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The Vale and Ridgeway Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2007: interim report

Introduction to the Vale and Ridgeway Project

The background to the project and site has been detailed in the previous six 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), as well as on the project web site:

http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/research/research_projects/marcham

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 Norway, USA, Australia, Kenya and Thailand as well as from a selection of British 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, despite bad weather conditions, c.400 people visited the site.

The 2006 Excavation Season [Fig. 1]

Excavations this season again focussed on the archaeology in Trendles Field. One of the main aims of this season was to complete the excavations in the area of the *temenos* entrance and the pathway leading out towards the semi-amphitheatre (Trenches 15 and 32). In addition, a small extension was added to Trench 14 to complete the excavation of a large pit inside the *temenos*. In the area around the semi-amphitheatre, the following aims were pursued: i) continue exploration of the western entrance to the arena (Trench 29); ii) complete excavations inside the arena, including a small extension to the south-east of the central area (Trench 9); iii) confirm the end of the bank to the north of the arena (Trench 37); iv) complete the excavations in Trench 24 and v) investigate the relict channel and the route of the drain exiting from the arena (Trenches 8b, 33a-d and 21). Three new trenches (34, 35 and 36) were also opened to investigate potential activity and buildings in the area between the *temenos* and the semi-amphitheatre. In addition, a small 10 m x 10 m trench was opened to the far eastern end of Trendles Field to explore the potential Iron Age archaeology, including a rectangular enclosure with pits and two penannular ditched features, identified by geophysical survey (MFP07 Trench 1).

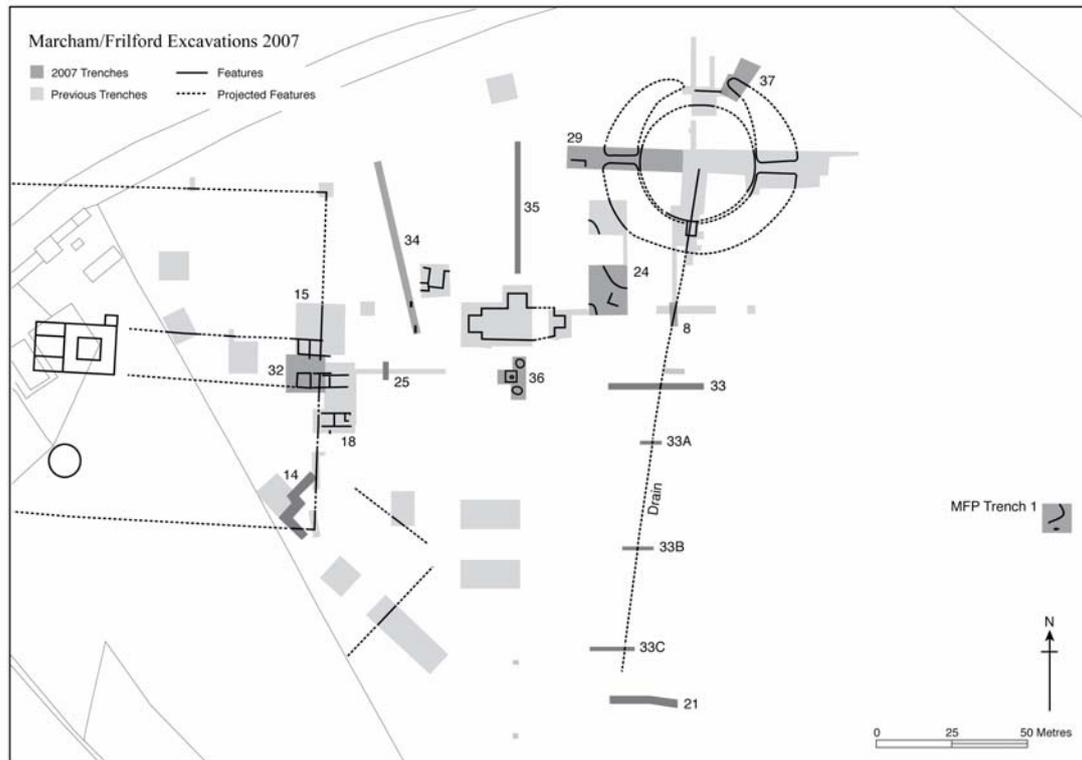


Fig. 1 Plan of the excavated trenches at Marcham/Frilford 2001-2007, also showing the outline of the *temenos* and temple buildings excavated in 1937-8.

Due to the severe flooding in Oxfordshire in July 2007, some of these objectives were not possible. Excavation in MFP07 Trench 1 was only possible for a single week of the season. During this time, the trench was cleaned revealing a complex of intercutting curvilinear ditches and pits. These features were not excavated to any significant depth, but initially appear to be Iron Age. Further excavation will take place in this area of the site in future seasons. The poor weather conditions also prevented any excavation in the interior of the arena (Trench 9 and parts of Trench 29), which was under water for the whole season.

The *temenos* area

The temenos entrance and pathway (Trenches 15 and 32) [Fig. 2]

The aim of the 2007 season in Trenches 15 and 32 was to investigate buildings and structures on the southern side of the *temenos* pathway in trench 32, and their relationship to those excavated in previous seasons in Trench 15. As elsewhere on the site, the walls had been robbed out. The foundations, which had been partially robbed out, directly overlay and did not cut the bedrock.

The pathway inside the *temenos* ran east-west towards the temple and is probably a continuation of the pathway investigated in Trench 25 (Fig 1). The pathway was constructed on the surface of the pre-building soil (32004 = 15100) at the same level as the surfaces on the inside and outside of the buildings. It has an overlying layer of crushed limestone gravel, which were thickest (up to 0.1 m) in the centre and thinning towards the edges. A few fragments of tabular limestone lie on top of the gravels suggesting that the gravel might have provided a foundation for a tiled surface which

has now been lost. Within the gaps between the stones a number of different layers were excavated suggesting that the pathway was repaired several times.

Excavations have determined that the structures to the south (Trench 32) and north (Trench 15) of the pathway inside the *temenos* mirrored each other in alignment, layout, and dimensions. To the south the structure is formed by walls [32032], [32019], [32028], [32031] and [32047] and to the north by walls [15036], [15087], [15033] and [15059]; both were aligned on the pathway. In both buildings the eastern north-south walls was created using the *temenos* wall. Both buildings have an internal division [15033] and [32047] to create two rooms, 4.2 m x 2.5 m to the east and 4.2 m x 3.3 m to the west. Exterior walls [15036] to the north and [32038] to the south appear to have continued further west, suggesting that a third, open-fronted room may also have existed. Posthole [32036], which underlay wall [32028], and posthole [32050] may point to an earlier timber phase. A small pit or posthole [32033] of unclear phase was also found in the north-western corner of the southern building. Nothing has survived to suggest a possible function for the rooms or for the activities that might have taken place in them. In addition, no floor surfaces survived.

Two opposing plinths [15059] and [32032] (each c. 1 m x 0.8 m) were positioned either side of the pathway on the same alignment as the internal partition walls [15033] and [32047]. These plinths might have provided foundations for an arch or columns. These would have framed the view from the entrance and guided the eye towards the temple building straight ahead.

Outside the *temenos* entrance, a single posthole [32037], 0.33 x 0.2 m x 0.2 m, was located 1 m to the east outside the *temenos* entrance. The fill (32006) comprised a large limestone slab, 0.4 m x 0.25 m, which had been placed horizontally on the base of the feature. Other large tabular limestone blocks had been placed vertically, presumably as packing.

To the north-east of the entrance a well-laid cobbled surface (15227 and 15160) lay outside of the *temenos* wall. The upper layer (15227) was composed of large tabular limestone blocks that appeared smooth and well worn. To the north of this cobbled surface was a work area containing a small hearth or oven [15232], which was D-shaped and clay lined with vertical sides. On the surface the clay was moulded to form a smooth rounded rim. A spread of mixed ashy material (15248), similar to the hearth fills, extended eastwards for approximately 2.6 m. A small pit [15251] was excavated c. 0.4 m southwest of the hearth.

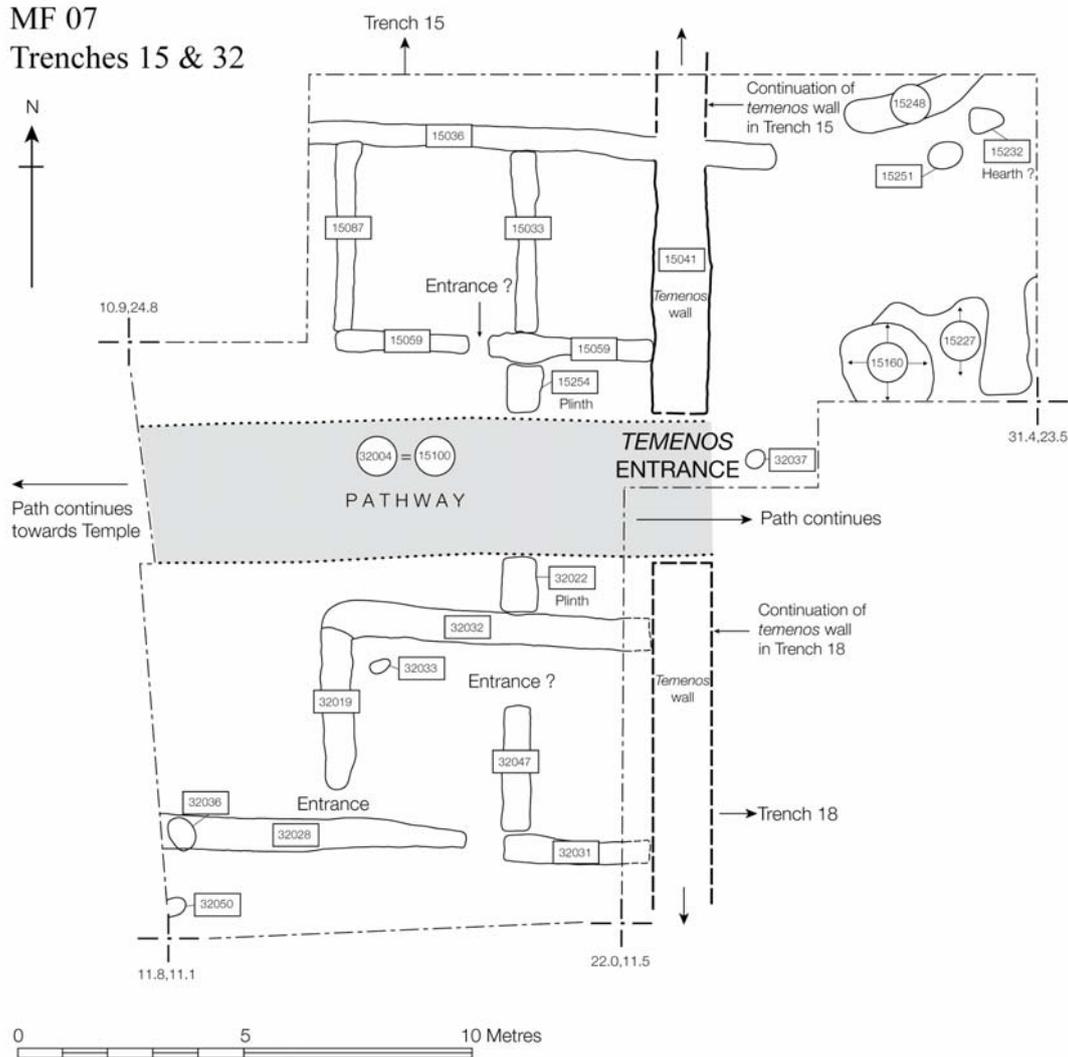


Fig. 2 Schematic plan showing the features at the entrance to the *temenos* in Trenches 15 and 32.

The temenos interior (Trench 14)

Trench 14, in the south-eastern corner of the *temenos*, was re-opened and extended this season to confirm the location of the *temenos* wall and continue excavation of a large pit. A short stretch of *temenos* wall was located in the north-eastern part of the trench. Running parallel to the wall inside the *temenos* was a narrow gully. This feature has not been seen elsewhere inside the *temenos* and while probably associated with the wall is so far of unclear function. To the west of these features more of the midden deposit found in 2002 was identified. Further west, in the area of the trench that had been open in the 2002 and 2003 seasons, was the very large pit [14295] c. 5 m x c. 8 m. The upper fills of the pit seem to contain 4th-century coins and pottery as well as copious amounts of animal bone, which probably derived from ritual activities inside the *temenos*. Five fills have so far been excavated to a depth of c. 1 m; poor weather conditions prevented further excavation this season. The high level of preservation inside the pit, as well as the potential for waterlogged layers further down, make this pit highly important for understanding what happened inside the *temenos*.

The semi-amphitheatre and its environs

The western entrance (Trench 29) [Fig. 3]

Although excavation in the interior of the arena was not possible, the western entrance area was open to excavation. Excavations in the far western end of the trench were completed this season. These clarified the relationships among the arena banks, the banks flanking the pathway and the pathway. The arena banks, which were constructed first in the sequence, to the south and north of the entranceway were consolidated by large dumps of rubble and yellow sand. The baths flanking the pathway were constructed next and the pathway at the end. It is likely though that these were all part of the same construction phase.

The entranceway into the arena was formed by cutting vertically through the bedrock to north [29045] and south [29085] and sloping gently down towards the arena edge. Towards the arena this opening flared out to a width of 3 m. The cobbled pathway (29047) followed the sloping cut through the bedrock to the edge of the arena. Across the opening in the arena walls [29033 and 29087] at the edge of the arena a step [29046] was constructed from limestone blocks. The northern half of the step [29046] (0.8 m wide) was wider than and of a different build to the southern part [29103] (0.5 m wide). The upper preserved surface of [29103] was not solid, but had a groove c. 0.1 m wide running through the centre, which suggests that it may have been possible partially to block the entrance. The rising floodwaters hampered further excavation in this area, so it is unclear whether these step features were contemporary.

Thick demolition and destruction layers were preserved over the cobbled pathway in the entranceway. These layers contained large rubble blocks, as well as significant amounts of pink wall plaster and oyster shells. The plaster may have been used to disguise the vertical cuts through the bedrock. Narrow, horizontal ledges in the bedrock may have been used to support a light timber framework for this plaster. After the entrance had crumbled into disuse, a long period of silting occurred. This thick silt layer contained large numbers of coins, a fragment of glass finger ring, a fragment of shale bracelet and a duck brooch, which may have been washed down from the possible shrine found in 2006 in the top of the bank to the south of the pathway.

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Trench 29

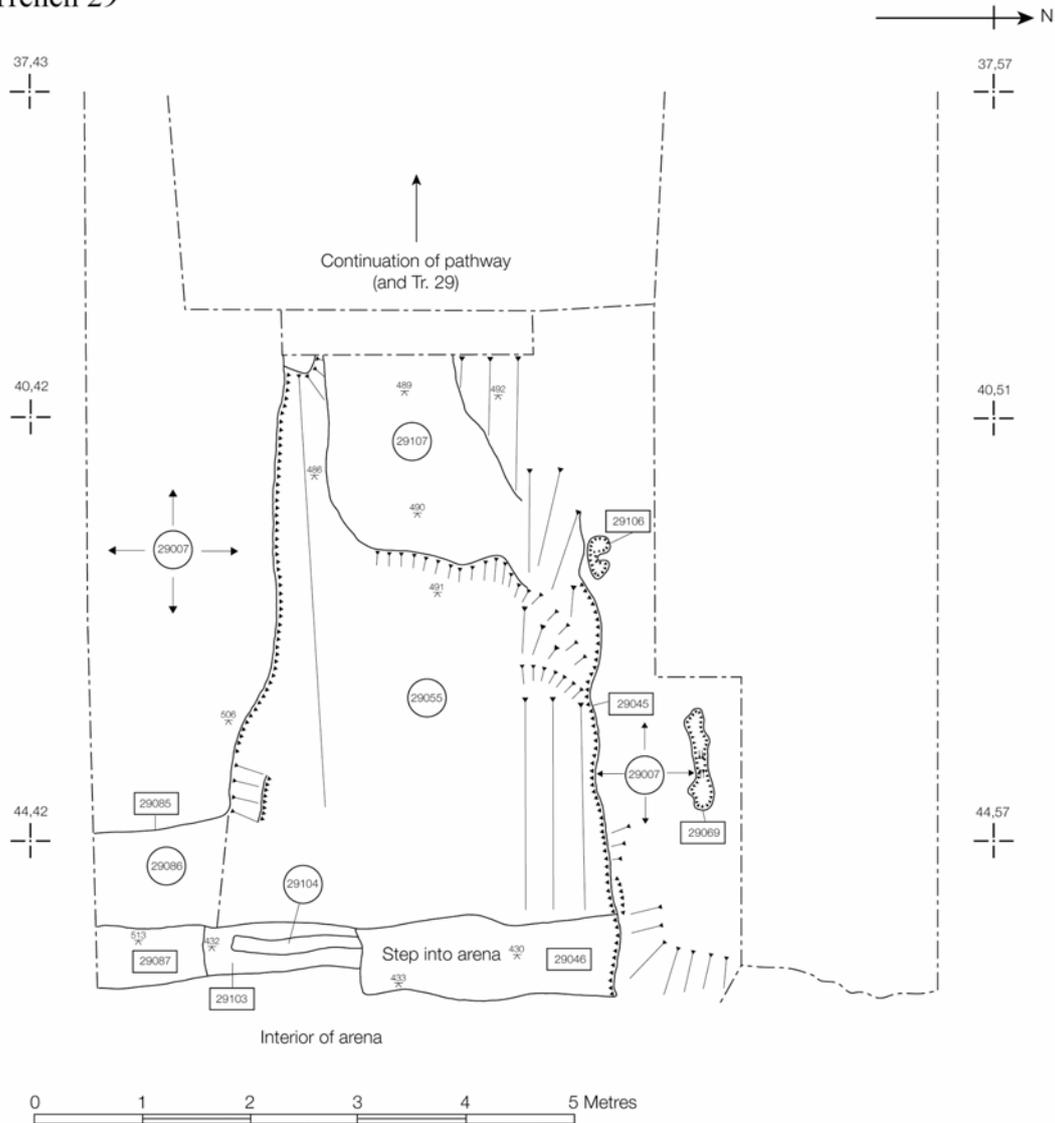


Fig. 3 Plan of the western entrance to the semi-amphitheatre showing the pathway and the step down to the arena in Trench 29.

The terminus of the northern bank (Trench 37)

This trench was positioned to the east of Trench 17 to investigate the terminus of the north-eastern sector of the arena bank. As elsewhere the bank was constructed from a series of dumps of material from the original excavation of the arena hollow. The excavations confirmed that there was a break in the bank to the east of the structural features identified previously in Trench 17.

The shrine to the south-west of the semi-amphitheatre (Trenches 24 and 30) [Fig. 4]

This was the final season of work on the probable shrine in Trench 24, which now appears to have been a three sided structure with an open front (similar in form to the building in Trench 22) facing the semi-amphitheatre. The east wall [24159] remains

only as a single stone at the end of a robber trench [24196]. The structure was surrounded by various stone and mortar demolition layers, suggesting that it was deliberately dismantled.

The stone clusters identified in 2006 were proven not to be cut features. They appear to fall into two groups: one at a lower level within the area defined by the walls, and one outside and level with the walls. The depth of the former suggests that it may be contemporary with the cobbled surface (24006/24124). A line of later stone clusters along the west wall suggests that the three sided structure pre-dates them. This shows a continuity of purpose in this area over an extended period. It is possible that these stone groups were post supports for small votive offerings or settings defining areas in which offerings had been placed.

Further investigation was also carried out to elucidate the relationship of this area with the arena bank in Trench 30. It appears that the bank slipped to the south and was repaired with a substantial bracing wall [24230] and revetment that extended towards the cobbled surface (24124/24006). This wall collapsed across the cobbles while the area was still open.

MF 07
Trench 24

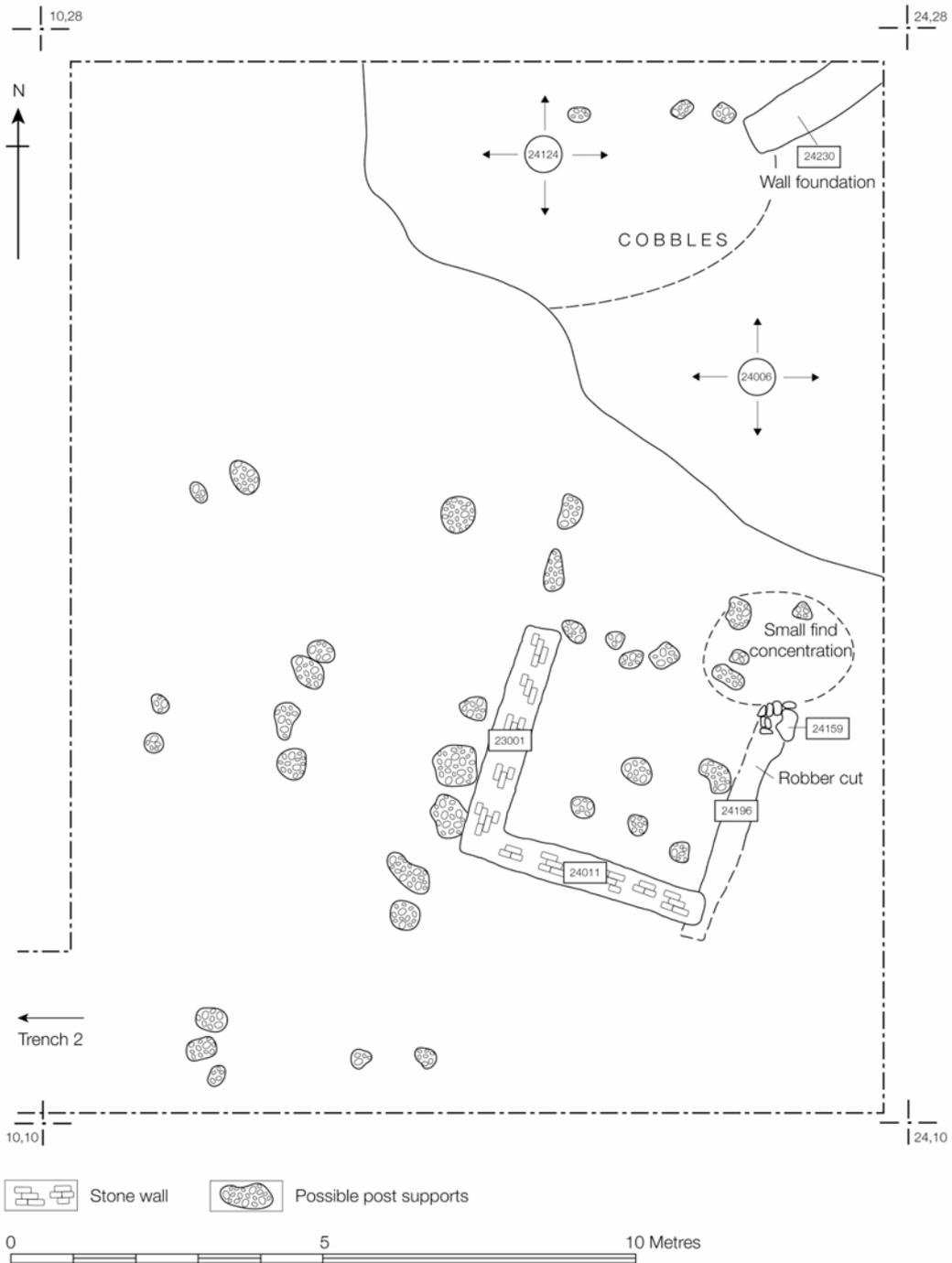


Fig. 4 Plan of Trench 24 showing the walls of the shrine, the possible post supports and the cobbled area outside the bank of the semi-amphitheatre.

The drain (Trenches 8b, 33a-d and 21) [Fig. 5]

This season's excavations on the drain were aimed at finding where the drain issued and defining its relationship with the relict channel. The drain was tracked running south from the semi-amphitheatre as far as Trench 21. Flooding prevented further

excavation in Trench 21 as well as tracing the drain any further south towards the River Ock. In Trench 8b to the south of the arena, the drain had undergone repairs by digging a large pit over its course.

Trenches 33a-d were positioned over the course of the drain and relict channel between the arena and Trench 21. A clear cut [33007], c. 1.5 m wide, for the drain was made through the relict channel [33010] and its fills. As elsewhere the drain [33009] was capped with large limestone slabs. The sides of the drain were constructed from four courses of limestone pieces pushed into the sides of the cut, forming a small channel. The drain was not lined and did not have a constructed base. In Trench 33b the drain truncated layers containing Mesolithic blades and bade cores. It is possible that these represented *in situ* Mesolithic activity associated with the relict channel.

MF 07

Trench 33A

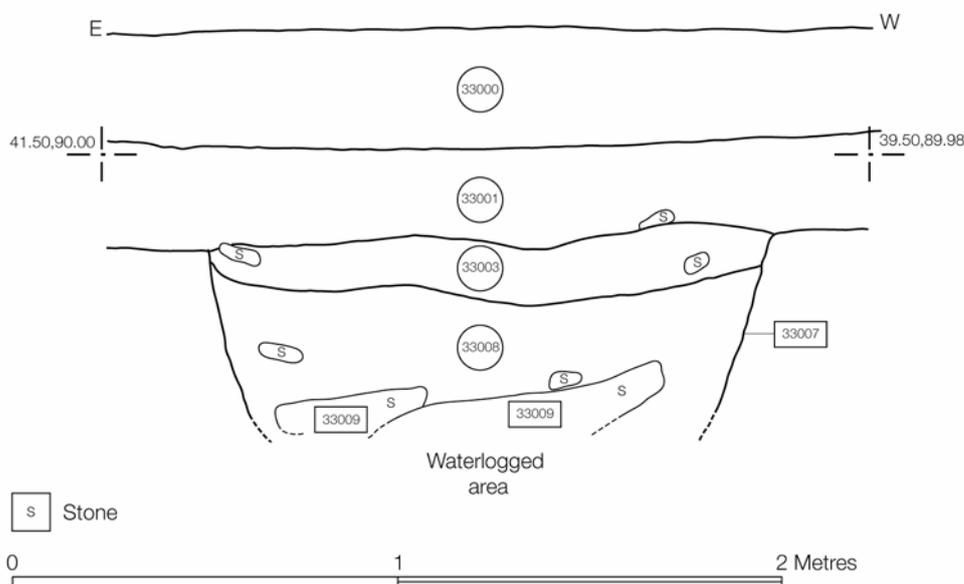


Fig. 5 Section through the drain in Trench 33A.

The area between the *temenos* and the semi-amphitheatre

The evaluation strip trenches

Two long strip trenches (34 and 35) were opened to evaluate the density of archaeology in the northern part of the field between the *temenos* and the semi-amphitheatre. In general the strips showed a lower density of archaeology to the north than the south. Trench 34 (59.5 m x 2 m) was opened to investigate a possible E-W trackway in the north, which was not found, and several strong positive geophysical anomalies in the south of the area; and to determine the western limits of the building uncovered in Trench 22.

The two strong geophysical anomalies had been produced by the foundation courses of two substantial smithing hearths, [34004: north] and [34009: south] constructed from limestone and probably associated with the Roman building in Trench 22. Both hearths were constructed from limestone, with three to five courses remaining (c. 0.5

m high). The northern hearth [34004], 2 m long and .9 m wide, was the larger of the two [Fig. 6a and b]. Evidence of clay bonding and lining remained and up to five fills of internal deposits of heat-affected silty sands containing abundant hammerscale and occasional smithing slag. Spreads of similar scorched and charcoal-rich material fanned out from the open ends; those from the less-disturbed northern hearth produced a number of iron fragments and objects. Other evidence for metal-working was discovered in an irregular scoop 16 m north of the northern hearth. The fill contained burnt clay similar to the hearth linings, fragments of bone and pottery, considerable amounts of slag, iron nails and 25 iron fragments and objects.

Between the hearths and the scoop, the western edge of the Trench 22 building appeared as a short stretch of E-W aligned wall and a line of four small postholes, running parallel to the western wall in Trench 22. These features suggested that the western room of the Trench 22 building was three-sided, like the main structure, with the line of post-holes in Trench 34 marking the roof-line of the open side.

Trench 35, which was close to the western entrance of the semi-amphitheatre, was opened to track the western extent of the pathway. Some patches of rubble were observed, but they had no clear form or function, so if the path did continue this far west, it has now been ploughed away. To the southern end of this trench an Iron Pit was located, which may have been associated with the other Iron Age pits found in Trench 2 further to the south.

The shrine in Trench 36 [Fig. 7]

This trench was located over a strong geophysical anomaly that showed two pit-like features to the south of the Trench 2 building and on the same alignment as the path leading out from the *temenos* to the semi-amphitheatre. In addition to the two pits, excavation revealed a 4.5 m square building ([36010], [36007], [36006] and [36025]).

The two large pits [36025 – north and 36023 – south], c. 2 m – 2.5 m in diameter respectively, seem to have been cut in the Iron Age as confirmed by Iron Age pottery in their lower fills. Both had large weathering cones suggesting that they had been left open for a considerable time. Romano-British pottery in their upper fills indicates that they were only partially filled when the square building was under construction. Rising water levels prevented complete excavation of these pits. Immediately to the south-east of pit [36025] were two small inter-cutting pits. The smaller and earlier pit [36036] was very shallow and disturbed. The later pit [36038] was oval, 0.8 m long, c 0.3 m deep, with near vertical sides and no weathering cone. The fill of this pit contained heat-discoloured stones and Romano-British pottery. Two smaller features were cut through the surviving Iron Age occupation layer south of pit [36025]. Posthole [36026] was tightly packed with large sherds Iron Age pottery. Northeast of this posthole, a very truncated pit [36045 (not on plan)] contained juvenile sheep/goat bones, possibly a complete skeleton.

Two pits [36059] and [36061] were found to the east of, and running under, the eastern wall [36007] of the square building respectively. Pit [36059] was sub-oval with near-vertical sides, c. 0.3 m deep and 1 m long: the single fill contained Iron Age pottery. Pit [36061] was sub-rectangular and 0.6 m long with near vertical sides; excavation of this pit was halted by water-logging. The main silty fill contained Iron Age pottery with a few sherds of Romano-British nearer the surface. The northern

part of this pit had been emptied down to bedrock and re-packed with angular limestone rubble, perhaps to stabilise the area before the wall foundations were laid. Further excavation will be needed to establish whether more pits lie beneath the Romano-British building.

The 4.15m square structure survives only as foundations, with a maximum of two rough courses remaining, laid in a herring-bone pattern. This building had four stone walls, in contrast to several other structures on the site, and an entrance to the south. In the centre of the building, packed onto bedding of fine sand, were the disturbed limestone foundations of a semi-circular structure [36065], c. 2 m in diameter, built around a pit [36062] that marked the exact centre of the square. This pit, c. 0.7 m x 0.6 m, was lined at the highest surviving level with stones, and cut down with near-vertical sides into bedrock. The fill contained 20 Roman-British cu-alloy coins and iron hobnails. This building seems to have been deliberately aligned on the Iron Age pits [36025, 36023 and 36062], which suggests that the layout of the Roman religious complex may have been influenced by earlier alignments.

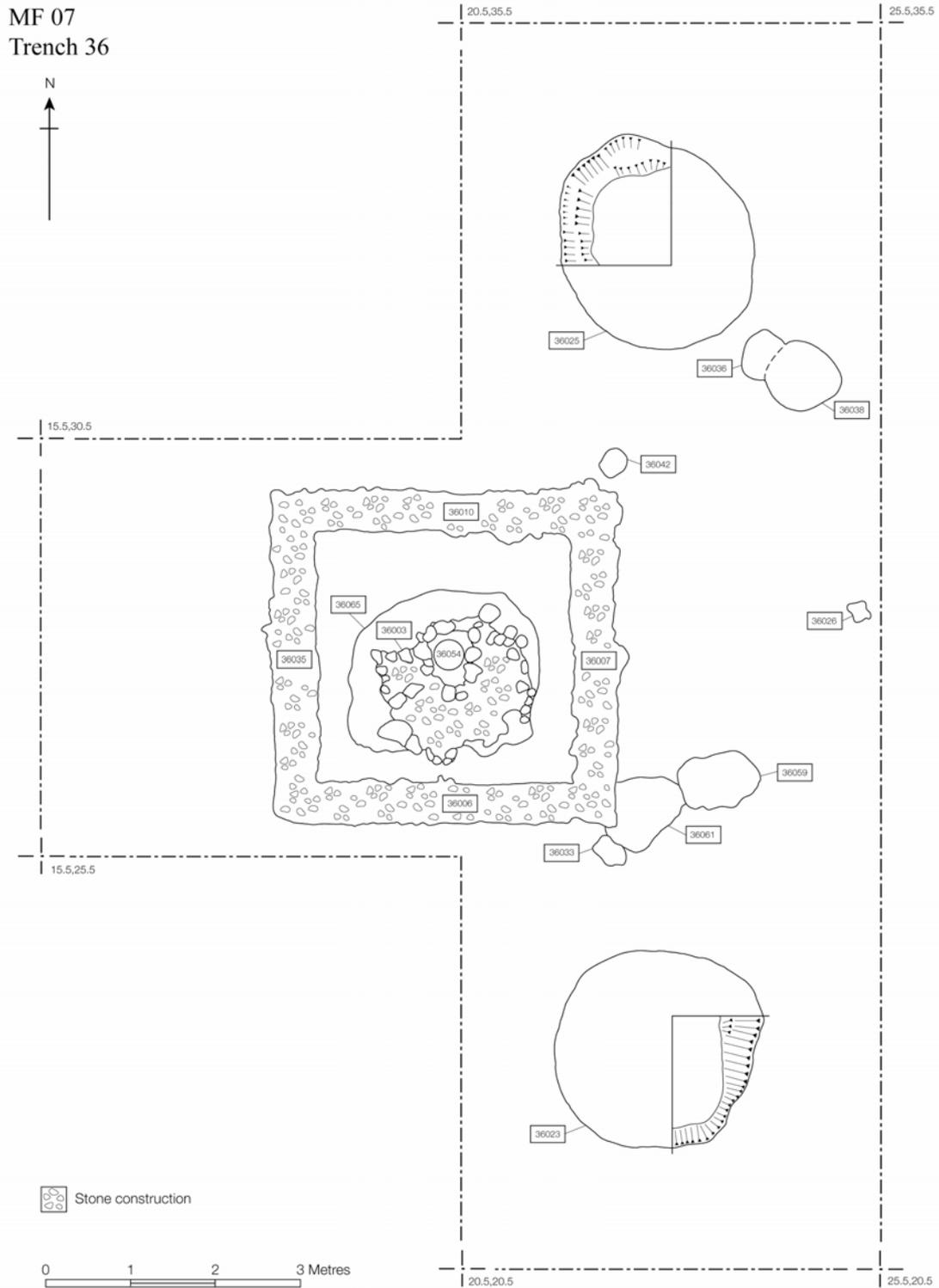


Fig. 7 Plan of Trench 36 showing the Roman shrine and Iron Age pits.

Aims for 2008 season in Trendles Field

This season's excavations provided a significant step forward in our understanding of this important rural religious complex. Of particular significance was the discovery of

the small, square shrine in Trench 36. This shrine not only helps us to reconstruct the articulation of this complex, but also appears to confirm suspicions that the complex was laid out with reference to past markers, such as pits. Completion of the excavations in this area will be a priority for the next season.

Weather conditions permitting, another key aim for next season will be to complete excavations in the centre of the arena. The design of the semi-amphitheatre and its place in the history of the complex are now reasonably well understood. It is hoped that by finishing the investigations inside the arena that the final pieces may fall into place.

Excavation of the large *favissa* pit in Trench 14 will also continue next season. The high level of preservation of animal bone, in particular, makes this a highly significant feature for interpreting the, possibly seasonal, activities inside the *temenos*. It is also possible that the lower fills of the pit may be waterlogged, so there may be good preservation conditions for leather and wood (as on other parts of the site) as well as environmental evidence.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Will and Janey Cumber for endless and varied support. Thanks also to John Duffield, Trevor and Ann Mumby for logistical support. Any project of this site is a team effort, so thanks also to the supervisory staff, students and volunteers who were involved in making the season a success. Funding was provided by the Cumber Family Trust and Oxford University. The illustrations were prepared and compiled by Mike Athanson and Alison Wilkins.

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