

Fig. 1: Plan of the site at Marcham showing the location of trenches excavated from 2001 to 2007, as well as Bradford and Goodchild's excavation sites in the Noah's Ark garden.

History and Background

Our excavations concentrate on the site of Marcham (also known as Frilford), which is located in the Vale of the White Horse (on the A338 to Wantage behind the former Noah's Ark Inn) [Fig. 1]. The archaeology on the site spans the prehistoric, Roman and Saxon periods. It includes prehistoric enclosures and buildings, a Roman temple enclosure, a Roman amphitheatre-like building, known as a 'semi-amphitheatre' and a Saxon cemetery.

The cemeteries [Fig. 2]

The late Roman and Saxon cemeteries were excavated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Over 300 inhumations and cremations have been found in this area. This is one of few cemeteries that span the late Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods.

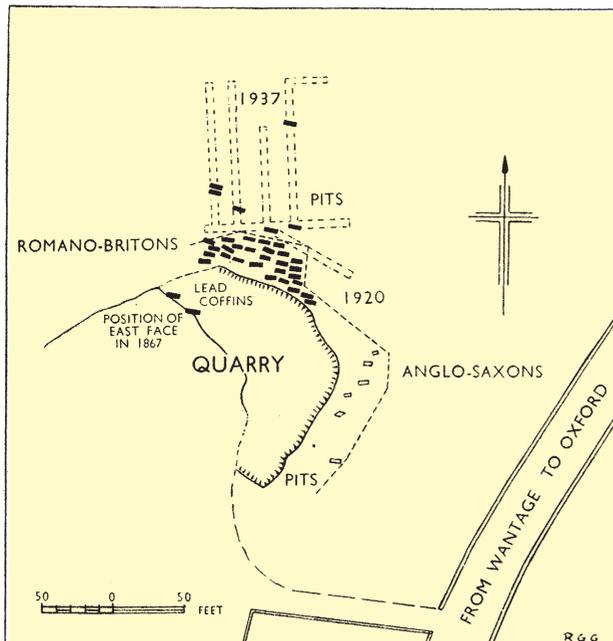


Fig. 2: Plan of the late Roman and Saxon cemeteries (Bradford and Goodchild 1939, fig. 12B).

Bradford and Goodchild's excavations

In the 1930s Bradford and Goodchild excavated in the garden of the Noah's Ark Inn. They found a Roman temple and circular building, known as a 'rotunda'. As well as these Roman remains, Bradford and Goodchild also found Iron Age roundhouses, pits and ditches [Fig. 3].

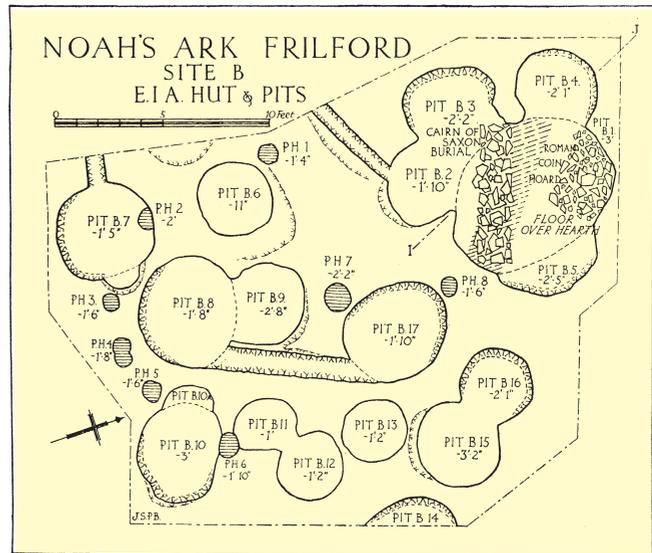


Fig. 3: The Iron Age archaeology excavated by Bradford and Goodchild (1939, fig. 3).

In 'Site C' an Iron Age ring-shaped ditch lay directly underneath the later Roman rotunda [Fig. 4]. This has led to speculation that the site may also have had a religious function in the Iron Age.

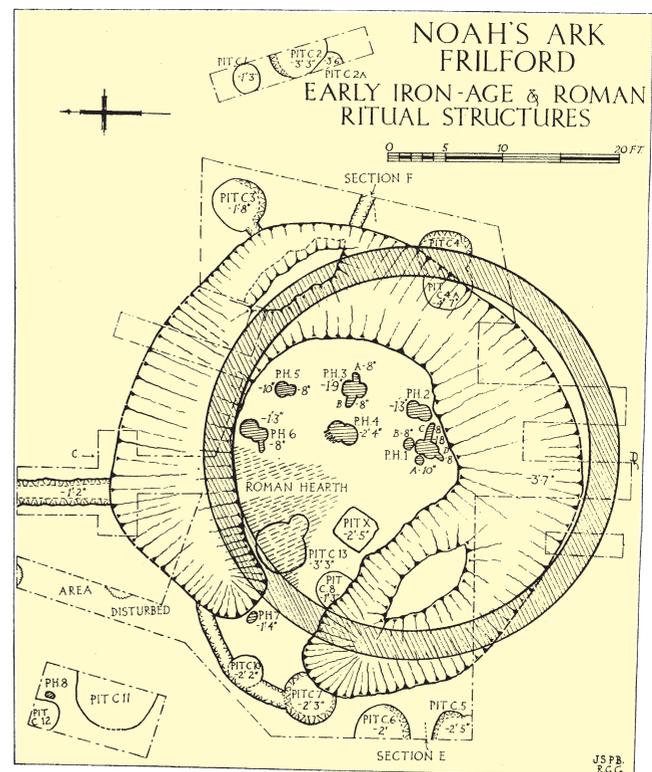


Fig. 4: Plan of the archaeology found in 'Site C' showing the Iron Age ditch and the Roman rotunda above it (Bradford and Goodchild 1939, fig. 5).

Time line

c. 2000 BC; The Bronze Age	c. 700 BC; The Iron Age	AD 43; The Roman Emperor Claudius invades Britain	AD 313; The Roman Empire converts to Christianity	AD 410-450; The Romans leave Britain; the Saxons invade England
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Discovering the semi-amphitheatre

In 1976 during crop-spraying over Trendles Field (the field to the east of the garden of the Noah's Ark Inn), a surprising discovery was made of a building that looked like a Roman amphitheatre [Fig. 5]. Small-scale excavations were carried out in the 1980s by Richard Hingley, which found the stone arena walls and a rectangular stone structure at the southern cardinal point.



Fig. 5: Aerial photograph of the semi-amphitheatre, appearing as a large darker green circle in the field. The structure sits in a natural hollow at the northern end of a dark green linear feature running south, which is an ancient stream channel.

Prior to our current excavations, a geophysical survey was also carried out in Trendles Field [Fig. 6]. The resulting image showed clearly the stone walls of the semi-amphitheatre with features at its four cardinal points, a large rectangular building in the centre of the field and a system of prehistoric ditches in the south-western corner.

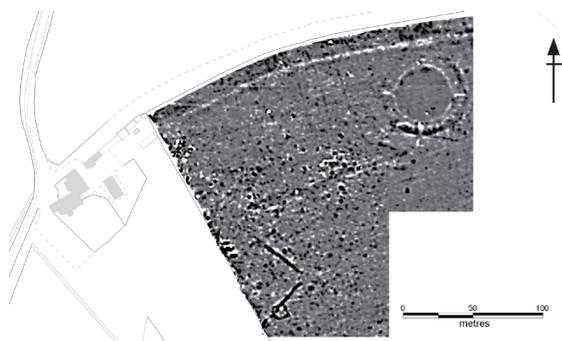


Fig. 6: Geophysical plot of Trendles Field. The ditches appear black; stone walls are white (Oxford Archaeomatics).

How does geophysical survey work?

Geophysics is a way of seeing beneath the soil without digging. There are two main methods of geophysics:

What are cropmarks?

Cropmarks can help us to identify archaeological sites from the air. The presence of archaeological features underground affects the growth of crops. Crops grow thicker and denser over sunken features, such as ditches and channels, but over walls they grow sparser. So on aerial photographs, ditches appear darker than the surrounding vegetation and walls lighter.

resistivity and magnetometry. Resistivity uses probes to measure how easily the soil conducts electricity using the principle that the damper the soil the more easily it will conduct electricity. Stone walls have high resistivity because they are drier and so do not conduct electricity easily. Ditches and pits are damper, so they give low readings. Magnetometry measures distortions in the earth's magnetic field caused by buried archaeological features. Features cut into the soil, like ditches and pits, cause high anomalies in the magnetic field; they appear black on the plot. Stone walls, on the other hand, appear white.

Prehistoric Marcham

As well as the Iron Age archaeology found in Bradford and Goodchild's excavations, prehistoric features have also been excavated in Trendles Field. Pottery from the ditches visible on the geophysical survey suggest they were dug in the Bronze Age and Iron Age.

To the north of the ditches over 32 intercutting pits were found [Fig. 7]. The pits contained a lot of animal bone and burnt stone.



Fig. 7: The Iron Age pits in Trench 14 under excavation.

Roman Marcham

During the Roman period, the site at Marcham became a thriving rural religious complex. The main elements of this complex were the temple inside its sacred enclosure and the semi-amphitheatre. A pathway ran from the south of the semi-amphitheatre towards the eastern entrance to the sacred enclosure. In addition, to these structures, there were several ancillary buildings and shrines. One of these shrines, in trench 36, was on the line of the pathway articulating the site [Fig. 8]. This shrine seems to have been positioned deliberately over some earlier Iron Age pits. This suggests that the complex was designed to refer back to the past associations of the site.

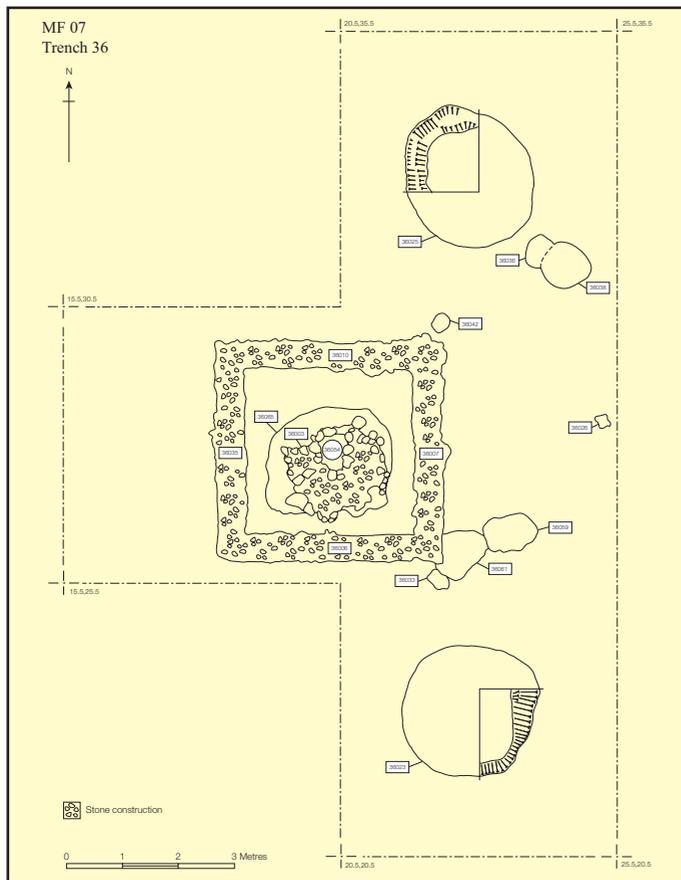


Fig.8: The Iron Age pits and Roman shrine in trench 36.

The temple and its enclosure

Bradford and Goodchild excavated two buildings inside the temple enclosure: the main temple and the rotunda. The main temple comprised a square room ('cella') sur-

rounded by a portico, which were built c. AD 80-90 [Fig. 9]. At a later date an annexe of three rooms was added. The rotunda was c. 11 m in diameter; it was probably built at a similar time to the main temple.

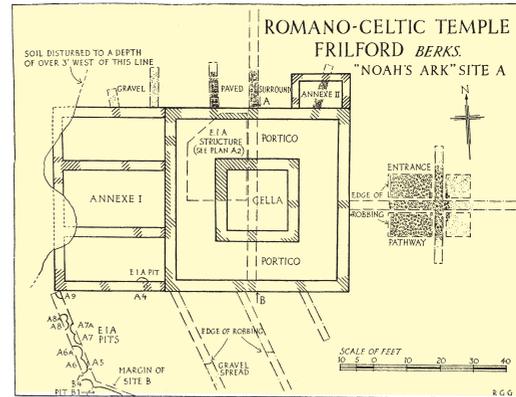


Fig. 9: Plan of the main temple as excavated by Bradford and Goodchild (1939, fig. 9).

These two buildings were located inside a walled enclosure called a temenos. A gravel pathway ran from the entrance in the eastern enclosure wall to the main temple building.

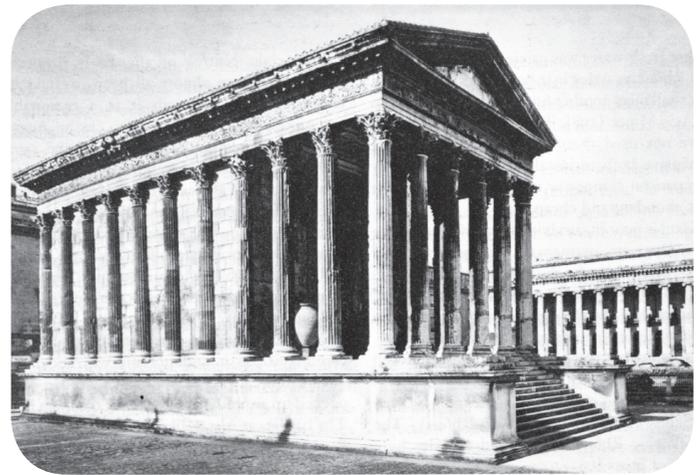


Fig.10: A typical Roman temple: the Maison Carrée, Nîmes (Ward-Perkins 1981, fig. 137).

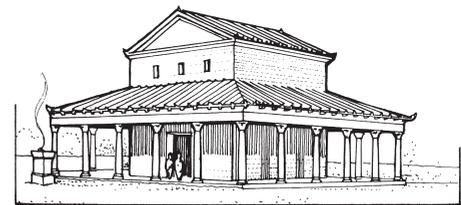
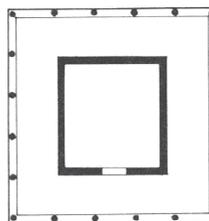


Fig.11: Plan and reconstruction of a typical Romano-Celtic-style temple: the Altbachtal sanctuary, Trier (Ward-Perkins 1981, fig. 139A).

Roman temples

Classical Roman temples, such as the Maison Carrée in Nîmes, were usually rectangular in plan. They were placed on a high podium and were approached by steps, which ran across the front of the building [Fig. 10]. The front part of the building (the 'portico') was open and surrounded by free-standing columns. A triangular pediment decorated the upper part of the portico. Behind the portico, was the enclosed part of the temple (the 'cella'); this was also surrounded by columns, but these were attached to the outside wall, which enclosed the space inside the temple.

Many temples in Roman Britain had a slightly different design; they are known as Romano-Celtic temples [Fig. 11]. They often had a square 'cella', which was surrounded by a walkway or portico. These temples were usually not on a high podium, but rather were placed inside a large sacred enclosure (the 'temenos'). The enclosure boundary was marked out by walls, ditches or fences.

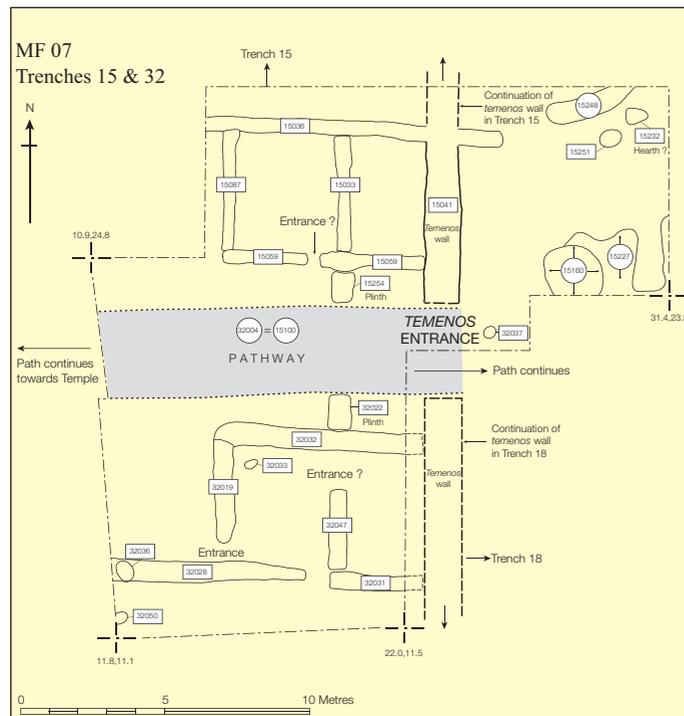
Inside the Sacred Enclosure

Entering the sacred enclosure

From the entrance in the eastern enclosure wall, visitors would have been able to see the temple directly ahead. Two structures either side of the pathway inside the entrance would have made the entrance seem impressive and monumental [Fig. 12]. These features are typical of Roman temples in southern Britain.

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. In both buildings the eastern north-south walls were created using the enclosure wall. Both buildings have an internal division to create two rooms. The exterior walls to the north and to the south appear to have continued further west, suggesting that a third, open-fronted room may also have existed. Nothing has survived to suggest a possible function for the rooms or for the activities that might have taken place in them.

Two opposing plinths were positioned either side of the pathway on the same alignment as the internal partition walls. These plinths might have provided foundations for



The Buildings in Trenches 15 and 18

Three buildings have been excavated in trenches 15 and 18 directly outside the temple enclosure to the north and south of the entrance. These buildings were walled on three sides and open towards the east. The two buildings to the south (trench 18) were separated by an outdoor, courtyard area [Fig. 14].

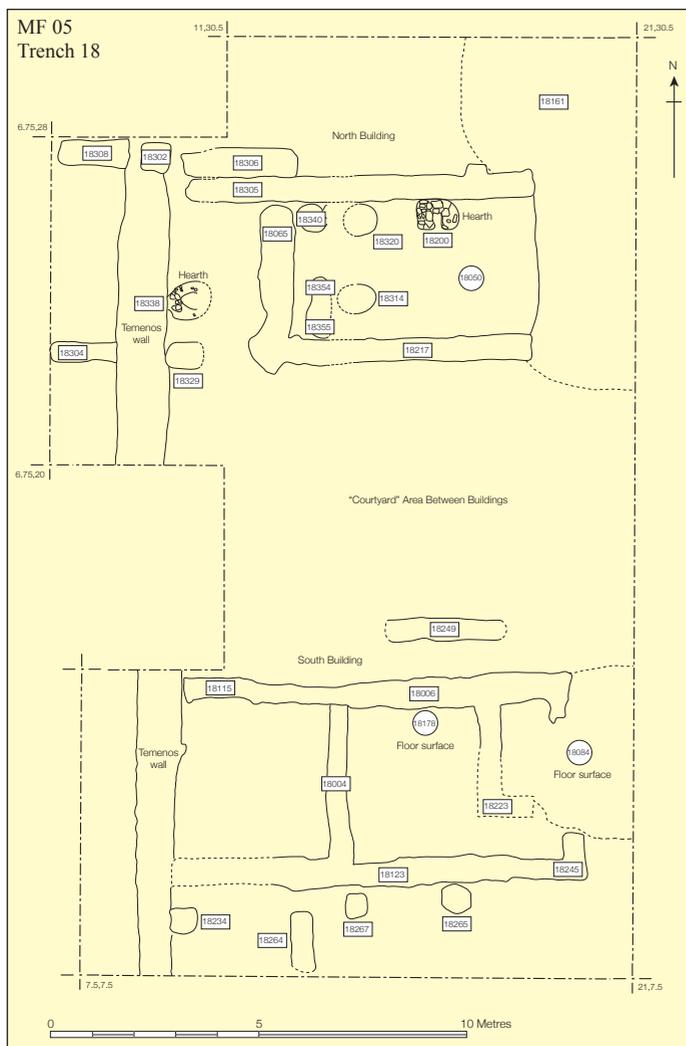


Fig. 14: Plan of the buildings excavated in trench 18.

What were these buildings used for?

These buildings were probably used to provide for the needs of the people visiting the temple. A very large number of finds came from this area, including a high proportion of

vessel glass, samian ware, such as beakers and other dining equipment from Gaul, and grinding bowls ('mortaria'). These finds suggest that eating and drinking may have been one of the activities carried out in these buildings.

Several hearths were also excavated inside these buildings [Fig. 15]. In addition, evidence for small-scale metalworking has been found. It is possible that metal objects were being made inside these buildings, which were then sold as votive items to people visiting the temple.



Fig. 15: One of the hearths inside the Trench 18 buildings.

What are 'mortaria'?

These bowls, which were usually white, were used for mixing and grinding foodstuffs. The bowls were broad with a prominent rim and spout. The inside of the bowls was gritted to aid the grinding process. Grinding bowls made in Oxfordshire were distributed across the Midlands and southern Britain from the 2nd to 4th centuries AD.

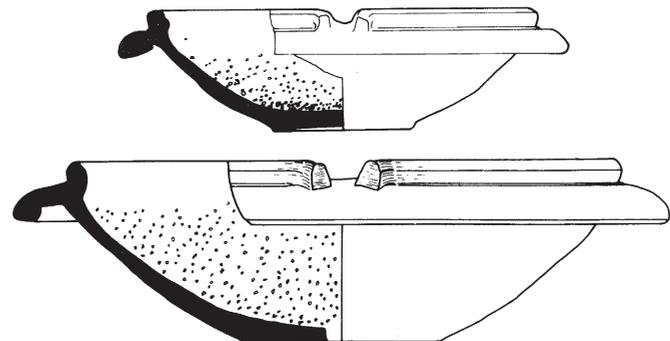
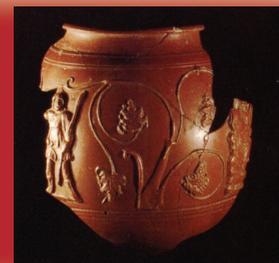


Fig. 16: Two examples of grinding bowls from the Oxfordshire potteries [Young 1977, fig. 21].

Below: Fig 17: A typical example of decorated samian ware [Cliquet et al. 1996, fig.X11].

Samian Ware

This kind of pottery, also known as 'terra sigillata' or 'Arretine Ware', has a glossy orange-red appearance and often has moulded decoration, sometimes showing mythological scenes [Fig. 17]. It was a higher class of pottery (known as a 'fine-ware'), which was often used for eating and drinking, rather than cooking. Samian wares were made in large numbers in workshops in northern Italy and Gaul; it was exported widely around the Roman Empire.



The Semi-Amphitheatre

In its initial phase the structure had a circular arena (c. 40 m in diameter) with a sand-covered floor. The arena was encircled by a wall, which had an entrance to the west. The wall itself was surrounded by a bank, which did not run around the whole perimeter of the structure. To the south, a masonry drain exited under the walls and bank [Fig. 18].



Fig. 18: View of the interior of the arena looking south along the drain.

Inset: Detail of the 'Royal Box', first discovered by Richard Hingley, showing the drain running underneath.

At a later date a rectangular structure (the so-called 'Royal Box') was constructed to the south of the arena. It may have seated dignitaries.

What was this structure used for?

This building is a cross between an amphitheatre and a theatre; a common type in northern and central Gaul [Fig. 19]. The arena space of this building makes it similar to an

amphitheatre. The viewing banks, however, did not entirely encircle the arena, which is similar to a theatre. In Gaul these buildings were often built in association with temples and sanctuaries, as at Marcham. They were probably used for a variety of religious performances, including recitals and combat.

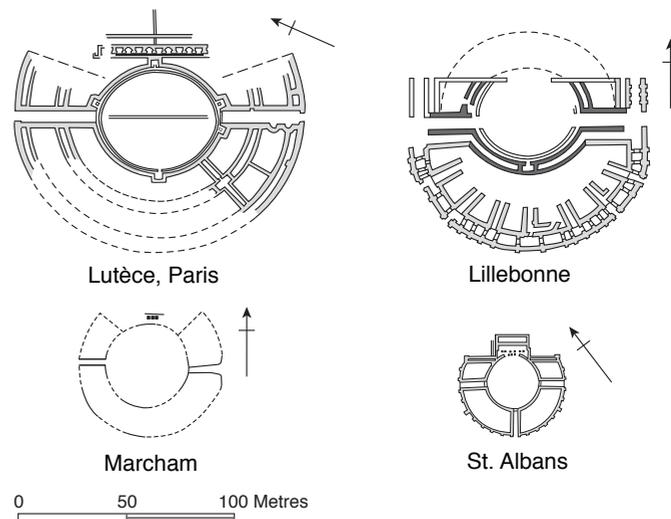


Fig. 19: Plans of similar buildings from Gaul and Britain.

The shrine to the south-west of the semi-amphitheatre

The religious nature of this building is strengthened by a shrine found in Trench 24. A large number of finds were found associated with this building, in particular personal items such as bronze and bone hairpins and cosmetic spoons [Figs 20 & 21]. Two further animal burials (another sheep and a cow) were also found in this area.



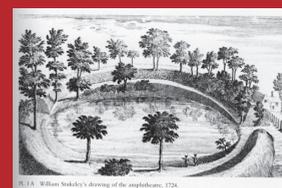
Above left: Fig. 20: A selection of bronze hair pins and cosmetic spoons found at Marcham.

Above right: Fig. 21: Two of the brooches found at Marcham.

Below: Fig. 22: A drawing by William Stukeley of the amphitheatre at Silchester as it looked in 1724 [Fulford 1989, plate 1a]

Amphitheatres in Britain

Amphitheatres were a Roman adaptation to the Greek theatre that allowed the audience to view games and fights in the round. In Britain, several examples are known, for example at Caerleon, Chester, London and Silchester [Fig. 22]. These amphitheatres are simpler than ones from the Mediterranean, such as the Colosseum in Rome. In Britain, most amphitheatres were built by digging an oval space for the arena. The soil from digging out the arena was used to make banks, which surrounded the arena and on which wooden seats could be constructed.



Late Roman and Saxon Marcham

The trench 2 building

This large building (c. 34 m long x 17 m wide) was located between the temple enclosure and the semi-amphitheatre. It comprised a main central room with annexes to the west, north and east [Fig. 23]. The coin evidence suggests that the building was constructed c. AD 340.

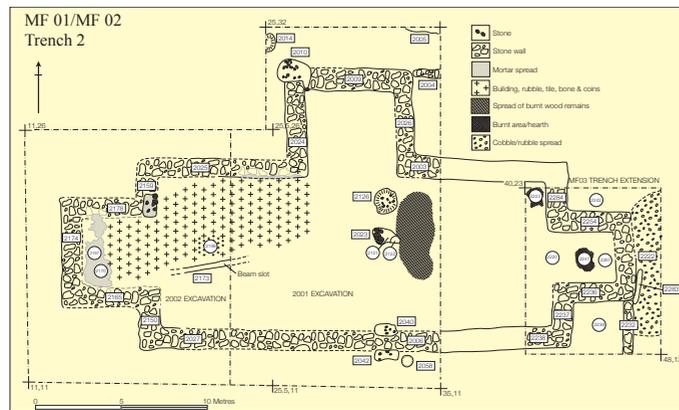


Fig. 23: Plan of the late Roman building in trench 2.

Was this building an early church?

It has been suggested that this building was an early rural church due to its construction date, that is after the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in AD 313.

Over 680 coins were found in this building, which comprise c. 40% of the total site coin assemblage [Fig. 24]. These coins overlap in date with those from the temple pathway, which suggests that the temple and this building were in use at the same time. As it is unlikely that pagan and Christian religions would have been practised together on the same site, it is also unlikely that this building was an early church.

At the moment the precise identification of this building remains uncertain.

The 'after-life' of the semi-amphitheatre

After the 4th century AD the use of the semi-amphitheatre seems to have changed. In the centre of the arena rough working surfaces and evidence for flimsy structures have been found. This activity seems to have continued into the middle Saxon period.

Also in the late Roman or Saxon periods a group of eight burials were placed in the eastern entrance of the semi-amphitheatre [Fig. 25]. The burials were all on an east-west alignment and had no grave goods. This suggests that the people buried here were Christian. It is possible that they were buried in this location to mark the closure of the arena as a functioning pagan monument.



Fig. 25: One of the late Roman or Saxon burials under excavation in the eastern entrance to the semi-amphitheatre.

What can we learn from skeletons?

Skeletons provide archaeologists with a wide range of information about the past. As well as being able to find out the age, height and sex of the people buried, scientific analysis of the bones can tell us about people's diets, health and where they may have moved from. We can also learn about the status, occupation and beliefs of people by looking at how people were buried and what items they were buried with.

Below: Fig 24: A selection of late Roman bronze coins from the trench 2 building.

Roman coins: the first 'Euro'?

In the Roman period, Roman coins were used and exchanged across the Roman Empire and even as far afield as India. Roman coins came in several denominations from a gold 'aureus' to a bronze 'as'. On one side the coins had pictures of the emperor's head. On the other side the coins were decorated with pictures of deities, famous buildings or events. These pictures were often accompanied with an inscription, which named the emperor and sometimes communicated messages such as 'SPES' ('hope') or 'FELICITAS' ('prosperity').

