

An Ancient Landscape: Iron-Age and Roman finds on the Berkshire Downs

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The downland of southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, often referred to as the 'Berkshire Downs', gives us a glimpse of a very ancient landscape. Visitors know many sites well, including Waylands Smithy Neolithic long barrow, the Iron-Age hillfort at Uffington with its White Horse, and the Ridgeway, running along the high points of the hills and very popular with walkers. Alongside these more famous destinations lies a rich historic landscape, littered with Bronze Age round barrows and the traces of Roman fields. These have attracted the attentions of generations of archaeologists and others with a passion for the past. Over the last decade two metal-detectorists have been searching farmland on these hills, finding around 2,000 objects on one particular site, the exact location of which is currently being kept secret to minimise the risks from looting. These finds range from the Bronze Age to the 20th century, the majority belonging to the Late Iron Age and Roman periods, dating from around 100 BC–AD 400. Such an assemblage offers archaeologists significant new information with which to study the Downs over a long period of time. There are many important objects within the group, including Late Iron Age and Roman brooches, rings and cosmetic items, as well as pottery and coinage. Some of the coins are important finds in their own right, including a unique example struck for Allectus (AD 293–6) which was kindly donated to the museum by the finder and now in the collections of the Heberden Coin Room.

In 2016 the Ashmolean received a grant from the Swire Charities for a two-year project to explore these finds and their landscape under the title 'An Iron-Age to post-Roman landscape on the Berkshire Downs'. Co-directed by John Naylor (Ashmolean) and Anni Byard (Oxfordshire Museums Service), its primary aim is to record each object onto the online database of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, a project which has compiled records of finds made by members of the public since 1997, and to do this Alison Pollard joined the project team as 'Finds Recording Assistant'. While we are recording all of the objects found at the site dating up until the early modern period to provide as full a record of the site as possible, the academic focus is on the late Iron Age, Roman and immediately post-Roman periods, around 100 BC to AD 500 in order to better understand the nature of the site and its place in the lives of the local population. A part of this has involved commissioning a geophysical survey of the site. Among the features revealed is a likely track, probably dating to the Roman period and which would have been an important element of its ancient topography, bringing people through the area. It may explain why so many finds have been made here. Evidence for transportation is rarely uncovered on ancient sites, but one of our finds is an iron Roman hipposandal, dating to the 1st or 2nd centuries AD, which acted as a type of horseshoe for when animals travelled on metalled roads, an unusual and important find.

It is likely that this track is one of the reasons why the site gained importance over time but what was the nature of the site? The finds suggest that in the later Iron Age and early Roman periods there may have been a small shrine. The Roman Republican and Late Iron-Age coins from the site can be considered alongside the finds of 1st and 2nd-century AD brooches and finger rings, a combination seen at excavated temples and shrines. One find often associated with temples or shrines – including from the Woodeaton (Oxfordshire) temple – is a small 3rd to 4th-century AD plate brooch in the shape of a horse and rider, and decorated with blue and red enamel. This object may represent a deity, possibly Mars or a native British god. Many other finds are more typical of excavated Roman settlements in general, especially the pottery, showing that the site may be somewhat multi-faceted, perhaps including the care of travellers on the road as well as agriculture. The pottery includes fine table wares, local wares and a number of ceramic roundels which could be gaming counters. A copper-alloy gaming piece was also found at the site.

In the late 4th century there may have been an official Imperial presence collecting agricultural taxes to feed the Roman army. This can be seen through the large numbers of copper coins and finds of military belt fittings. A handful of early-medieval finds attest to the continued relevance of the location after the end of Roman Britain. Medieval and later finds reflect accidental losses and agriculture, including manuring of the site. A lot of work is left to do but already it is clear that our site was an important place in the local landscape during later prehistory and the Roman period.

Figure captions

1. Copper-alloy radiate of Allectus (AD 293–6) showing Oceanus with one foot placed on a dolphin and the other on a galley. The design probably represents the emperor's naval power, and is unique on a coin of Allectus. HCR9497.

2. Iron hipposandal, 1st-2nd centuries AD. PAS database number ASHM-1956FE. © Portable Antiquities Scheme.

3. Copper-alloy 'horse-and-rider' brooch decorated with panels of enamel, 3rd-4th centuries AD. PAS database number ASHM-AE1E31. © Portable Antiquities Scheme.