Archaeological Evaluation in the Vale of White Horse, near Abingdon, 1992-99

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SUMMARY

This report provides a short overview of an archaeological evaluation which has been carried out since 1992 in connection with a potential new reservoir south-west of Abingdon. The project has provided a great deal of new information about this part of the Vale of White Horse, including an extensive Middle Bronze Age settlement and field system and a series of Iron Age and Romano-British sites.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992 Thames Water commissioned an archaeological evaluation of a 14 km² area of land between the villages of Drayton, Steventon and East Hanney in the Vale of White Horse, south-west of Abingdon. The survey area is roughly that delimited by the Reading to Swindon railway line, the A34, the A338 and the River Ock (Fig. 1). The archaeological evaluation forms one component of a wide range of environmental studies being undertaken by Thames Water to assess the environmental impact of a potential new reservoir within this area. Given both the duration of the project and the importance of the findings it is considered appropriate to present an overview of the results, even though the evaluation is ongoing. The data summarised below have been accrued by a combination of evaluation techniques such as aerial survey, fieldwalking, geophysical survey and trial trenching. By its nature evaluation is a limited programme of work and can therefore only provide a certain level of data about individual sites. Archaeological interpretations should therefore be considered provisional. The main sites are located on Fig. 1.

BRONZE AGE

Evidence for the pre Bronze Age period is confined to occasional unstratified finds, mainly from fieldwalking. These finds comprise two sherds of Peterborough Ware, a reused fragment of a polished flint axe and small quantities of other struck flint (although little of the last category is diagnostic). Early Bronze Age activity is also poorly represented and consists of only four sherds of pottery, two of which are from Beakers. These Early Bronze Age sherds were recovered from three separate Iron Age/Romano-British sites.

Three new areas of Middle Bronze Age activity have been identified. They all occur in the southern part of the survey area, on the slightly higher ground which roughly coincides with the second and third gravel terraces. The major site of this period is an extensive co-axial field system. The two boundaries which form the main axes of the system each extend over some 400 m. and are associated with a series of rectilinear enclosures. A sub-rectangular enclosure, 70 m. long and between 35 m. and 65 m. wide, joined to one of the main axes of the field system, appears to represent the main settlement area. The other two areas of Middle Bronze Age activity are more localised but include evidence for another field system and a possible settlement area.

The ceramic assemblages from the three sites (under 200 sherds in total) consist of Deverel-Rimbury style pottery. Both Bucket and Globular Urns are represented in a range

Fig. 1. Location of main archaeological sites.

of flint- and shell-tempered fabrics. Decoration consists of applied bosses and cordons, incised motifs, comb decoration, and finger tipping. Other domestic finds comprise a worked bone gouge, cylindrical clay loomweights and a large pyramidal-shaped chalk object whose function is uncertain. Cattle bones are predominant among the faunal material but sheep, horse, red deer and dog are also represented. Emmer wheat and barley are present among the charred plant remains, albeit in low quantities.

IRON AGE AND ROMANO-BRITISH

The evaluation has produced a significant amount of new data concerning the location and extent of Iron Age and Romano-British settlement in this part of the Clay Vale. To date eighteen Iron Age and/or Romano-British sites have been identified in the survey area. Most of these sites are new discoveries but where the locations were already known (or suspected) the project has considerably amplified the pre-existing data. It is not possible to discuss or describe the sites individually in this overview; attention is therefore focused on the chronology and overall character of the sites.

From the evaluation data there is a marked paucity of Early Iron Age activity. The evidence is limited to a small amount of recognisably Early Iron Age pottery at just two sites. The Middle Iron Age, however, appears to mark the start of fairly extensive activity across the survey area. Eleven sites have produced evidence for Middle Iron Age settlement and these comprise two main types. The first type, recorded at four locations, consists of discrete sub-rectangular enclosures. At one site the enclosures are small (up to 20 x 30 m.) but in the other three cases they are large (up to 100 x 65 m.). There is slight evidence to suggest that the small enclosures may have originated in the Early Iron Age. In nearly all cases these Middle Iron Age settlement enclosures appear to have been abandoned by the Late Iron Age and the locations were not later utilised for settlement during the Roman period.

Most of the Middle Iron Age settlement locations, however, were utilised for settlement and/or agriculture during the Roman period. These form the second type of Middle Iron Age settlement and were identified within much larger Romano-British complexes. One of the interesting aspects which has emerged from the evaluation data is the evidence for the chronology of occupation of these settlements during the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. In general, continuity of settlement in the pre- and post-Conquest periods cannot be demonstrated. Indeed, by comparison with the Middle Iron Age the Late Iron Age is poorly represented in the evaluation data. At only one major site does the evidence perhaps suggest continuity of occupation between the pre- and post-Conquest periods. Interestingly this is also the only site which has convincing evidence for occupation throughout the Romano-British period.

Twelve sites have produced evidence for Romano-British settlement and/or agricultural activity. Together the various ceramic assemblages span the entire Romano-British period from the 1st to the late 4th/early 5th century AD. There appear to be subtle differences between the date ranges represented at various sites. At least two sites appear to have been abandoned (for settlement purposes at least) by the mid 2nd century AD and others perhaps slightly later. Around this time other settlements were being established. In most cases these Romano-British sites re-utilised Middle Iron Age settlement locations, but in a few cases new 'foundations' are evident.

The project has yielded particularly interesting information about the layout of the Romano-British settlements and their associated field systems. This information has been gained both by aerial reconnaissance and by extensive geophysical surveys. Many of the Romano-British complexes are very extensive, often over 5 hectares in size. Linear configurations are also evident and in one case three separate 'sites' form an almost unbroken arrangement of enclosures extending over some 1.5 km. These enclosures are associated with a major trackway running north from the junction of Cow Common Brook and the Hanney-Steventon road, heading towards Frilford (see Fig. 1). This and other trackways can be demonstrated (archaeologically) to have been in existence from the later Iron Age; in all probability they had much earlier origins as major routes across the Vale from the Berkshire Downs.

A Romano-British adult inhumation and a cremation burial were discovered at two of the Late Romano-British sites. Both burials are likely to indicate the presence of larger

cemeteries. The inhumation was supine, extended and aligned west to east. The cremation was contained within two pottery vessels: an outer reduced ware jar and an inner colour-coated beaker dated mid to late 4th century AD. The cremation vessels also contained a large number of iron nails, presumably from the coffin and/or pyre. At another Late Romano-British settlement the incomplete skeletal remains of four infants (aged less than six months) were discovered. These remains were associated with structural or domestic deposits – a fairly widely reported phenomenon on Romano-British sites.[1]

Most of the ceramic assemblages from the Romano-British settlements, along with the range of domestic and personal artefacts, indicate agricultural settlements of low or medium status. Several of the sites, however, produced small quantities of material indicative of 'Romanised' buildings. Unfortunately *in situ* evidence for stone buildings was very limited and, where it existed, poorly preserved. Among the late Romano-British sites, one in particular appears to be of higher status than the others. It produced a wide range of domestic and personal artefacts as well as 'luxury' items such as a fine bronze dish (described below) and a fragment of decorated Kimmeridge shale. The latter was probably part of a circular table top or cutting board and is quite an unusual find this far from the manufacturing source in south-east Dorset.

Of most intrinsic interest among the Roman finds and worthy of a separate note here was a complete copper alloy dish found in Drayton parish (Fig. 2). The vessel has an external diameter of 245 mm. and is 45 mm. deep. It has straight, everted sides and a flat rim decorated with punched diagonal lines. The base of the dish is convex and has a small central hole which has been plugged, indicating that the vessel was made by 'spinning'. The dish is very similar to two published examples from nearby Sutton Courtenay[2] and is almost identical to a vessel from Coombe Down on Salisbury Plain.[3] The Drayton dish was recovered from a pit and was associated with pottery dated to the 4th or possibly 5th century AD.

Palaeo-environmental evidence indicates a mixed farming economy during the Romano-British period. Cattle, sheep, pig, horse and deer are all well-represented among the faunal remains. The predominant cereals are spelt wheat and barley but there is also evidence for oats. On one site there is also evidence for emmer wheat in a 1st- or 2nd-century AD context which may support the suggestion that there was a minor re-introduction of this cereal in the Early Romano-British period.[4]

SAXON

The Saxon period is poorly represented in the evaluation data. One of the Romano-British sites produced a small group of pottery in a sandy fabric which may potentially date to the post-Roman/early Saxon period (i.e. 5th century AD). Although it cannot be ruled out that these sherds represent redeposited Iron Age material, they raise the possibility of continuity of occupation during the 5th century at this and perhaps other Late Roman sites within the survey area.

[1] E. Scott, *The Archaeology of Infancy and Infant Death* (BAR 819, 1999).

[2] D. Miles, 'Two Bronze Bowls from Sutton Courtenay', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 70-6. See this paper for further discussion on this class of vessel, including manufacturing techniques and dating.

[3] M. Fulford, R. Entwhistle and F. Raymond, 'Excavations at Coombe Down, Wiltshire, 1992 (The Salisbury Plain Project)' (in prep.).

[4] G. Lambrick, 'The Development of Prehistoric and Roman Farming on the Thames Gravels', in M. Fulford and E. Nichols (eds.), *Developing Landscapes of Lowland Britain. The Archaeology of the Gravels: A Review* (Soc. Antiq. London Occas. Paper 14, 1992), 97.

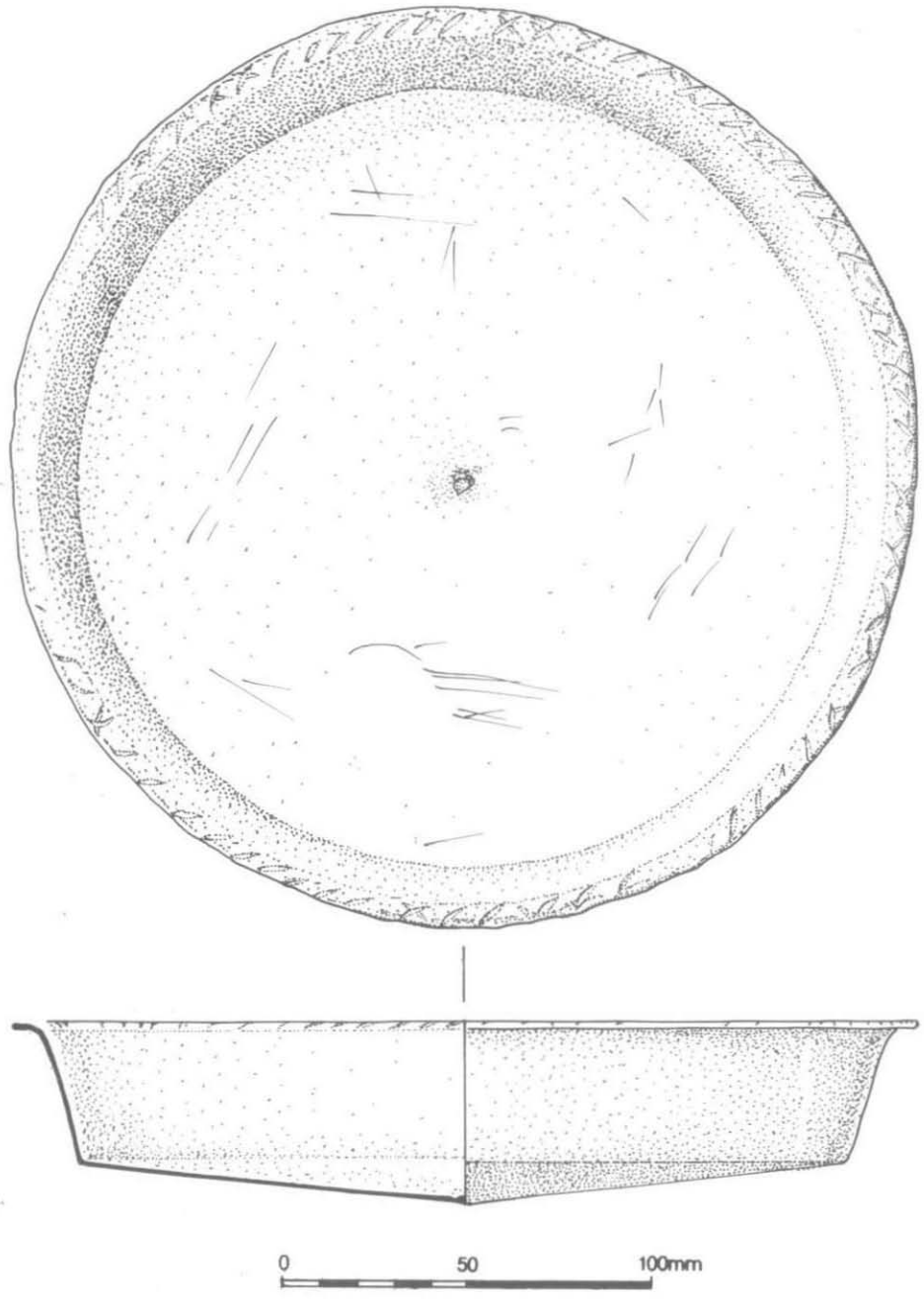

Fig. 2. Late Roman copper alloy dish (scale 1:2).

More confidence can be placed in the dating of a small group of organic-tempered pottery characteristic of the early to middle Saxon period (5th to 8th century). This group included sherds from a handmade burnished vessel with impressed decoration. Other fabric types, for example calcareous with sparse organic material, may also date to the early to middle Saxon period. Where stratified, the Saxon pottery was almost exclusively associated with Late Roman material. The only archaeological features attributable to the Saxon period were two ditches which appear to represent recuts of a Romano-British feature and which may also have been associated with the robbing of a stone wall.

CONCLUSIONS

This overview aims to convey an impression of the main findings of the Abingdon Reservoir Proposal evaluation. The project provides an extremely useful opportunity to further elucidate the archaeological landscape of the Vale of White Horse[5] – an area generally poorly understood but at the same time literally overlooked by so many important monuments on the Berkshire Downs. The project has demonstrated exploitation of the Vale for agriculture and settlement from the Middle Bronze Age and extensive settlement during the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. For the later Iron Age and Romano-British periods the project has also provided the first real insight into the utilisation of the rural landscape between the major settlements at Abingdon, Frilford and Wantage.

The evaluation results allow a re-assessment of the archaeological potential of this part of the Clay Vale. In all probability the nature and intensity of archaeological activity recorded by the project is typical for a much wider zone of the Clay Vale. Overall, the pattern of settlement in the Vale may still be considered less intensive than on the Thames Valley gravels but the data from the reservoir project help restore a balance with the much-studied gravels of the Upper Thames Valley.

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[5] See also M. Tingle, *The Vale of the White Horse Survey: The study of a changing landscape in the clay lowlands of southern England from prehistory to the present* (BAR 218, 1991).