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## **The Vale and Ridgeway Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2009: interim report**

### **Introduction to the Vale and Ridgeway Project**

The background to the project and site has been detailed in the previous eight 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), as well as on the project web site: <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/VRP1.html>

As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation, and is committed to education in the widest sense. This season's excavation saw participants from across the world including USA and Kenya 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 2009 Excavation Season [Fig. 1]**

Excavations this year were spread across Trendles Field and the Noah's Ark garden. In Trendles Field, which has been the focus of our excavations until this year, three trenches were continued from previous seasons (MF09: trenches 9 and 36 and MFP09: trench 2). Two new trenches (MF09: trenches 39 and 40) were also opened in the central area of the complex and over the putative end of the drain respectively. The aims of the season included: continued exploration of the well inside the shrine in trench 36; completion of the excavations in the interior of the arena of the semi-amphitheatre in trench 9; gaining a greater understanding of the archaeology in the central area of the complex and investigating activity towards the end of the drain leaving the semi-amphitheatre.

This was also the second year of excavations inside the Scheduled Ancient Monument (OX211, Scheduled Monument Consent HSD 9/2/9919) in the Noah's Ark Inn Garden, where Bradford and Goodchild (1939) first excavated the temple site. One trench (MFNA09: trench 1) was continued from the 2008 season to complete investigating the date and character of the barrel-shaped, ditched enclosure. After a geophysical survey over the main temple building carried out by William Wintle before the 2009 season (Wintle this volume), three new trenches (MFNA09: trenches, 6, 7 and 8) were opened over the site of the temple originally excavated by Bradford and Goodchild.

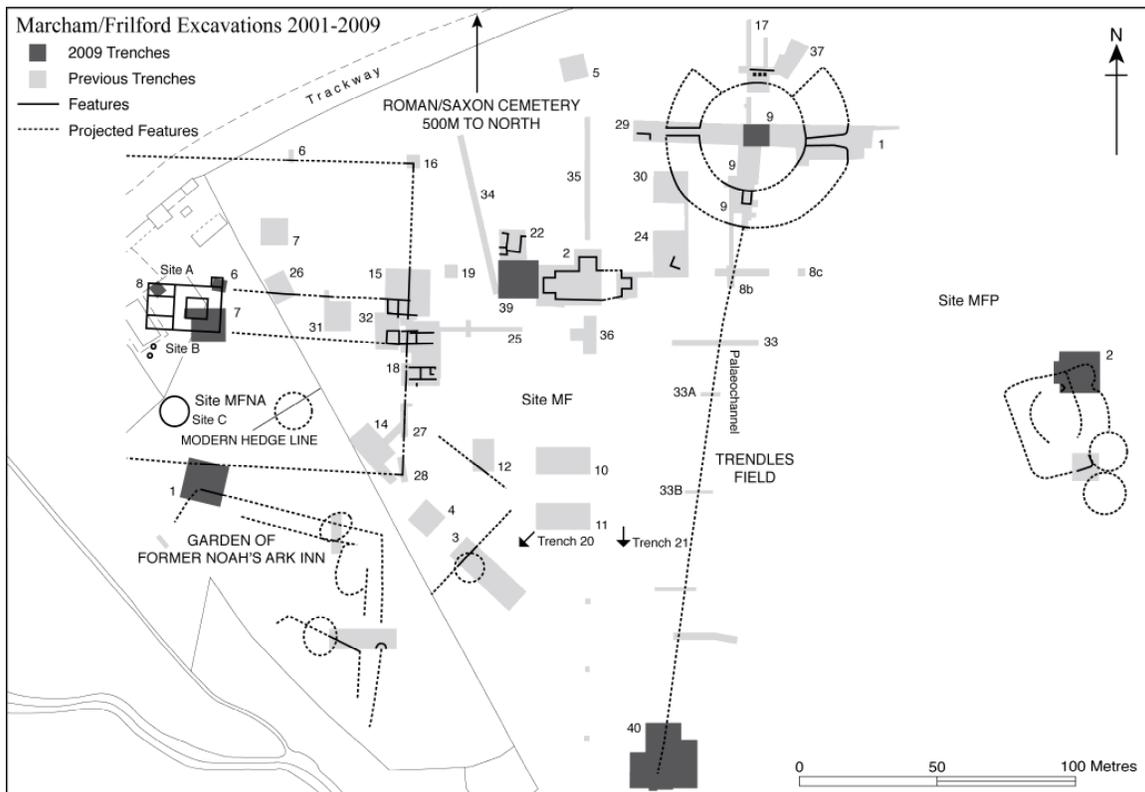


Fig. 1 Overall site plan showing the excavation areas and all trenches (those excavated in 2009 are indicated in darker grey).

### Excavations inside the Noah's Ark Inn garden, Frilford (SAM OX211): MFNA08 Trenches 1, 6-8 [Figs 2-7]

#### Trench 1 [Fig. 2]

Excavations in the 2009 season in trench 1 focussed on the Iron Age ditches in this trench. Ditch group 1016 was on an east-west alignment and formed the northern boundary of the enclosure. The ditch was a stepped v-shape, c. 3.2 m wide x 1.75 m deep, which was very similar in profile and size to the ditch sections excavated in trenches 2 and 3 in 2008 [Fig. 3]. The upper fills were extremely rich in finds, especially in early Roman pottery. In addition a carefully stacked pile of animal bone, from which an iron knife was protruding, was also found. This concentration of finds was markedly different from the ditch sections in the other trenches. The close proximity of this section of the ditched enclosure to the Roman *temenos* may explain the high level of deposition in this area and may be related to a possible southern entrance to the *temenos*.

Ditch group 1014 was on a north-south alignment and formed the western boundary of the enclosure. Somewhat unexpectedly, this section of the ditch was narrower (1.8 m wide) than the other sections of enclosure ditch and had a different profile being v-shaped without the step feature and was 1.4 m deep. It is unclear why this was the case, but it

may be possible that this side of the enclosure was not dug at the same time as the northern and eastern sides.

MFNA 08  
Trench 1

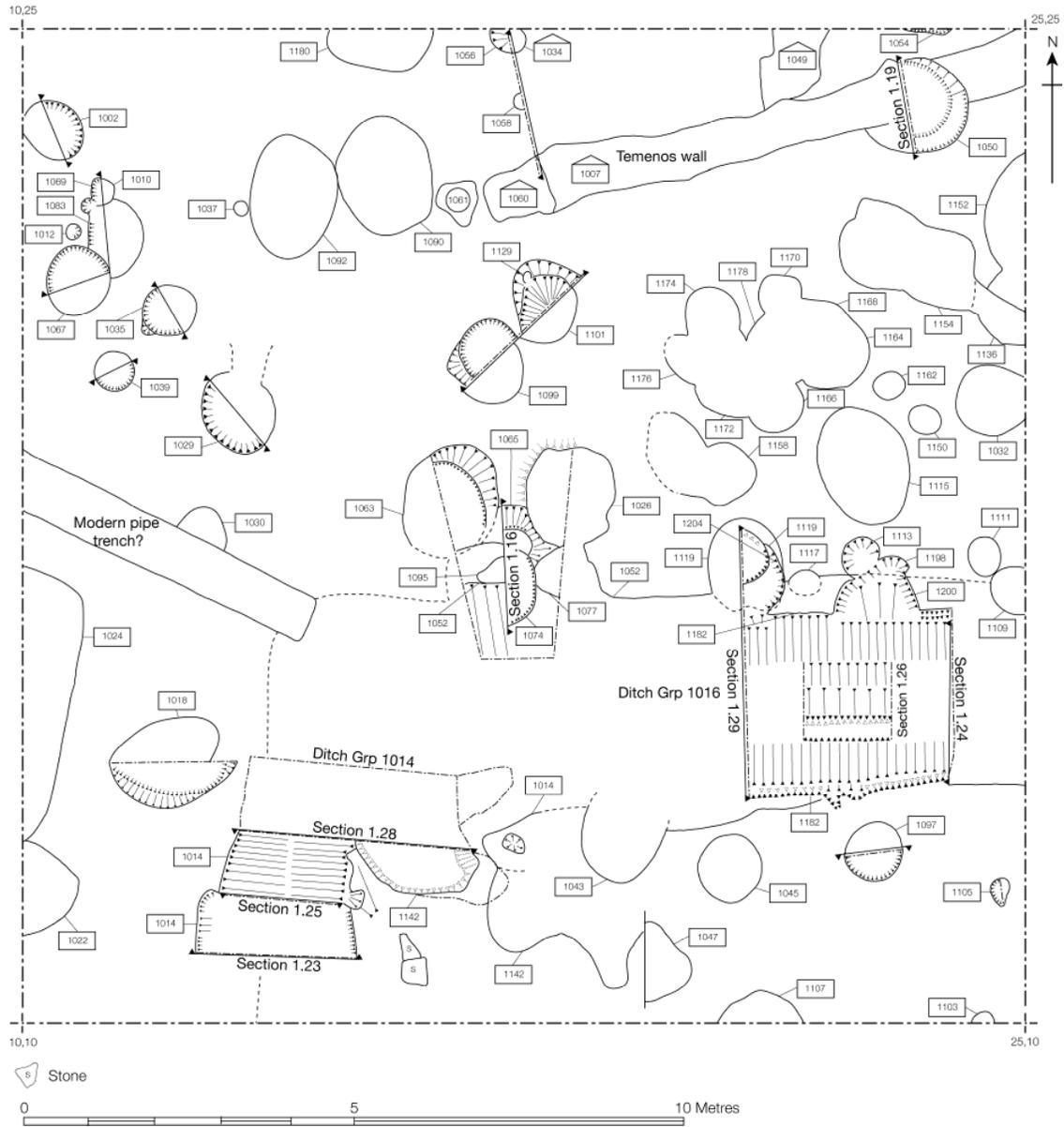


Fig. 2 Plan of MFNA trench 1.

MFNA 09  
Trench 1  
Section 1.31

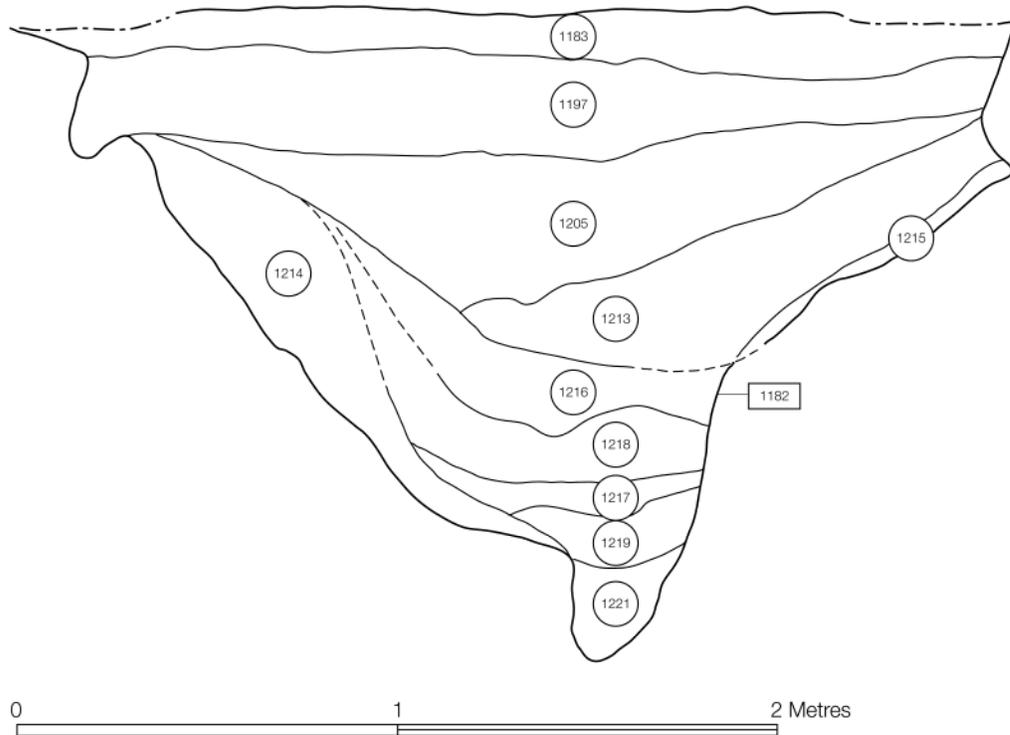


Fig. 3 Section through ditch [1182] in MFNA trench 1.

*The temple trenches: trenches 6-8*

Three trenches were excavated in the area of the temple. The largest of these trenches was located over the south-eastern corner of the main temple building (trench 7) and two smaller trenches were placed over the north-eastern corner of the temple and the side annexe (trench 6) and over the north-western section of the temple in the area of the tripartite annexe (trench 8). There were several reasons behind excavating the temple area again; these included: confirming the location of earlier excavations, understanding the extent and thoroughness of the earlier excavations in order to be able to assess their conclusions and to gain a fresh insight into the date and nature of the temple building and any activities that may have been carried out inside. These trenches generally avoided the area excavated by Harding (1987), though the north-western corner of trench 7 intersected with Harding's trench in order to confirm its location. The trenches excavated by Bradford and Goodchild (1939) proved to be easy to locate, a testament to the accuracy of their surveying. More unexpected was the shallow depth of the majority of these trenches. The majority of them hit the tops of the robber trenches for the temple walls, but these were very rarely excavated to any greater depth, meaning that the temple is in a better state of preservation than may have been assumed previously. Their plan of the eastern sector of the temple also proved to be extremely accurate. Somewhat more difficult to locate were the evaluation trenches excavated by Oxford Archaeological Unit

in the 1980s (Miles and Wait 1987; Wait and Miles 1988). Accounting for survey errors, at least one evaluation trench should have run through either our trench 6 or our trench 8, but no excavation trenches on the right alignment could be traced, so the location of these remains unclear.

MFNA 09  
Trench 7

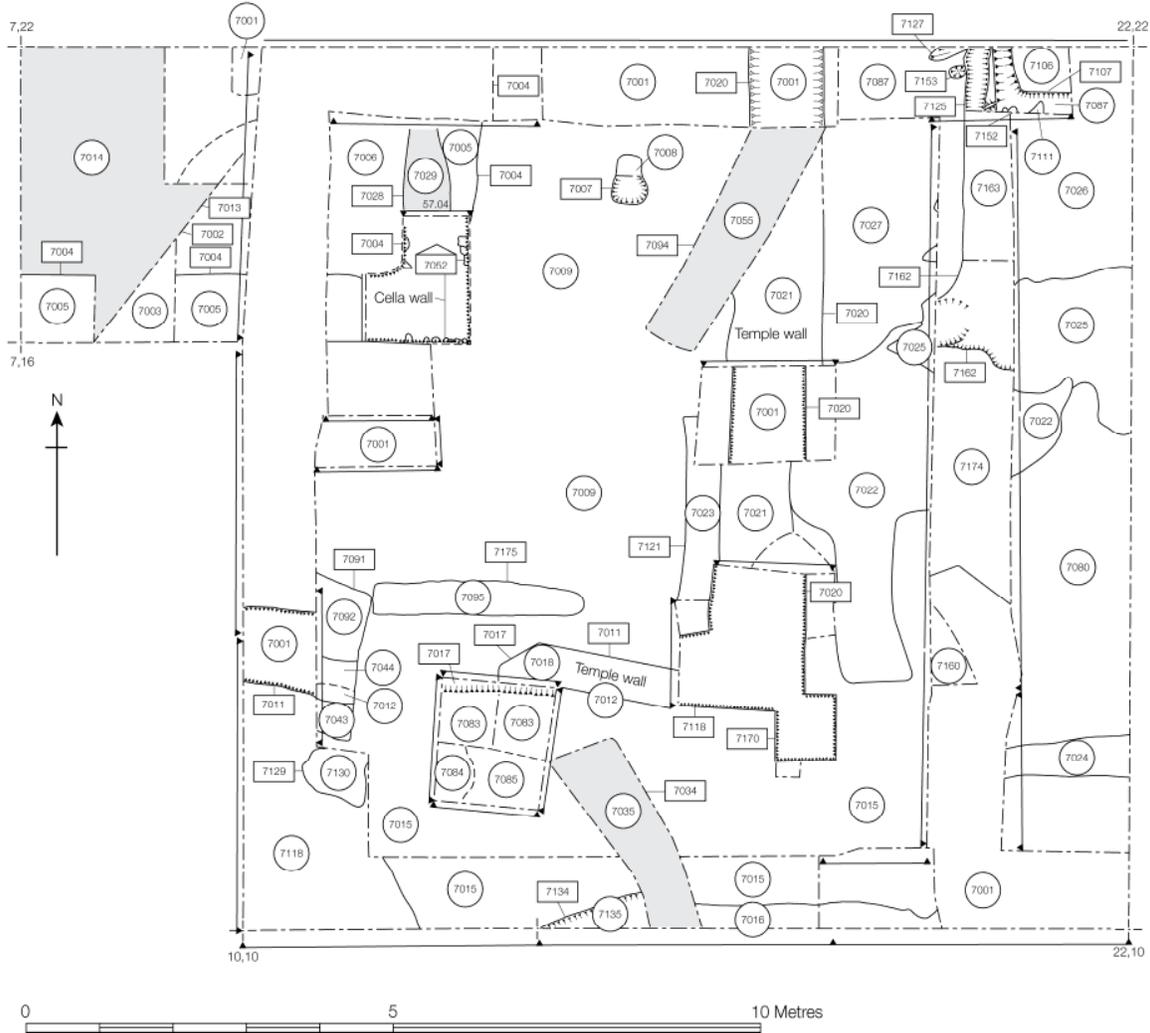


Fig. 4 Plan of MFNA trench 7.

The temple [7011=7118=7020] and cella [7004] walls were largely robbed out and the robber trenches backfilled with large quantities of small, unwanted stones and mortar [Fig. 4]. The date of this robbing of the walls is still unclear. One small part of the cella wall [7052] was not entirely robbed, illustrating that the foundations were made of vertical and pitched limestone pieces [Fig. 5]. The extent of the remaining foundations and the size of the robber trench in this area were the same, suggesting that the robber trenches provide a good proxy for the size of the walls. In this case, we can say that both

the temple and cella walls were c. 1 m wide and their robber trenches c. 0.5 m deep. At the south-eastern corner of the temple, a buttress-like extension [7170] seems to be have been added to the corner, which is a detail not recorded by Bradford and Goodchild. Inside the cella the upper layers contained large pieces of limestone rubble, but no floor layers survived. Like Bradford and Goodchild, we found large numbers of scattered ceramic tesserae, which suggest that a plain tessellated floor has been ploughed out or destroyed. Underneath this layer were a series of silt layers containing very few finds. Similarly no floor layers survived inside the ambulatory between the outer temple and cella walls. There was evidence for several small burning episodes in the upper layers in this area that might be related to some of the activities that occurred inside the building. A similar sequence of silts to those inside the cella underlay these areas. Where bedrock was exposed inside the temple building no cut features were recorded, suggesting that Harding's stake-walled roundhouse was not accompanied by any features to the south and east.

MFNA 09  
Trench 7  
Section 7.04

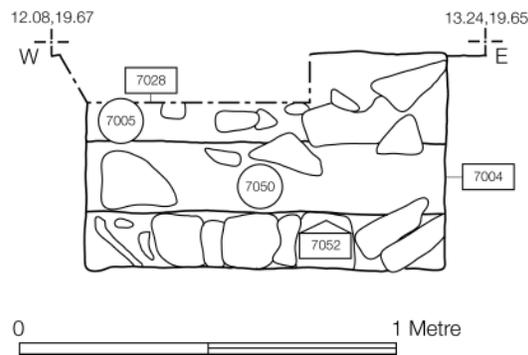


Fig. 5 Section through part of the cella wall in MFNA trench 7, showing where the wall has not been robbed.

Outside the temple walls were a series of destruction layers (7015, 7016, 7022, 7027 and 7080) surrounding the temple building. Copious fragments of wall plaster of a variety of colours were retrieved from these deposits. In contrast, very little wall plaster was recovered from the deposits inside the temple and cella walls. This suggests very strongly that the outside, rather than the inside, of the temple was decorated, which would have made the building a striking and colourful focal point inside the *temenos*. Another significant find from outside the temple to the east (from layer 7022) was the finely-modelled head and neck fragment of a ceramic bull figurine wearing a painted garland on top of its head. It appears that this figurine was a product of the local Oxfordshire potteries (P. Booth pers. comm.) and may have been made specifically for deposition at this temple. This is the only figurine that has so far been found at Marcham, though a ceramic model of an animal horn was found in the upper ditch fills in trench 1 to the south in 2008.

It was hoped that excavations in the north-eastern annexe (trench 6; Fig. 6) would help elucidate its character and purpose, but it is still unclear what this small space was used for. The finds, in particular the very large amounts of ceramic building material, from this trench have been instructive, however, about the broader building history of the temple. A very large concentration of roof tile was recovered from trench 6, principally from layers 6010, 6003 and 6008. It would appear that these represent two deposits of roof tile with one roof dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (deposited in 6010 and 6003) and another roof dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (deposited in 6008) (Warry 2009). This suggests that the roof was renovated at least twice during the life of the temple and also suggests that the temple must have been constructed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD at the latest; an earlier building with a roof of a different material may be possible. A clay-filled pit [6012] of unclear date was also found in the north-eastern corner of the trench.

MF 09

Trench 6

Plan 602

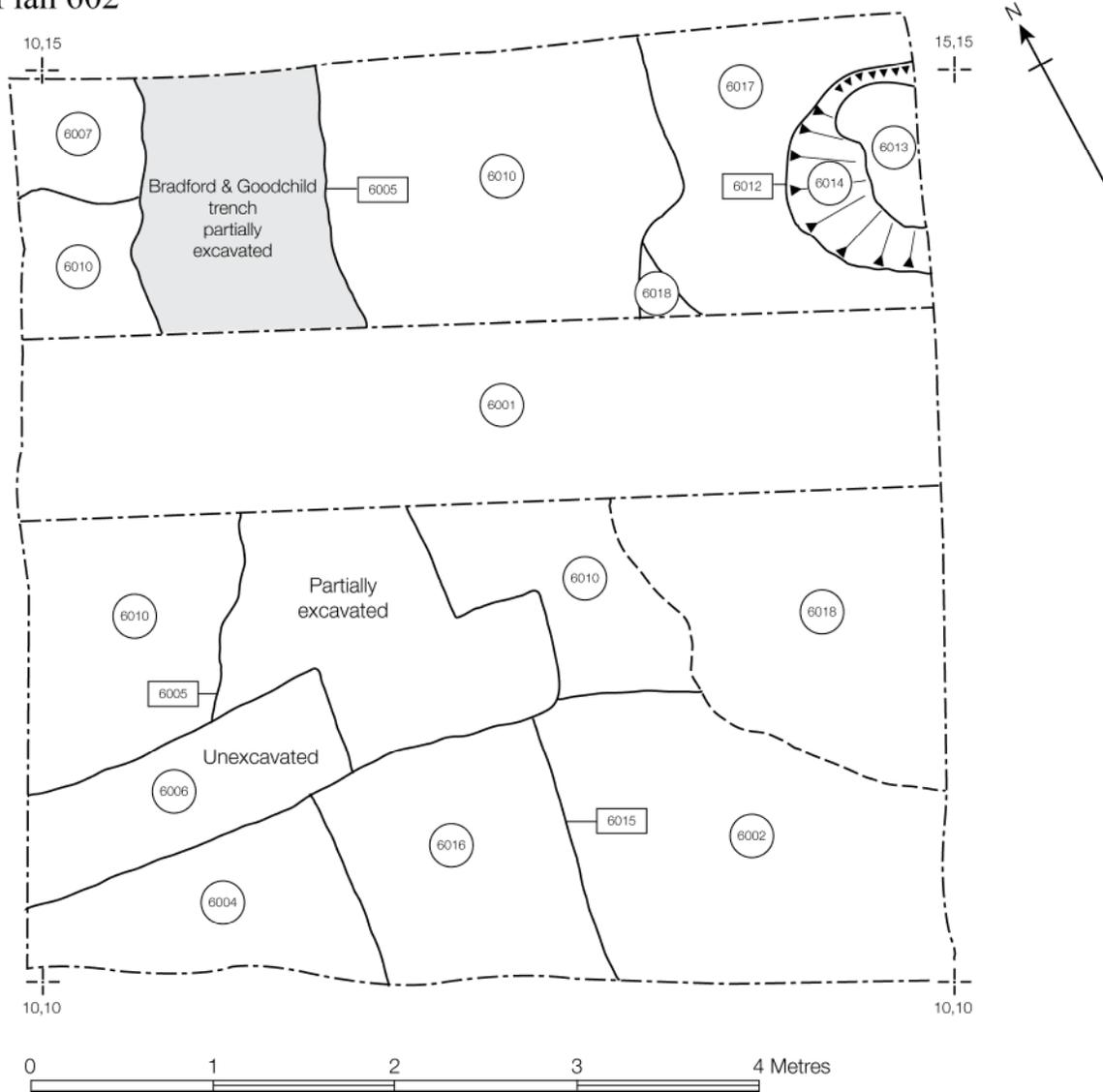


Fig. 6 Plan of MFNA trench 6.

It was also hoped that excavations in trench 8 would help unravel the function, purpose and chronology of the tripartite annexe. Unfortunately, the majority of the archaeology in trench 8 was severely truncated by a large, probably post-medieval, pit or cellar [8016] that may have been related to the Noah's Ark Inn when it was functioning as a pub, as well as by the earlier excavation trenches [Fig. 7].

### MFNA 09 Trench 8

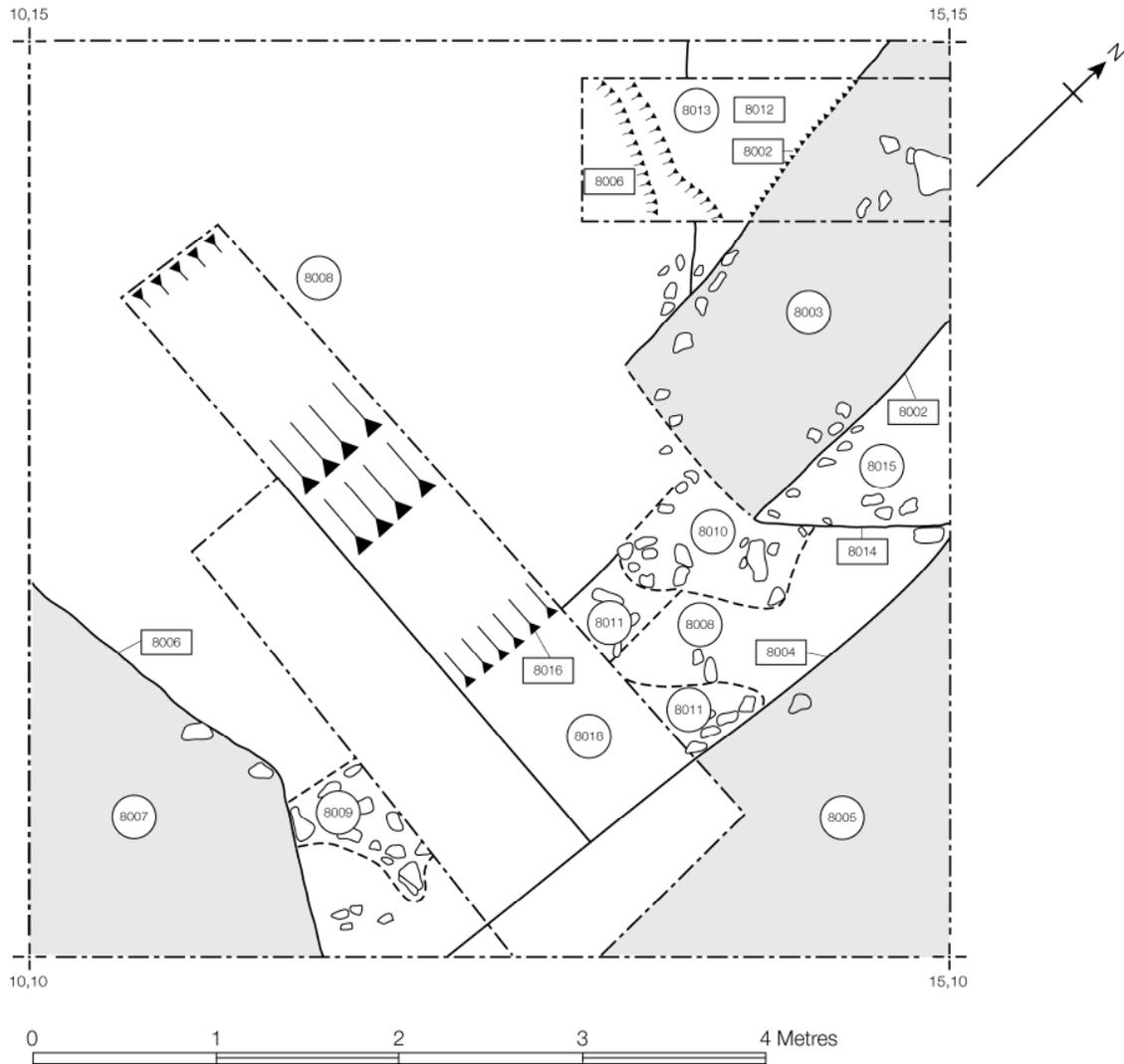


Fig. 7 Plan of MFNA trench 8.

## Excavations in Trendles Field

### *The semi-amphitheatre arena: trench 9 [Fig. 8]*

For the first time in several years conditions allowed excavation in the centre of the arena. Work in 2009 sought to answer questions about the course and character of the north-south axial drain and possible post-Roman activity within the arena.

The north-south leg of drain [9333], uncovered in the south of the arena in 2005, was found to continue north [9502] through the centre, so the exact point of origin of the drain is still not known, but it cannot have been in the centre of the arena. As in other sections of the excavated drain, the sidewalls of the drain were constructed throughout of 3-4 courses of relatively small roughly-faced stones, without a base, creating a channel never more than 0.35 m wide and 0.2 m deep. These sidewalls remained of consistent build and gently meandering course, but major alterations were made to the capstones (see below). There was also evidence that main drain had been remodelled and repaired a number of times: trample and disturbance in the surrounding sandy clays (9479) testified to both water-logging and repeated attempts to master the rise and flow of water. This demonstrated that water management was a challenge throughout the life of the arena.

North of the centre two exceptionally large capstones [9498] over 1 m long and 0.8 m wide were uncovered. These later slabs may have functioned as foundations for a path to the centre, perhaps as the middle became wetter. The central 2 m length of the drain demonstrated an earlier capstone model [9476]. These stones were much more modest and only roughly shaped. Here the single clay fill over the drain was undisturbed within a very clear cut [9474]. However, the base of the southern end of this portion of drain channel was lower than the base of the continuation south - above which yet another arrangement of capstones [9497] and fills evinced further remodelling. This drop of over 0.1 m happened across the only break discovered in the drain channel. This suggests either that the drain to the north had subsided gradually, fracturing the channel, or that the southern portion was rebuilt at a higher level to create an improvised sump. South of the break the capstones were thin and angular and of a regular size (c. 0.5 m square), but a succession of patchy fills, including a final rubble packing (9496), were clearly the result of increasingly desperate overhaul and intervention.

Excavation to the south-east of the centre provided more evidence for drainage problems. Traces of the arena surface, including sand, were discovered in an area (c. 3 x 3 m as revealed) which had become a muddy pool of stagnant water into which were dumped stones, ceramic building material and organic waste leaving a sludge (9523) containing bone, fragments of wood, charcoal and Roman pottery. This was sealed by a rough stone layer (9518) of large pieces of building stone and roof-tile, perhaps from the demolition of structures elsewhere on the site. Above this a deep layer of clayey colluvium (9501) from the south-east bank demonstrated reverse stratigraphy with early medieval pottery at the lowest level of in-fill. A rubble layer (9518) might tentatively be linked to very late or immediately post-Roman activity but no artefactual evidence was found to support this hypothesis.



MF 09  
Trench 40

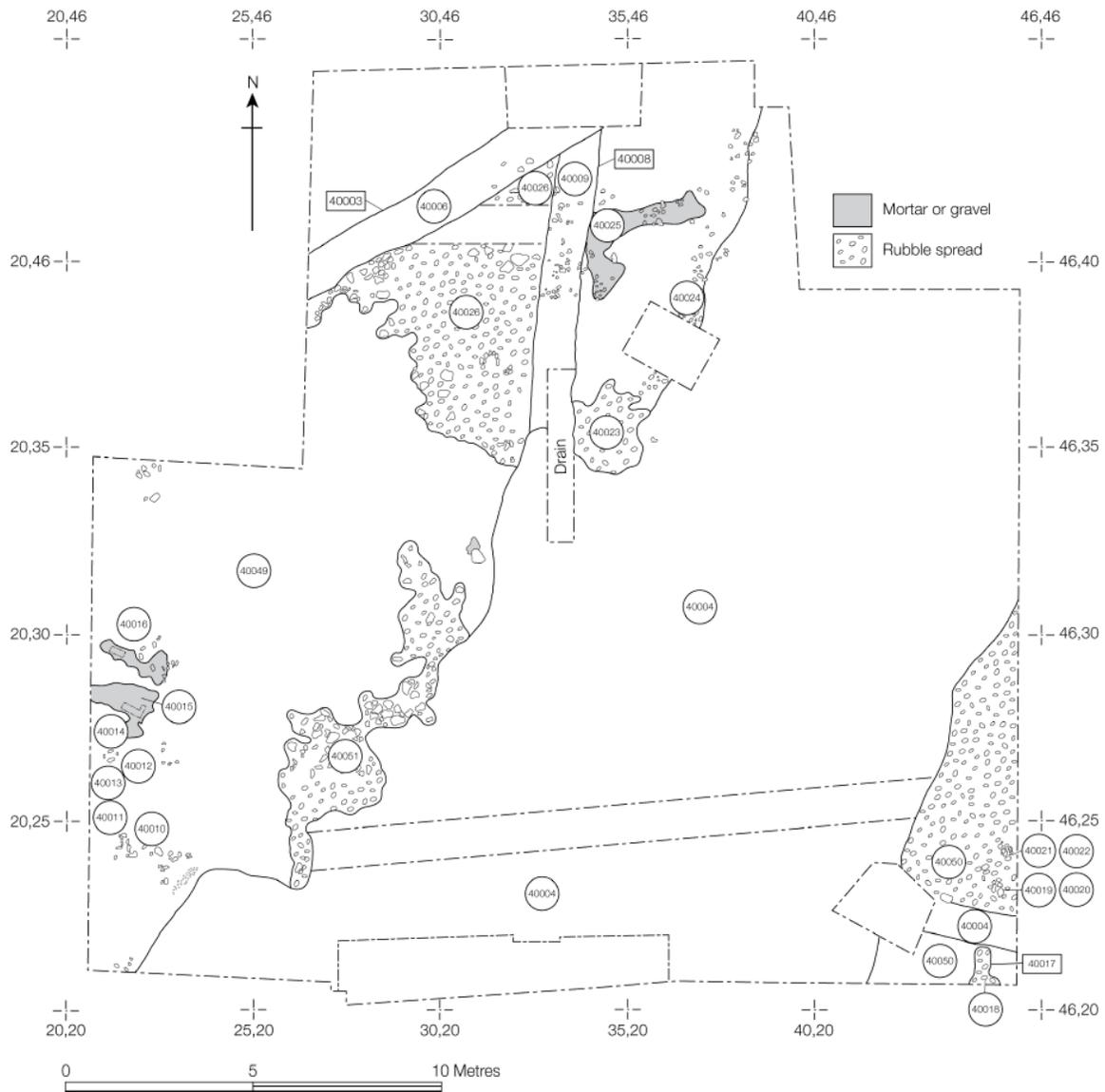


Fig. 9 Plan of MF trench 40.

*Activity in the central area of the complex: trenches 36 and 39*

Excavations of the well/shaft [36123] inside the shrine in trench 36 were completed in 2009 [Fig. 10]. The feature was c. 1.8 m deep and c. 0.75 m in diameter. The stonelining, size and shape would suggest that the feature was a well, but the stone layer (36173) at its base might cast some doubt on this interpretation. No further excavations were carried out in this trench.



MF 09  
Trench 39

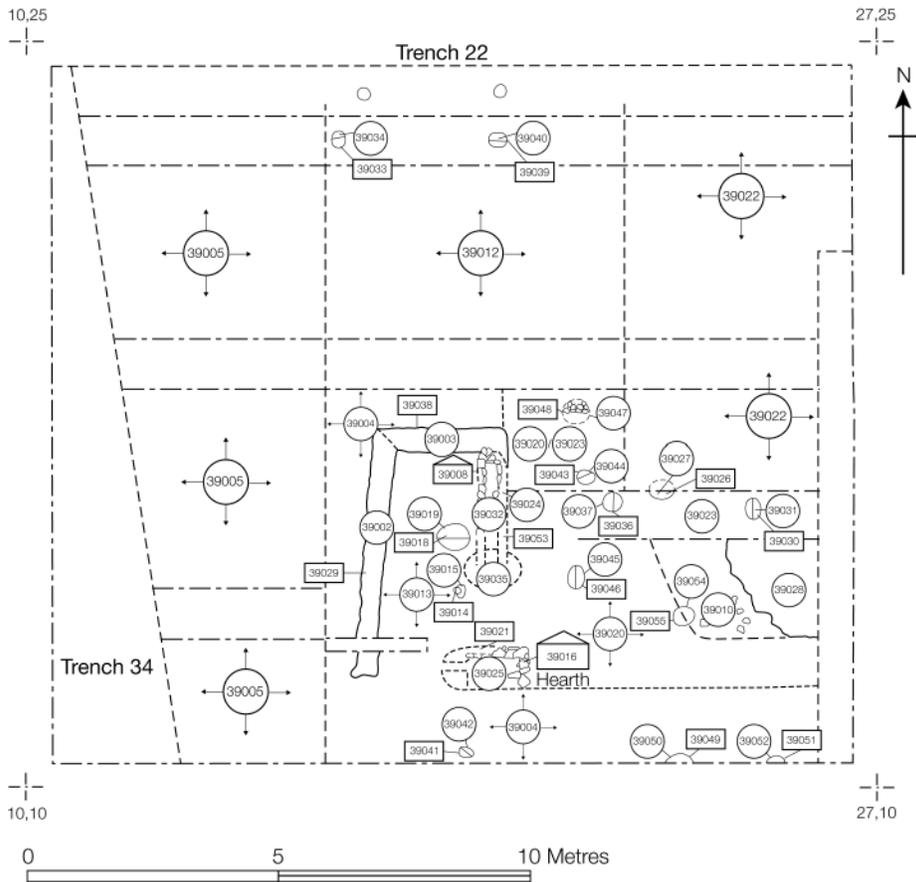


Fig. 11 Plan of MF trench 39.

In the absence of stratigraphical relationships between the building and hearths found in Trenches 22 and 34 it had been proposed in previous seasons that the metal-working activity took place after the Trench 22 building's main period of use. It now appears, however, that the smithing hearths belonged to a phase before construction of the Trench 22 building. This hypothesis is perhaps supported by the position of the hearth in Trench 22 - impractically close to an internal corner of the building - and would explain more neatly the tree-throw hole filled with metal-working and hearth debris in the building's annexe as part of site-clearance and levelling for building.

A cobbled surface (39028), revealed in previous seasons to the west of the Trench 2 building, was found to continue into Trench 39 and, significantly, to overlie the oyster shell spread. The cobbles were in turn sealed by demolition debris (39010), presumably from the Trench 2 building. In the south of Trench 39, west of the cobbled surface, faint gravelly traces were found of foundation trenches [39029]=[39038] for a three-sided building open to the south, c. 7 m long x 4 m wide. The remains of these gravel-lined trenches just scooped the top of the oyster shell layer and made use of the western side of hearth [39008] as part of the foundations, suggesting that the shell layer had been part of

site preparation for this building. Any other remains of this later construction, apart from a spread of debris related to the gravel foundations, has been lost to ploughing.

### *MFP09 Trench 2 [Figs 12-13]*

The D-shaped enclosure over which Trench 2 was targeted is a flat-bottomed Bronze Age ditch [2131] approximately 2 m deep, flanked by a bank of re-deposited material on either side. Several pits of probable Iron Age date had been cut into the bank on the south side, whilst the bank on the north side appears to have slumped into the ditch. The ditch, pits and bank were all subsequently truncated by a V-shaped Iron Age ditch [2055] that was re-cut twice, once during the Iron Age and once during the Iron Age to Roman transition [Fig. 13]. The alignment of the Iron Age ditch has yet to be conclusively proven.

Investigations elsewhere in the trench have identified up to three probably Bronze Age pits, two of which appear to be bell-shaped. The primary fill (2178) of one of these pits [2205], on the southern edge of the trench, consisted of mixed silts and general waste including charcoal flecks and contained large fragments of pottery dating to the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age transition. These features were filled from the north side with alternating bands of mixed silt with domestic waste and natural colluvial clay. It is likely that many features in this area of Trendles Field are masked by various phases of colluvium. This conclusion is given weight by the identification of several ephemeral cut features, for example [2117] and [2240], which may pre-date the Bronze Age activity and are filled with colluvial clay similar to the banding within [2205].

A large part of the trench appears to comprise several intercutting Iron Age pits of varying size, previously interpreted in 2008 as a single large pit [2012]. As the depth of excavation increased it became possible to see patterns of pits in plan within the fills. One of these pits, [2214] within the centre of the trench, contained articulated neonatal remains placed against the edge of the cut.

In the south-eastern corner of the trench there was a complex sequence of inter-cutting pits. Continued excavation of pit [2124] revealed that a small pit [2135] was cut into its primary fill; an articulated bovine leg was then deposited into this small pit. This feature likewise silted over when a second pit [2122] of the same shape, size and alignment was cut into the secondary fill to the south of the first pit. No significant finds were identified within this second pit. A third such pit [2138] was identified west of [2135] and appears to have been cut directly into the base of [2124], although it is impossible to be certain due to truncation by a possible linear feature [2216] that cuts through [2124] yet is of uncertain relationship to [2122] and [2135]. It has been suggested that the pits within trench 2 were quarry pits for the extraction of the natural glauconite-rich green sand and white tuffaceous clay where there is a 2 m deep shelf in the limestone bedrock.



this deposition represents a closing event where old or out-dated artefacts were disposed of, perhaps as the focus of activity migrated westward toward the Temple complex.

MFP 09  
Trench 2  
Section 2.51

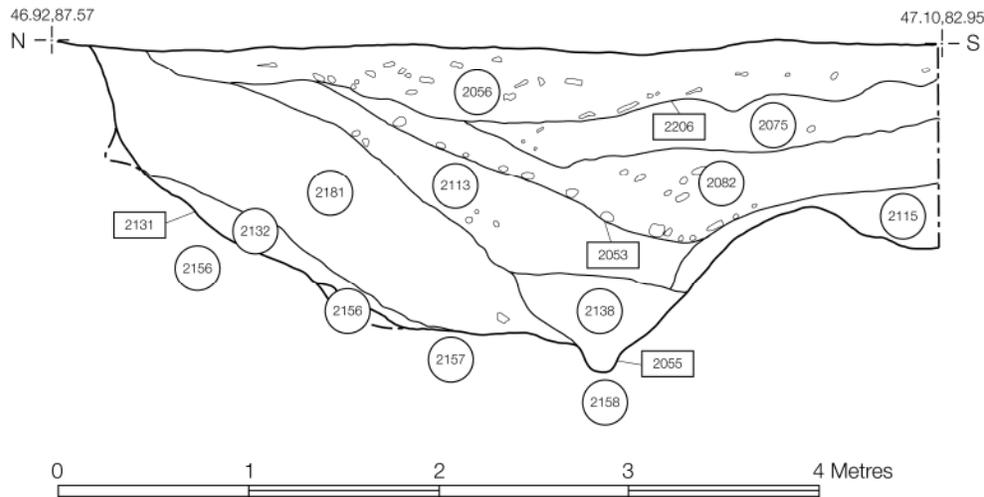


Fig. 13 Section through ditches [2131] and [2055] in MFP trench 2.

*Conclusions and future plans*

While this season's excavations in the scheduled temple area were not able to contribute much to our understanding of the annexe features, they have been able to shed new light on aspects of the main temple building and its immediate environs. In particular, the exterior painting of the temple, the burning episodes inside the temple ambulatory, the phasing of the roof and the deposition of specially-made items such as the ceramic bull figurine have added previously unknown elements to the story of the temple.

In Trendles Field the excavations inside the arena have now been completed. The hearths in trench 39 have added to a growing picture of small-scale industrial activity on the site, which merits more research. The oyster shell layer in this trench has also contributed some much needed stratigraphy to the central part of the site, which in conjunction with finds data will hopefully help in understanding the sequence of buildings and activities in this area. Excavations in trench 40 will continue in the 2010 season, where a particular focus will be on the nature of the deposition in the boggy layers and also further definition of the end of the drain. Similarly, excavations will continue in the prehistoric settlement at the far west of Trendles Field. This will involve investigating further the complex sequences in trench 2 and also opening new trenches in different parts of this area.

### *Acknowledgements*

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