NOTES

A CORNELIAN INTAGLIO FROM BRIDEWELL FARM, NORTH LEIGH, REDISCOVERED

An important intaglio from Oxfordshire, thought lost for 50 years, is now in the collections of the Oxfordshire Museum Service.[1]

Photographs taken of plaster impressions of two intaglios found at Bridewell Farm, North Leigh in 1910 are illustrated in the Roman Oxfordshire chapter of the first volume of the *Victoria County History*.[2] The entry mentions 'an oval enamelled seal box', 'a denarius of Faustina' and three intaglios although of the third no details are given, and goes on to record that they were in the possession of Miss M.I. Gask of Church Mead, North Leigh. When the author of this note came to write his doctoral dissertation in the late 1960s he was able to obtain copies of the published photographs of the impressions from the Ashmolean Museum, to which the gems had clearly at one time been submitted for study, and these were subsequently published in his monograph.[3]

Through great good fortune, the finer of the intaglios, depicting the Roman corn-goddess Ceres, was last year submitted for identification to the Oxfordshire Museum Service by Ms Jennet Blake, Miss Gask's great-niece. She had inherited the gem in 1953 and with great generosity has donated it to the county's collection.

The stone was made the subject of a short article by Christine Bloxham and illustrated in colour in *Limited Edition*;[4] subsequently it was photographed by Mr. Robert Wilkins (Fig. 1) and it receives full publication here for the first time. Unfortunately the other intaglio shown in impression in the *V.C.H.* (Fig. 2) fell out of the ring in which it was set about 50 years ago and must be considered lost. The impression will be briefly reconsidered here too. The other items have, as far as we know, never been identified. Although clearly not stratigraphically dated they are broadly suggestive of a site flourishing in the Antonine period. The information about the findspot is somewhat vague. Bridewell Farm is situated virtually equidistant from the Roman villas at North Leigh and Shakenoak, and the small Roman roadside settlement at Wilcote, incidentally the provenance of another 2nd-century cornelian intaglio in the collection of the Oxfordshire Museum Service, showing Daedalus making a wing.[5]

The surviving intaglio is an orange cornelian (not chalcedony as previously stated), with a slightly convex upper face which exhibits a few surface scratches, and measures 12.5 mm. x 10 mm. (this correcting previous dimensions given). The stone, which is now set in a modern open-backed ring, is engraved with the figure of a woman wearing a long belted chiton, standing to the front and facing left. She holds an object, probably identifiable as a covered dish, in her right hand and two ears of corn in her left. There is a ground line. The

[1] The intaglio, OXCMS:2002.94.1, is on permanent display at the Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock, Oxon.

[2] M.V. Taylor, in *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 316, 341 pl. xviiA.

[3] M. Henig, *A Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* (BAR 8, 2nd edn. 1978), nos. 262 (Ceres) and 492 (warrior).

[4] Supplement to *Oxford Times*, August 2002, p. 19.

[5] M. Henig, 'The Intaglio', in A.R. Hands, *The Romano-British Roadside Settlement at Wilcote, Oxfordshire, II, Excavations 1993-6* (BAR Brit. Ser. 265, 1998).

Fig. 1. Cornelian intaglio depicting the goddess Ceres. Scale 4:1.
Photograph by R.L. Wilkins, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford.

subject is to be identified as the goddess Ceres, and the type can be compared with that of a nude male figure holding similar attributes (dish or patera and corn-ears), representing Bonus Eventus. An example of such a gem, unfortunately broken, was found recently at Frilford and was published in *Oxoniensia*.[6] The pair of Ceres and Bonus Eventus (respectively the Greek Demeter and Triptolemos) may have been taken from a sculptural group by Praxiteles, the famous Greek sculptor of the 4th century BC, mentioned by Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historiae*, XXXVI, 23) as standing in the Gardens of Servilius at Rome. Another intaglio of different type, depicting Ceres, likewise holding ears of corn, but seated, was carved on a mottled green jasper gem found in 2001 in excavations in the vicinity of the 'amphitheatre' at Frilford, and will be published in due course in the excavation report.

Although the device is reasonably neat when viewed casually, a high degree of stylisation is shown especially in rendering the physiognomy: thus chin, mouth and nose are rendered as three horizontal grooves and the cheek as a transverse groove while the dish consists of two horizontal grooves bisected by a vertical groove. Similar stylisation can be *see*n in a large assemblage of engraved gems, all cornelians, some set and others unset, thought to be the stock-in-trade of a jeweller working in East Anglia.[7] Although it is clear from detailed illustrations of the Snettisham Roman jeweller's hoard that the North Leigh gem is not from the same studio, size and material as well as general style would suggest a comparable mid 2nd-century dating and there is no reason why the intaglio should not have been cut in Britain, perhaps at some nearby centre such as Alchester or Cirencester.

The second, lost Bridewell Farm intaglio (Fig. 2) showed a half-kneeling male figure. He wears a plumed helmet, holds in one hand a shield and in the other a sword. The bevelled edging of the stone is generally found with intaglios of chalcedony and onyx. It is described as having been milky-blue in colour. The intaglio measured about 10 by 9 mm.

The *V.C.H.* description is 'Cupid as a kneeling gladiator' and this description was allowed to influence the identification of the stone in Henig's *Corpus*. It certainly does not show a cupid, and there is no positive reason why the subject should be regarded as portraying a

[6] R. Goodburn and M. Henig, 'A Roman Intaglio from Frilford', *Oxoniensia*, lxiii (1998), 239-40.
[7] C. Johns, *The Snettisham Roman Jeweller's Hoard* (Brit. Mus. Publ. 1997), nos. 135-53 and 225 for Ceres. The first and last of these gems shows a similarly stylised dish.

Fig. 2. Impression of lost intaglio showing a warrior. Scale 4:1. *Photograph: Ashmolean Museum.*

gladiator rather than a warrior-hero. Indeed the total nudity of the figure suggests a hero; gladiators generally wear a tunic. The type is matched by those of intaglios collected by Sir Arthur Evans in Dalmatia, one showing a nude half-kneeling warrior of Republican date and the other, dating from imperial times (admittedly showing its subject wearing a tunic), representing a soldier taking a military oath before a standard.[8] Only one other gem from Roman Britain (from Herefordshire) is published as depicting a gladiator and here too the intaglio must be re-designated as a portrayal of a heroic nude, a warrior-hero.[9] It should be noted that the subject of gladiators hardly appears on mosaics from Britain either. Members of the elite may have thought the subject inappropriate as a seal device, and the relative lack of high quality art from the province showing gladiatorial scenes may designate a cultural preference. However, the clue to interpreting this gem may lie not in the culture of the learned but in the concerns of the farmer. Many deities looked after the crops and ensured a bountiful harvest. Ceres, the subject of the surviving intaglio, was one of them. Although on coins she is sometimes called *Fides Publica* representing the continuity of the coin supply to Rome, for a farmer in Britain her importance was inevitably more direct and personal. Another deity who was clearly important as the protector of the crops, whatever he did in other contexts, was Mars who is found in sculptures throughout the Cotswold region and was venerated locally at the temple at Woodeaton. With his sword and shield he protected the groves and fields and whatever the source of the iconography, the North Leigh farmer who wore this second signet may well have regarded the device as portraying *Mars Pater*.[10]

I am very grateful to Dr. Lauren Gilmour FSA, Curator of Archaeology, Oxfordshire Museum Service, for help in compiling this note.

MARTIN HENIG

[8] S.H. Middleton, *Engraved Gems from Dalmatia* (Oxf. Univ. Comm. for Archaeol. 1991), nos. 158-9.
[9] Henig, op. cit. note 3, no. 491.
[10] J. Bagnall Smith, 'Interim Report on the Votive Material from Romano-Celtic Temple Sites in Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lx (1995), 185, 188 fig. 12, 190 fig. 15.

RECENT DISCOVERIES AT ALCHESTER AND WOODEATON

Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by Scottish and Southern Energy plc to carry out a programme of archaeological investigations during the refurbishment of the 33 Kv overhead supply line from Headington to Bicester (SP 545 083 to SP 578 212) between August 2000 and October 2001.[1] The southern part of the route at Headington crossed the western end of Wadley Hill and continued towards Bicester via Drun's Hill within the floodplain of the River Ray. The underlying solid geology of the route comprises Cornbrash of the Jurassic Period above the Oolitic Limestone series.[2]

This note summarises the principal discoveries made during the course of the works. A detailed report of the results of the investigations has been deposited with the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record.

At the summit of Drun's Hill, Woodeaton (SP 544 114), a large quantity of Romano-British artefacts had previously been recovered from the Hill and although no features were observed during the watching brief, 12 fragments of furnace bottom or tap slag and 45 sherds of Roman pottery were collected from topsoil deposits. This material may have derived from a metalworking site associated with the nearby temple at Woodeaton.

To the immediate north of Woodeaton, the supply line crossed the north-east summit of a small hill and passed close to the Woodeaton Romano-Celtic temple (located at SP 538 128) and to the east of Islip Roman villa. A limited number of later prehistoric and Roman features, principally ditches, were present here and are likely to relate to enclosures and field systems identified as cropmarks through aerial photography. Although no features were found that could be directly related to either the temple or villa sites, it is clear that archaeological remains of these complexes extend beyond the Scheduled parts of each site.

At Alchester, the route passed through the Roman small town located on the broad western floodplain of the River Ray between Wendlebury and Bicester (SP 572 202). The Alchester to Dorchester Roman road, identified clearly by an earlier geophysical survey, was conclusively located during the investigations and comprised a well-defined limestone kerb and horizontal limestone slabs above a substantial stone foundation. Pottery of 2nd-century AD date lay below the limestone foundation layer whilst later Roman pottery lay on and above the road, thus indicative of the period of use. Immediately to the west of the road, a possible roadside ditch was recorded cut into a series of levelling deposits. Elements of a network of drainage ditches co-aligned with the Roman road were also identified during the excavations.

Investigations on the eastern side of the Roman town revealed a compact 'yard' surface containing Romano-British material. Although this may represent evidence of extra-mural settlement, it is not known whether this surface is Roman or a later deposit with residual artefact content. However, drainage appears to have been a problem in the immediate area as shown by the presence of a small gully superseded by a larger ditch. Above these drainage features was a pit of unknown function. All of the features lay beneath a gravel/silt surface containing Late Iron Age/Romano-British material, probably residual in this context.

[1] 'Southern Electric 33 Kv Refurbishment Headington to Bicester Overhead Line Oxfordshire: Archaeological Watching Brief and Excavation' (Wessex Archaeology, unpubl. client report 2002, ref. 48266).

[2] Geological Map of Great Britain, Sheet 2, 1:625 000 series.

Archaeological investigation to the north of the Roman town identified Romano-British occupation extending into the 4th century AD.[3] However, a decline in this extra-mural settlement has been suggested occurring during the 3rd century AD.[4]

Another trench, situated *c.* 70-100 m. to the north of the site of 28 unaccompanied inhumation burials that were discovered in 1848 during the construction of the railway, contained several fragments of redeposited human bone. The skeletal elements recovered, along with the relatively unabraded condition of the bone, indicated that the remains were probably rapidly redeposited following their disturbance in antiquity from more than one grave in close proximity. The plan of the Roman town as presented in Burnham and Wacher shows the location of an east-west aligned inter-vallum road which meets the rampart about halfway between the 1848 burials and the trench.[5] Although the road is not shown to continue to the east of the rampart on the plan, there is a suggestion on an accompanying aerial photograph that it may have done so. If this were to have been the case, and the 19th-century burials were Roman (no date was established), the evidence recovered in the current investigations suggests that burials may have been located to either side of that road as it left the Roman town.

Further to the north-east, beyond the eastern rampart of the town, a section of a compact gravel surface was recorded. It is possible that this represents an unpaved section of an east-west aligned road emerging from the Roman town along the line of what is now Langford Lane. The road lay below a greyish silty clay deposit that indicates a deliberate levelling episode. A hearth cut through this deposit and also into the gravel surface indicates activity which post-dates the use of the road. As Sauer[6] had earlier recorded Anglo-Saxon pottery within robber trenches to the south-west of the Roman town, the hearth may therefore be linked with occupation of the town in the post-Roman period.

The limited excavations within and adjacent to the Roman small town were not substantial enough for a more precise interpretation other than those presented above. However, valuable information has been recovered regarding the fabric of the Roman roads leading southwards and eastwards from the town and the possible presence of extra-mural burials to the east.

M. DUNKLEY

A NEW ROMANO-BRITISH SETTLEMENT ENCLOSURE AT TUSMORE DMV

Northamptonshire Archaeology undertook a magnetometer survey of about 4 ha. of land within the scheduled area of the deserted medieval village of Tusmore in June 2002 (Fig. 1). The deserted medieval village lies on an outcrop of gravel on the North Oxfordshire Jurassic Ridge. It has surviving earthworks consisting of sunken roads, house enclosures and a village

[3] P.M. Booth, J. Evans and J. Hiller, *Excavations in the Extramural Settlement of Roman Alchester, Oxfordshire, 1991* (Oxf. Archaeol. Monograph No. 1, 2002).

[4] M. Foreman and S. Rahtz, 'Excavations at Faccenda Chicken Farm', *Oxoniensia*, 49 (1984), 24-46.

[5] B.C. Burnham and J. Wacher, *The Small Towns of Roman Britain* (1990).

[6] E. Sauer, 'Alchester Farm, Wendlebury, An Archaeological Evaluation' (Univ. of Leicester, unpubl. client report, 2000).

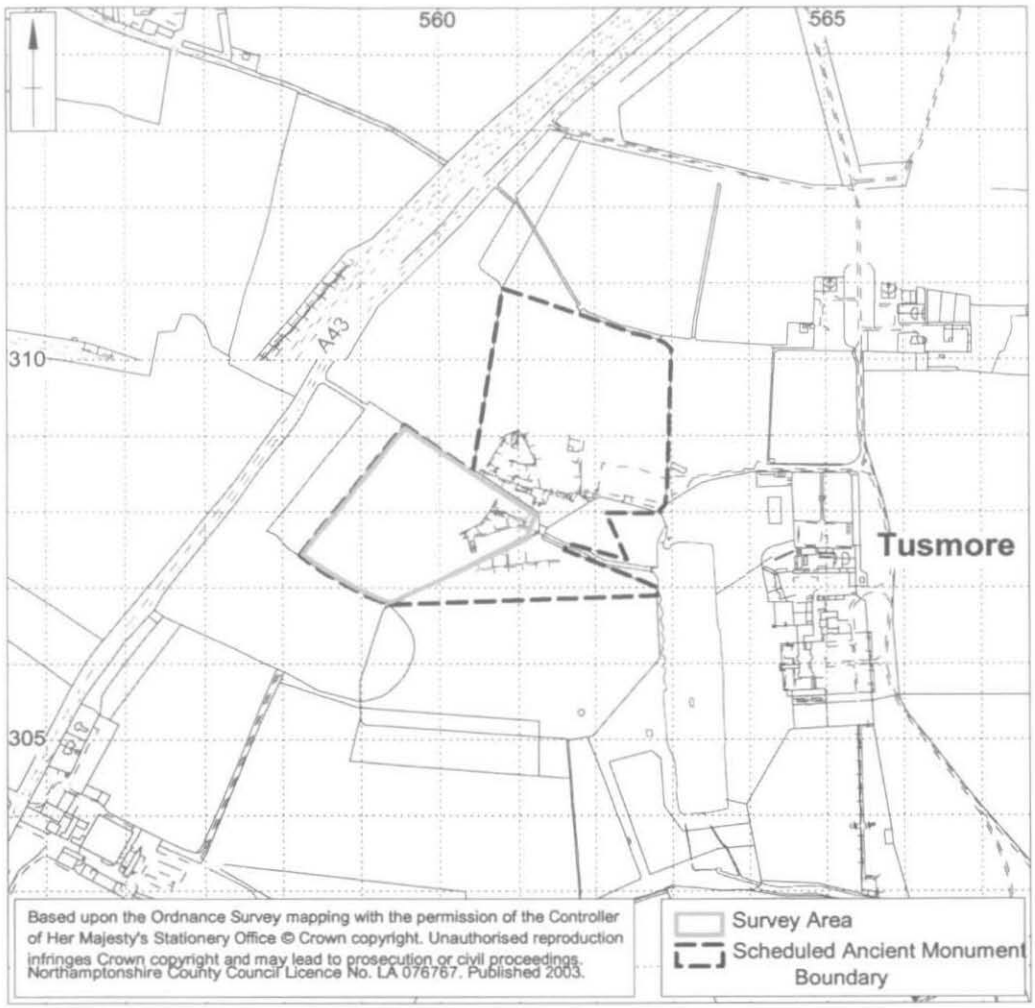

Fig. 1. Location of Scheduled Monument and survey area.

boundary bank.[1] The survey area lay to the west of the main group of earthworks on land bounded by tree plantations on two sides.

The survey was prompted by finds of Iron Age and Roman pottery on the extreme western boundary of the scheduled area during a watching brief undertaken during drainage works in connection with the A43 road improvements. This suggested previously unrecorded settlements of these periods here. An approach was made to English Heritage for funding to survey the field.

[1] D. Miles and R.T. Rowley, 'Tusmore Deserted Village', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 309-15.

Fig. 2. Magnetometer survey results.

The magnetometer survey produced extremely clear results in the north-east corner of the field, revealing a multi-phase ditched enclosure with settlement features, almost certainly of Roman date on the basis of surface pottery (Fig. 2). There is some complexity to the pattern of features and it is possible that the settlement had Iron Age antecedents, although this is speculative. Medieval settlement features in the south-eastern corner of the field are also reasonably clear. The modern drain is evident running parallel to the south-western field boundary. There is a weak linear feature here running north-eastward for about 50 m. The watching brief identified this as an Iron Age ditch. It may be indicative of wider settlement on this side of the field which is too magnetically weak to be depicted with any clarity. There are surface scatters of iron slag showing as strong bipolar responses toward the centre of the field. These cannot be dated.

ANDY MUDD