Excavations on the Cursus at Drayton, Oxon.

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With a contribution by BOB WILSON

SUMMARY

Rescue excavations by the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society, directed by J. Wallis, during 1981 and 1982 on the area of the E. ditch of the Drayton Cursus produced evidence for an internal bank but could not suggest a function for this type of monument. Radiocarbon dates from material in the lower fills of the ditch indicated that it was dug around 2900 bc. The earlier fills contained Peterborough-type pottery and the later ones produced Beaker sherds. However, the cursus ditch remained an influence on land division into the Roman period. The S. part of the site was covered with alluvium, the deposition of which may have commenced in the late Neolithic period. As this is a widespread phenomenon in the Thames Valley it is suggested that many other sites of Neolithic and later dates may also be preserved in this manner. Mesolithic remains, peat deposits, flint-working deposits, Roman ditches and Saxo-Medieval layers were also investigated. The W. part of the cursus has since been excavated by the Oxford Archaeological Unit, and a full report both on its work and on that of the Society will be published in a later volume.

Fig. 1. Location Plan.
INTRODUCTION

The cursus (Fig. 1) appears on air photographs 1 as two parallel ditches, 100 m. apart, which run intermittently north-eastwards from a square end on the second terrace of the Thames down to the first terrace, which is some 6 m. lower. Its N. end has not been located. E.T. Leeds investigated Neolithic, Bronze Age and Anglo-Saxon sites near the cursus on the second terrace, 2 and the Abingdon Society has excavated a Neolithic henge and Bronze-Age remains to the north of the cursus. 3 The Society’s recent work on Bronze Age and Neolithic sites in the Abingdon area, including this cursus, has been summarised by Thomas and Wallis. 4 A Roman villa has also been excavated at Drop Short some 700 m. S.E. of the site, and a long barrow has been identified 1 km. to its NW.

As comparatively little is known about cursuses, it was decided to open an area, centred on the E. cursus ditch, at the S. end of a field threatened by gravel extraction (NGR SU 491 943), in the hope that this low-lying area might produce some waterlogged remains (Fig. 2). A smaller cutting was designed to investigate the way in which the cursus was formed from ditch segments separated by causeways. Other small trenches were dug across the cursus as time permitted, and two trenches to the S. of the threatened area were designed to ascertain whether the cursus climbed onto the second terrace. Pits and other features were investigated as they were revealed during gravel extraction.

Specialist reports have been prepared on prehistoric pottery (H. Case); Roman pottery (N. Trippett); flint material (J. Wallis) and bones (R. Wilson). The Oxford Archaeological Unit has since recovered more material in further excavations, and will publish the whole site and finds in detail. The reports, finds and archive material from both the Abingdon Society’s and the Unit’s sites will ultimately be deposited with Oxfordshire County Council’s Department of Museum Services. As the Unit’s work recovered relatively little bone material, Mr. Wilson’s summary of his report is published here as an appendix.

EXCAVATIONS

The results of these cuttings may be summarised thus:

*Trench 1 (6 x 1 m.)*

This trench was positioned over the cursus ditch (4) at the N. end of the threatened area. The cursus ditch had been cut 70 cm. into the natural gravel, had a maximum width of 2.5 m. and an irregular V-shaped profile. It had been cut by a later gully (6), 4 cm. deep and 16 cm. wide, which ran along the W. side of the cursus. A ditch-like disturbance (5), 1.5 m. wide and 0.4 m. deep, was found 7 m. to the W. of the cursus ditch.

*Trench 2 (14.5 x 5 m.) (Fig. 3)*

This trench was placed over a causeway in the cursus. The cursus ditch was 3.5 m. wide and 1.4 m. deep below the ground-surface, and cut 1 m. into the natural gravel with a U-shaped profile. Its silting pattern indicated that the bank may have been on its W. side. After it had almost completely silted up, it was recut to a depth of 30 cm. The causeway between segments was 6 m. wide. A Roman ditch (7), 1.3 m. wide and 60 cm. deep with a V-shaped profile, cut the cursus ditch. A small gully (50), 40 cm. to 1 m. wide and 20 cm. deep with a U-shaped profile, followed the E. side of the cursus ditch and appeared to respect the Roman ditch. The S. segment had been disturbed, probably during the 19th century.

3 Council for British Archaeology Group 9 *Newsletter* 3 (1973), 40.
Fig. 2. Trench Locations and Main Features.
TRENCH 2 PLAN

SECTION A - B

Fig. 3. Trench 2. Plan and Section.

Area 3 (Fig. 4)
Although this was the main area of investigation the nature of the gravel extraction dictated the method adopted. Work was carried out in three stages:

(1) Cleaning and recording of sections produced by mechanical excavation:

This stage located the cursus ditch and found an antler in its fill. The upcast was shown to be on its W. side, and to have sealed various small features and the old ground-surface. This surface was cut by various features: the earliest filled with a clayey loam similar to its own composition, later ones with a fill containing some alluvial clay, and the latest filled solely with alluvial clay. This clay had filled the cursus ditch after a humic layer had accumulated; it covered the upcast and the old ground-surface, and itself had features cut into it.

There must have been many features which were not recognised as they were filled with the clay into which they had been cut. Those cut into the underlying gravel could only be identified by their differing backfill, but fortunately these could be assigned a stratigraphic relationship as the height of their gravel upcast in the section indicated the level of the ground-surface at the time they were dug. For example, gully (14) was cut after 25cm. of clay had been deposited, and ditch (11), dated by Roman pottery, was dug after a further 10cm. of silt had been laid
EXCAVATIONS ON THE CURSUS AT DRAYTON

AREA 3 PLAN

SECTION C - D

SECTION E - F

Fig. 4. Area 3. Plan and Sections.
down. The alluvial clay was some 60cm. deep, with its surface at 50m. O.D.; reducing conditions appeared to have developed 20cm. below the ground-surface, for there were no molluscan remains beneath that level.

Whilst of help in establishing the stratigraphic sequence, this stage did not greatly assist either the identification of the type of features shown in section, or the recovery of artifacts to establish their date and purpose.

(2) Cleaning and excavation of the old ground-surface:

Some 140 square metres of the old ground-surface sealed by the alluvial clay were uncovered, and the ditches excavated. Unfortunately the area flooded several times during excavation, and could not be investigated with the care which its complexity deserved. The cursus ditch was found to be some 2.5m. wide and cut 80cm. into the former ground-surface, with a U-shaped profile. One of its lowest fills was of a dark grey gravelly clay with traces of organic material, although of this only the shells of a few hazelnuts could be identified. Peterborough-type ware, flints and bones (including those of *bos primigenius*) were also found in this fill, which produced the following radiocarbon dates:


Using the High Precision curve for calibration indicates a 95 per cent probability that this deposit was laid down between 3980 BC and 3350 BC.

The gravel underneath the ditch was stained as if water-reeds had been growing there. The upcast of the cursus ditch sealed features of which one (58) contained crumbs and flakes of pottery comparable to Peterborough ware; an indistinct curving gully-like disturbance (71/57), some 5m. long and 50cm. wide, also belonged to this phase.

The upcast covered the old ground-surface unevenly, but some 4.5m. from the lip of the ditch 10cm. of gravel overlay that surface. Phosphate analysis did not indicate any difference between areas on either side of the cursus ditch. No trace was found of any revetment for the cursus bank. The only pottery from the upcast was an undiagnostic, probably prehistoric, sherd 10mm. square and 2.5mm. thick from its upper surface. Pit (28) was located near the junction of cursus ditch (4) and the Roman ditch (11). It contained Peterborough ware, and was probably cut soon after commencement of the deposition of alluvial clay at the N. end of this area, as it was filled with clay, loam and pebbles.

When the clay alluviation had reached the top of the cursus ditch, some Beaker sherds were deposited in it. This may indicate that alluviation had reached that level by the Beaker period, but it is alternatively possible that these sherds were part of the later upcast from ditch (23) which sealed the cursus in this vicinity. This ditch followed the alignment of the cursus ditch before turning E. some 11m. N. of section C–D. It was in turn cut by the Roman ditch (11), which ran in an E.–W. direction, but kinked some 6m. at its junction with the cursus ditch 30m. N. of section C–D before resuming its original direction.

(3) Excavation of features revealed by mechanical stripping:

This stage mainly recovered remains of pits and gullies. Most of these were no doubt totally destroyed by the machines, while even those which could be identified had lost their upper layers and their stratigraphic context. It was possible to locate two main areas of pits, one of 25 pits within 35m. of the junction of ditch (11) and the cursus ditch, the other of 30 pits in an area 100m. E.–W. by 40m. N.–S. centred on a point some 150m. E. of the cursus ditch and 25m. N. of ditch (11). Three curving and two straight gullies were also located.

The presence of alluvium in the fill of the pits could be taken to indicate their age, but as the alluvial clay was deposited over the years it gradually spread northwards up the slope. A consequence of this was that a feature on the S. side of the area could have a clay fill, whereas a feature contemporary with it on the N. side would have a loamy fill. South of the Roman ditch (11), 9 out of 13 pits had clay fills, but N. of that ditch only 9 out of 51 pits had clay fills. Several of the pits contained orange and black silt fills. These were initially interpreted as the result of burning, but since no charcoal or other burnt material was found it is possible that these colours were caused by natural processes. There were relatively few finds in these pits; only 7 produced flints, one (87) produced fragments of collared urn, and a large, indistinct, mainly gravel-filled pit (73), produced Bronze-Age pottery. This dearth of finds, and the amount of gravel in the fills of these pits, could indicate that many were in fact tree-holes. They ranged from 10cm. to 1.2m. in depth, although 84 per cent were less than 50cm. deep. Their diameters ranged from 40cm. to 3.2m. and of these 80 per cent were between 40cm. and 1.6m.

The evidence indicates the following phases:

(1) The pre-cursus occupation. The evidence for this is the finds sealed by the cursus upcast and the Mesolithic material under the peat. The peat sealed by alluvium possibly belongs to this phase.

(2) The cursus was constructed and a humic layer accumulated in its ditch during the earlier 4th millennium BC.

(3) The area remained in use, and during the Later Neolithic period there began the alluvial deposition of clay which gradually buried the former ground surface. Certain ditches dug until the early Roman period respected the alignment of the cursus ditch where it had not been covered with alluvium.

(4) By the mid-2nd century AD ditches were being constructed at the N. end of the area without any obvious regard to the alignment of the E. cursus ditch.
DISCUSSION

Essex County Council has recently carried out work on the Springfield cursus, and the Oxford Archaeological Unit has also excavated the cursus at Dorchester-upon-Thames, the western side of the Drayton cursus and part of that at Lechlade. The Dorset cursus has also recently been investigated. We do not intend to interpret cursuses in this report and have only recorded here what we consider to be the main features of importance. The probability that the bank was internal would make this cursus fairly typical; the segmental construction of the N. end of the cursus is, however, of interest. Environmental evidence and organic material may be preserved in the bed of peat underlying the alluvium, although these will deteriorate should that area be drained. The radiocarbon dates make this cursus contemporary with the causewayed enclosure at Abingdon, which has produced radiocarbon dates from 1500 bc to 3110 bc. Little can be said of the Bronze Age and Roman periods, although it is probable that domestic occupation was taking place in the vicinity at this time. The date of the commencement of alluviation is given a Later Neolithic date, which is earlier than the Late Iron Age date proposed by Robinson and Lambrick, and the post-Early Bronze Age date of the alluviation excavated by Palmer at the Hamel, Oxford. The Drayton evidence does, however, appear to agree with the sequence excavated at Wallingford, where it was found that some 37cm. of alluvium had been deposited before the 8th century BC, possibly a millenium earlier. This is probably because the slow alluviation covered and preserved surfaces of differing heights at different dates.

THE BONES by BOB WILSON

Some 400 bone fragments were obtained, most from Saxo-Medieval contexts but small groups from prehistoric and Romano-British contexts. Bones from the early deposits are mostly preserved poorly. Those from higher levels of the gravels are whitened and eroded by leaching. A few bones from waterlogged deposits in the cursus, and many from the Saxo-Medieval gully, are better preserved. The bones from the Neolithic features are mainly from cattle, 24, with a further 2 from Bos primigenius. Four bones are from pig, one scapula is from horse, and one metacarpal and a piece of antler are from red deer. The Romano-British bones consist of 9 sheep bones and 3 each of cattle and horse. The Saxo-Medieval group consist of 59 cattle bones, 10 sheep, 12 pig, 5 horse, 1 dog and 1 piece of antler. Most of these bones appear to be larger fragments from the peripheral areas of settlements. The wild species bones among those of the Neolithic indicate a partly wooded landscape.

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