. The initial hypothesis for Trench 5 was that the strong positive flux readings around the ENE-WSW feature were a possible branch of the nearby Roman road, now known as the A338. The route of this is confirmed until shortly before the Western bank of the River Ock, just to the North West of the site. The smaller cross feature gave a positive reading on the magnetometer, indicating a possible ditch with a parallel neighbour showing slightly to its west, as well as the fainter trace of other possible ditches along a similar alignment across a wider area. Initial thoughts of these were the remains of a prehistoric field system.

On removing the topsoil, the number of finds recovered was observed to be less than in the topsoil of all the trenches outside of the amphitheatre. The trench was initially 10m by 10m, Figure 10, and the topsoil was considerably greater in depth along the northern and southern edges of the trench than across the middle directly over the strong signal that registered on the geophysical survey. Patches of consolidated gravel were revealed. As the level of the trench was brought down over a wider area, patches of a greensand

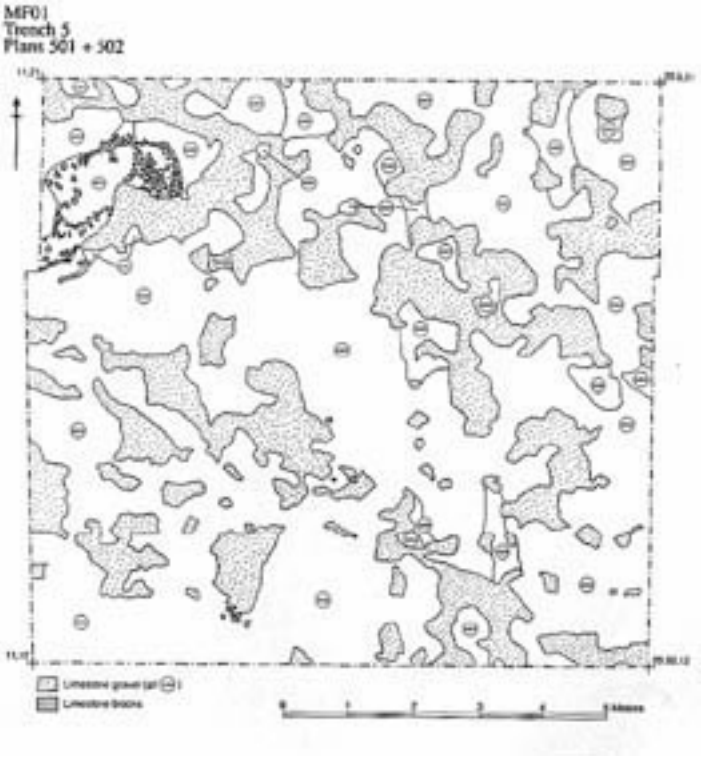

Figure 10. Trench 5. The possible Romano-British road.

material and large areas of orange sand were revealed. When examined in section, the sequence of the layers that had been revealed were clear to see: first, sitting directly on the limestone bedrock was the orange sand [5002], which in places was particularly fine and lacked any form of inclusion. On top of this in places could be seen to be the greensand material, [5005]. Further, in some places on top of this were patches of the consolidated limestone gravel [5006]. In plan the patches of greensand, and where applicable, gravel, formed no recognisable pattern, Figure 10. More importantly, the surface was of a similar nature across the whole trench, not as the survey had implied solely concentrated in the centre. Indeed, extension slit trenches were dug to expand the East section of the trench up to a length of 19m in order to chase the spread of the gravel. In this section, it finally appeared to fade at a total width of about 15 metres. In neither slit trench was there any firm evidence for side ditches, whose presence would be likely next to a Roman road.

As for the North-South ditch that was initially proposed, no clear evidence was exposed. Despite excavating into the bedrock at the exact point where the positive magnetic anomaly indicated no feature could be clearly defined, although with a favourable eye it was considered easier to remove bedrock at this point than elsewhere. The conclusion for the North-South ditch at this point, then, is that if it is present, it remains primarily as a 'ghost' image on the magnetometry.

As for an interpretation of the gravel surface [5006], the possibility of a road is not to be discounted. No similar surface was excavated elsewhere on the site, indicating that it is likely to a deliberate deposit. The lack of side ditches, as well as its wide spread, may be explained by its course through a settlement and perhaps it represents more of an open concourse rather than a wide road. The fragmentary nature of the gravel makes any further interpretation particularly difficult. An exception to the pattern of the gravel surface was a concentration of larger, fist-sized pieces of limestone rubble in the NW corner [5003]. This may represent consolidation of a damaged surface, or perhaps less disturbed remains of the original surface. What is clear is that the strong magnetic signal was at least in part generated by the dip in topsoil, which in turn had been caused by particularly deep ploughing in recent history.

With a firm identification of the deposits in this trench still to be made work will continue in 2002. To the East of Trench 5, centred on the co-ordinates 444110, 196355, there appears on the geophysics what would appear to be a better preserved example of the 'road'. Although giving a fainter signal, the topsoil has not been erratically ploughed thus preventing the skewed results that led to the positioning of Trench 5 and possible traces of edging ditches are visible. Just north of the anomaly at this point, a semicircle of post-holes can also be seen, and perhaps excavation at this point will provide the relative chronology that Trench 5 did not.

Sequence and significance

Since the early excavations at Frilford it has been recognised as an important Romano-British religious complex with Iron Age antecedents perhaps based on tribal boundaries (Stevens, 1940). The current work shows that activity within the area started at least in the middle Bronze Age with a possible enclosure, occupation and burials. Excavation and the geophysics suggest the scale of the Iron Age occupation with pits and ditches occurring over the whole area although the activity does seem to be dispersed rather than enclosed. Romano-British use of the site could start with the early rectangular enclosure although whether this is associated with an early phase of the amphitheatre and any other structures has yet to be resolved. The temple, stone-built amphitheatre and cruciform building all suggest a major ceremonial/religious complex although rural in character rather than the norm of being associated with either a town or fort. The excavated road points towards Abingdon as the nearest Romano-British urban centre at a distance of about 4 or 5 kilometres to the south-east. Fieldwalking and geophysical evidence suggests large areas of Romano-British activity and remains between the public buildings and in surrounding areas towards the cemetery to the north identified and excavated in the late 19th century. The next two seasons of excavation will assess these areas in terms of occupation and establish whether there is a domestic component to the site. Anglo-Saxon occupation is ephemeral at the moment although the same cemetery did continue into this period and some of the larger sub-rectangular positive anomalies on the geophysics may be sunken-floored buildings. Marcham/Frilford is an important site in understanding the development of the Downs/Vale area and the evidence for continuity, albeit discontinuous, fits with notions of social reproduction and identity through references to the past (Gosden and Lock, 1998).

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