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The Vale and Ridgeway Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2011: interim report

Introduction to the Vale and Ridgeway Project

The background to the project and site has been detailed in the previous ten interim reports in *South Midlands Archaeology* (Lock and Gosden 2002; Lock and Gosden 2003; Lock *et al.* 2004; Gosden and Lock 2005; Lock and Gosden 2006; Kamash *et al.* 2007; Kamash *et al.* 2008; Kamash *et al.* 2009; Kamash *et al.* 2010b, Kamash *et al.* 2011), as well as on the project web site: <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/VRP1.html> and a longer interim (Kamash *et al.* 2010a).

As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation, and is committed to education in the widest sense. This, our 11th and final season of excavation, saw participants from across the world as well as from a selection of British schools and universities. 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 over 1000 people visited the site.

The 2011 Excavation Season [Figs 1 and 2]

Excavations this season continued in two areas on Trendles Field; the Roman religious complex (MF), and an area of predominantly Iron Age activity (MFP) [Fig 1].

In MF, investigations were focussed on Trench 40 which continued work begun in 2009 and 2010, and Trench 21, originally opened in 2004, with continued investigations in 2006 to 2008 and 2010. The aim of these trenches was to investigate activity in the area towards the end of the drain which runs southwards from the semi-amphitheatre toward the River Ock.

In MFP, investigations in Trenches 3 and 4 continued from the 2010 season, and two new trenches, Trench 5 and 6 were opened to further investigate the anomalies identified from geophysical survey [Fig 2]. Trench 5 was located to investigate a second curvilinear enclosure similar to that under investigation in Trench 3, and Trench 6 to investigate the extent of the cluster of pits recorded in Trench 4 and a further enclosure suggested by the geophysics.

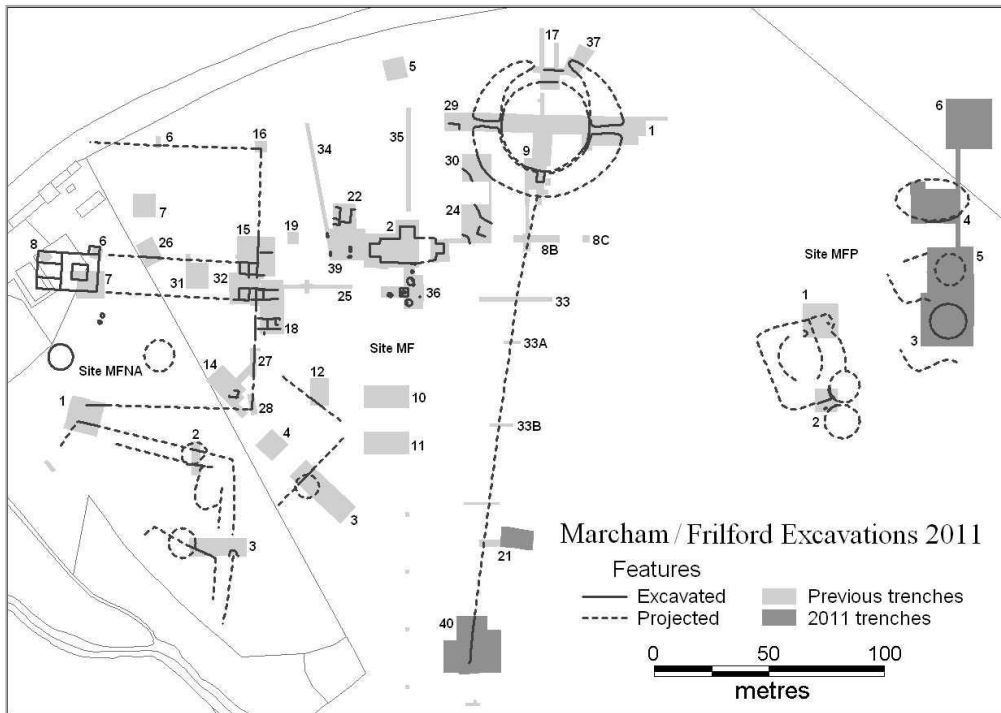


Fig. 1: Overall plan of the site showing the excavation areas and the trenches excavated in 2011



Fig 2: Extract from the geophysical survey of the MF and MFP excavation area

To the western corner of the new extension, a linear feature [21,095] was uncovered running SE-NW which cut into the gravel bank (21,090). A section through [21,095] revealed a heavily robbed out wall [21,099]. On the east side of this, a beam slot [21,101], running parallel with the wall trench, cut into both the floor surface (21,067) and ring ditch/gully [21,070], indicating [21,101] was later.

Further work was also carried out on the eastern area of Trench 21 which was extended in 2006/7. This included the area around the Roman stone-capped drain [21,060] which revealed a circular pattern of pitched cobbles [21,103] that were cut by [21,059], the drain cut. This suggests that the cobbled surface was an early feature on the site, at least earlier than the drain.

MF11 Trench 40 [Fig 4]

Excavations continued in Trench 40, first opened in 2009 and incorporating two earlier trial trenches - 33E and 33F. Its main purpose was to investigate the end of the arena drain which had evaded detection in previous years, and to look for any associated remains.

As anticipated, the end of the drain [40,007] was located. The drain, having run underground within cut [40,008], emerged through the northern bank of the erosion channel and discharged into a small, southwards draining ditch [40,071]. No clear stratigraphic relationships were seen between the ditch cut and drain trench or between their respective fills, and it is presumed that the two were created, functioned and silted up as a single unit.

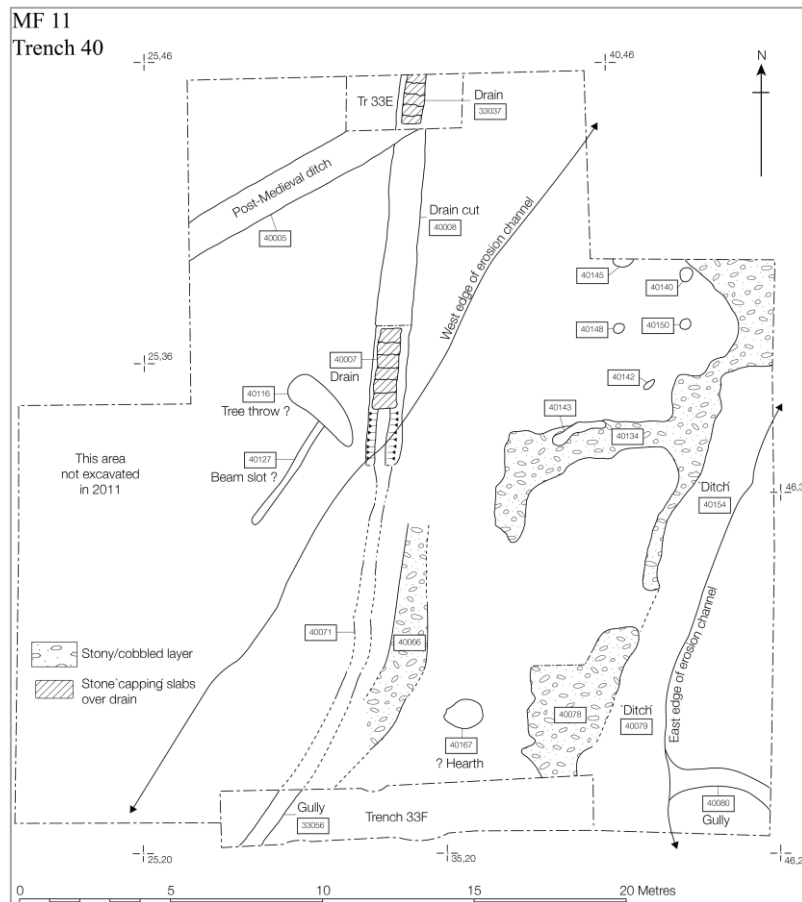


Fig 4: Plan of MF Trench 40

The structure of the drain was comparable to that seen elsewhere on the site, comprising two rough dry-stone walls spanned by large undressed capstones. There was no elaboration at the drain terminal, and no evidence for associated structures of any significance. A probable path surface (40,066), comprising a thin, cambered strip of weathered limestone pieces, ran along the eastern side of [40071]. A similar deposit recorded in Trench 33 [33,052] in 2006, was probably part of the same feature.

The path surface, the fills of ditch [40,071], and the southernmost part of the arena drain were all sealed by the upper fills of the erosion channel group [40,058] which comprised dark sandy silt deposits with extensive iron mottling and an abundance of late Roman detritus including large quantities of pottery and animal bone, 4th century coins, and a smaller number of other finds. Our initial thoughts that this material had washed down through the drain no longer seem reasonable due to the overall quantity and the size of individual pieces. It now seems much more likely that this material was deposited here, probably in a wet/boggy area that the drain fed into.

To the east of the drain and ditch, other features were sealed beneath the upper channel fills. Towards the north of the trench a small number of charcoal-rich patches (40,140), (40,142) and (40,143), some set within small scoops, [40,148] and [40,150] were identified. In the same area was an enigmatic cluster of limestone pieces and very large re-fitting sherds of grog tempered Roman pot (40,145) set within a slightly charcoally matrix and in the south of the trench a possible hearth base consisting of a densely packed cluster of heavily burnt limestone pieces [40,167]. This may be the source of context (40158), a widespread but discontinuous lens of grey ashy material and re-deposited clumps of burnt soil lying beneath (40,004).

Also beneath the upper channel fill was a branching and sinuous spread of redeposited limestone (40,078) and gravel (40,134) beneath which were two postholes [40,164] and [40,173], a small pit or butt-end [40,168], containing a blade core, and a single course of rough limestone blocks, possibly the footings of a wall [40,175]. A deep sondage through the gap between (40,134) and (40,178) showed both to be underlain by the lower channel fills (40,166) and (40,184), from which several worked flints were recovered.

The edge of (40,134) ran parallel to the eastern edge of the erosion channel, so that the two edges appeared to define a ditch [40,154], assumed to be a continuation of possible ditch [40,079] investigated in 2010. However, neither [40,079] nor [40,154] had a clear and convincing ditch profile when sectioned, and their western edges have proved particularly hard to define.

To the west of the arena drain, and outside of the erosion channel, two poorly dated features were identified - one a probable tree throw [40,116], which produced one flint blade and a few pieces of debitage, the other an ephemeral linear depression [40,127] most plausibly interpreted as a beam slot. The date and function of [40,127] is unknown, and was not associated with any other structural features.

Excavations in the Iron Age enclosures (MFP11) Trenches 3-6

MFP10 Trench 3 [Fig 5]

Trench 3 was opened in 2010 to elucidate the function of a large curvilinear ditch group [3011] identified by geophysics, and its relationship to the surrounding enclosures. Several

crucibles (one of which retained a separate yellowish fill), while the lower layers produced burnt stone, an unfired loom weight and a large amount of green clay. Pit [3217] was 1.2m in diameter and 75cm deep and was also undercut. The top layers produced a very dark, organic fill with stones arranged in a circular pattern suggestive of a hearth. Both [3017] and [3217] produced large amounts of iron slag.

Interventions in the south-west showed that the intercutting pits and gullies were shallow, contemporaneous features with few finds. The largest and deepest of these, ditch [3047], was 1.05m wide and 0.25m deep from which a large amount of animal bone and a human femur were recovered. Pit [3285] was undercut with two shallow gullies cut into it in the south [3287] and north [3313]. It contained two very dark fills and the base was lined with a red ceramic material (3318) identified as a collapsed pot. This covered all sides of the pit suggesting it had been purposely placed there. It is possible that this was a furnace or kiln with the surrounding features playing some function in relation to this, although there was no evidence of extensive burning or slag.

In the north-west, the area identified as a ditch in 2010 was revealed to be a complex group of inter-cutting features and layers, group [3233]. It was not fully excavated but appeared to be similar to the large inter-cutting features identified in Trench 5.

Most of the major features in Trench 3 cut through a reddish-yellow layer (3035). This is not a natural layer, and it was often difficult to clearly identify the edge of some features. In several areas it also overlay a possible alluvial wash (3301). A 1m wide slot was placed in the centre of the trench in order to investigate this further which showed it to be the uppermost layer of a series of alluvial deposits similar to those identified in Trench 2 in 2008-2010.

MFP11 Trench 4 [Fig 6]

Trench 4 was opened in 2010 over an extensive cluster of discrete and intercutting pits visible on the geophysics (circled in Fig 1). In 2010 approximately 40 of the pits were excavated or half-sectioned. In 2011 the trench was extended 7m to the west and in that extension by an extra 3m to the north. The northern extension confirmed that the pit clusters continued into an area obscured on the geophysics by interference from an electricity pylon. While the cluster clearly extended west beyond the confines of the trench, the density of pits diminished rapidly towards the south, suggesting that despite the lack of any remaining traces, some sort of boundary might once have existed.

In 2011 a further 60 pits were investigated including complex groups [4220] in the north and [4221] in the west, both comprising twelve intercutting pits, as well as the remaining pits in cluster [4222]/[4042], cut by a later narrow curvilinear gully [4206]. As found in 2010, all of the pits were heavily truncated with some surviving only to a depth of 0.1-0.2m. Despite this truncation a few remained to over 0.5m in depth, for example intercutting pits [4065] and [4245]. The trench also contained several near-linear pit arrangements, always of three intercutting pits, for example group [4266], pairs of pits, and discrete pits. Although this suggests some deliberate patterning it is also possible that further pits were cut at a level now lost through erosion.

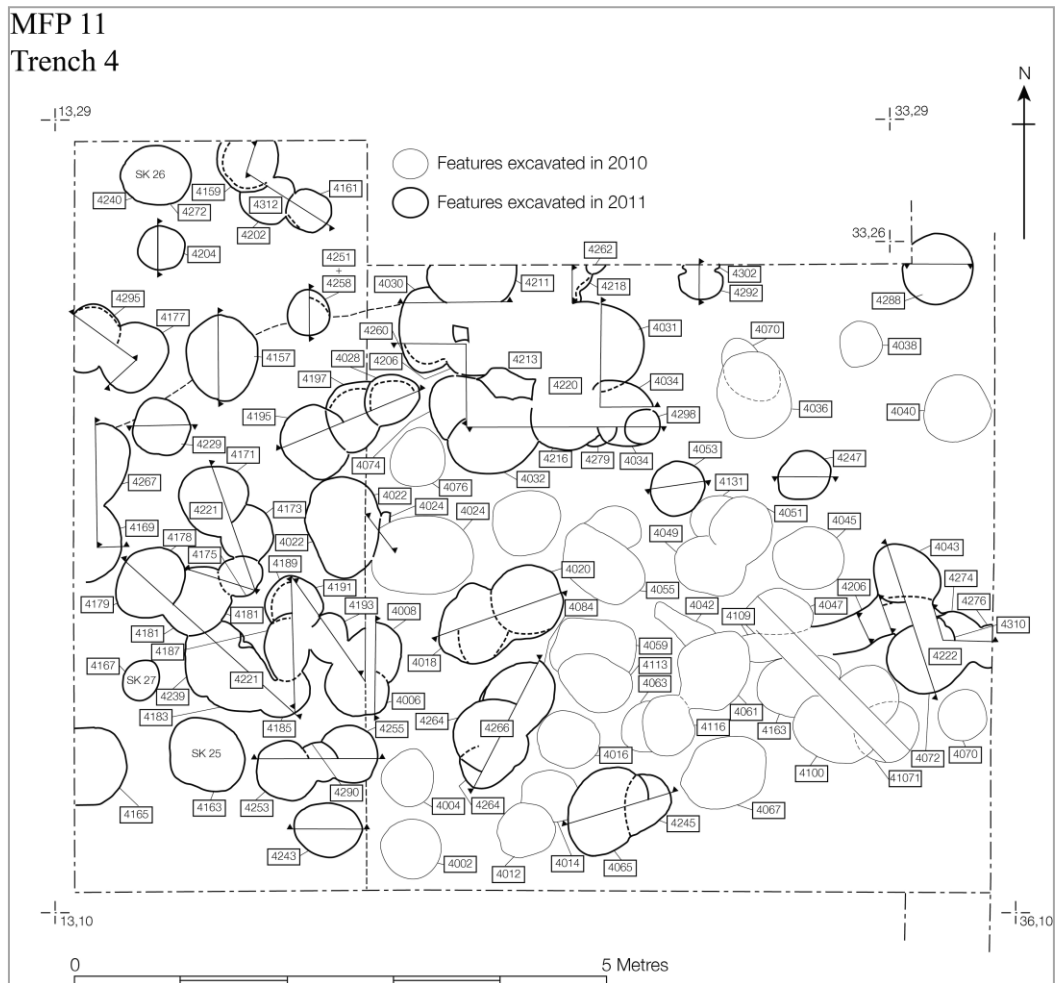


Fig 6: Plan of MFP Trench 4

Quantities of well-preserved Iron Age pottery and animal bone, occasionally articulated, were recovered, along with two further burials: SK25 in [4163], a circular pit 2m in diameter in the south of the extension, and SK26 in pit [4240] 13m to the north. The former, a young adult, was well-preserved and had been placed on the bedrock. The skeleton was semi-prone with one arm outstretched. The more damaged skeleton [SK26] in the north was that of a child which had been placed in a tightly crouched position in a slightly smaller circular pit, again directly onto bedrock. The fragmentary remains of an infant burial [SK27] were also discovered in the bottom, of a surviving scoop of small circular pit [4167], just to the north-west of SK 25. Finds of disarticulated human bone down-slope in Trench 3 suggests that more of the pits may once have contained burials.

MF11 Trench 5 [Fig 7]

Trench 5 was opened in 2011 to link Trench 3 and 4 in the east of the site. The purpose of this trench was to investigate a further large enclosure similar to that under investigation in Trench 3, and to also investigate the variable geology of the site which appears to have had a strong effect on the nature of the surviving archaeology.

In 2011 a 20.5m x 20.5m trench was opened across the ring ditch of the large enclosure. The enclosure, which was approximately 16m in diameter, appeared irregular in plan, and excavation showed that this resulted from it being constructed of paired ditches and the intercutting of the ditches. A further sinuous ditch [5040] cut centrally though the interior of the enclosure from the south-west, before turning northwards mid-way along its course, where it appears to continue as a pair of shallow ditches [5175] and [5177].

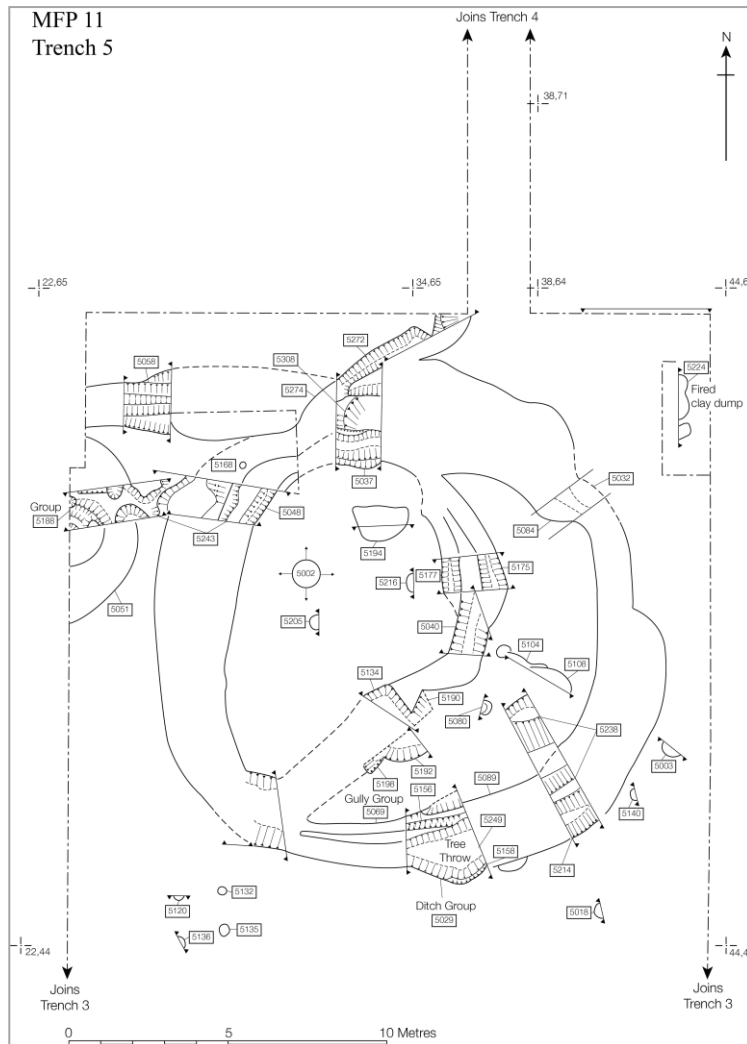


Fig 7: Plan of MFP Trench 5

Several interventions were made across the enclosure. Ditch group [5029] and gully group [5069] in the south of the enclosure revealed a series of features. The largest of these [5249] cut both [5158], a shallow 40cm deep ditch, and [5156] a narrow 20cm deep gully, and was interpreted as a possible tree throw. To the east of these, the enclosure ditch was made up of two ditches; outer ditch [5214] which was 1.6m wide by 1.2m deep and filled by a dark silty deposit (5241) from which a large amounts of burnt animal bone and charcoal was recovered, and inner ditch [5238] which had steeply sloping sides and was approximately 1m deep.

Further to the north-east the enclosure comprised two circuits with the earlier ditch [5084] later cut by outer ditch [5032].

The enclosure continued as a series of shallow ditches and gullies in the north [5037], [5308], [5272] comprising an inner ditch [5308] which was 0.7m wide and 0.45m deep and cut down to natural. This appears to have cut a curvilinear ditch [5037] with shallow sloping sides and flat base, 28cm deep. A V-shaped ditch [5272] 0.55m deep extended northwards from the outer enclosure ditch cutting through bedrock.

Four shallow pits between 0.25-0.6m deep were investigated within the enclosure [5104] which was cut by a further pit [5108], [5192] which was cut by ditches [5190], [5198] and [5134], and pit [5194]. Pit [5194] in the north of the enclosure was rectangular 1.3m long x 0.8m wide with a flat base. A collection of deliberately placed boulders were found in the secondary fill.

Outside the enclosure in the north-west of the trench a series of what appeared to be small, possibly intercutting ditches were investigated, group [5188]. This showed that while some of the features might have been deliberately cut, the entire area had the appearance of a natural but heavily eroded surface probably formed through water puddling and erosion, and rapidly overlain with a deposit of clay (5091) 20-60cm thick.

In the north-east of the trench a fill from an irregular-shaped pit [5224] contained a loom weight and numerous finds of fired clay.

A number of postholes 30-50cm in diameter were also investigated within and outside the enclosure. Some were found to be shallow, probably truncated features, for example [5216] at only 7cm deep, others such as [5205] were more substantial at 22cm deep. Four postholes in the south-west corner of the trench, [5120], [5132], [5135], [5136], appear to form a square of approximately 1m although it was not possible to determine their function.

MF11 Trench 6 [Fig 8]

The Iron Age pits recorded in Trench 4 were found to continue northwards into Trench 6 at the top of the slope, where they had been heavily truncated; the trench having an average depth of 0.3m to bedrock. The pits ranged in size from 1.75 x 1.75m, with a depth of 0.75m, and 0.75 x 0.8m with a depth of 0.07m. The majority were isolated events, occasionally clustered. From pit [6005] a single cockspur was recovered.

Pit [6027], measuring approximately 1.8 x 2m, and 0.35m deep, located in the south-east corner of the trench, contained an Iron Age crouched inhumation (SK24). [6027] was partially cut by ditch group [6184], and a series of large stones cut from the bedrock had been placed along the edge of the pit, probably to redefine it. The ditch narrowed at this point, presumably to skirt around the edge of the pit whilst maintaining the diameter of its own circular enclosure, estimated at around 10m. This ditch was also Iron Age.

A larger Iron Age ditched D-shaped enclosure [6186], was found in the south side of the trench. This was re-cut once by [6187], either to widen or redefine it, which created a double-ditch profile along most of its length. The ditch also cut through a number of pits, suggesting that the location of any pits within the enclosed space may be coincidental.

A third enclosure [6185], is believed to pre-date [6184] and post-date [6186/7], as it is cut by the former but appears to avoid the latter by virtue of a straight length and sharp turn. Only two pits were found to cut any of these ditches, all others being either cut by, or of no stratigraphic relation to them. All ditch interventions contained Iron Age finds.

coins, one of which was pierced, all of which suggest that this is a Saxon feature. It is also possible that the Roman finds discovered within spread (6099) were also deposited at this time. Environmental sampling within pit [6123] returned a number of eel and frog bones, and fragments of egg shell. It seems likely that [6123] was used for deposition of general re-deposited waste material, although its original purpose is uncertain.

In addition to [6127] and [6129], eighteen further postholes were excavated, including one double posthole filled with animal bone. Six other potential postholes were un-excavated. They formed no discernible pattern. All postholes contained small fragments of pottery and posthole [6153] contained a complete cow skull.

Conclusions

The eleven seasons of excavation at Marcham/Frilford have produced a massive amount of evidence as well as stimulating various intellectual questions regarding the Iron Age and Romano-British periods in central England. The practicalities of the post-excavation are well underway and there are plans in place to bring this to a conclusion within the next few years. Our current thinking regarding the interpretation of the site has been outlined in (Kamash *et al.* 2010a) although, as is often the case, this may change as we work our way through the material. The size and complexity of the site and its material remains offers a unique opportunity within central England to study an Iron Age site with evidence for extensive ritual structures and practice which were then replaced by a rural Romano-British temple complex including an unusual type of ‘amphitheatre’ and a range of other religious/ritual structures. The unusual character of the various Iron Age enclosures which appear not to be domestic, the ring-ditches to the east and the large barrel-shaped enclosure to the west, seem to act as important markers to be later replaced by an equally unusual Romano-British site. This inevitably raises questions of changing social relationships between the indigenous population and incoming new ideas and social norms within a religious/ritual context and the role that material culture played within those relationships. It is an opportunity to rethink what we mean by religion and ritual, especially within the Iron Age, and indeed whether they are valid terms at all.

The intention is to publish the final reports as monographs in the Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph Series.

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