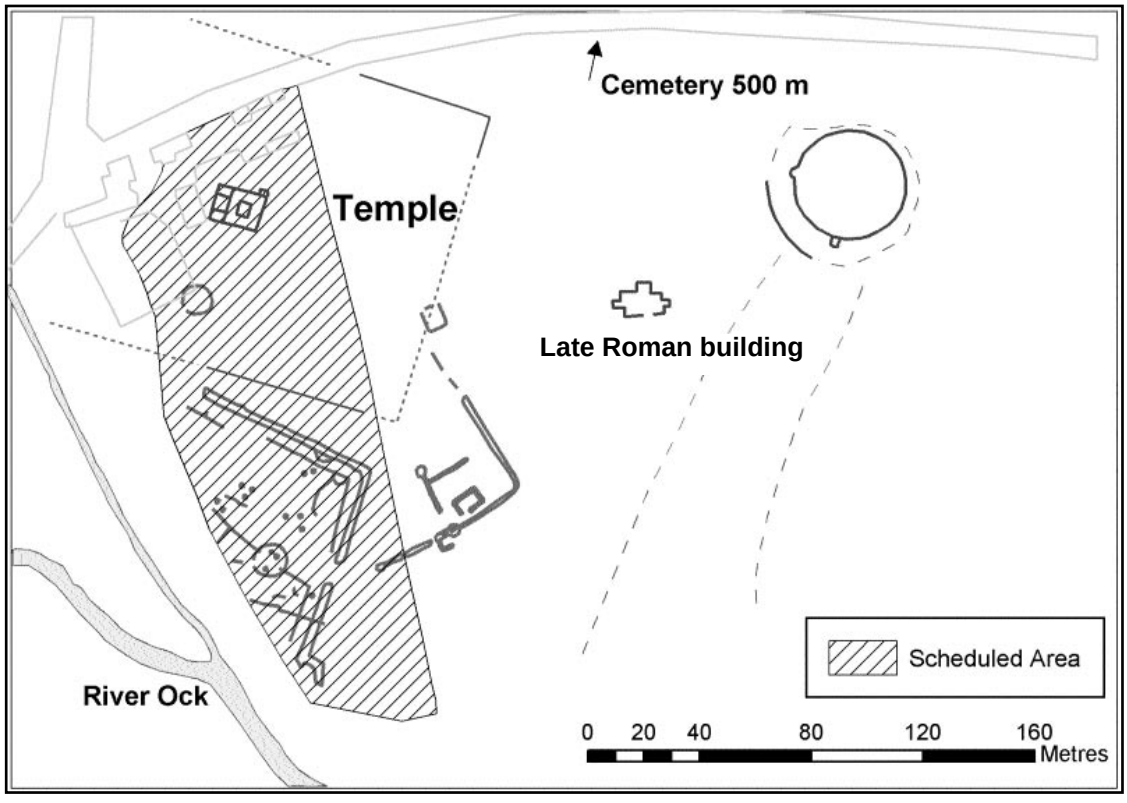
Frilford:

A Romano-British ritual pool in Oxfordshire?

Chris Gosden and Gary Lock, Institute of Archaeology, 36 Beaumont Street Oxford OX1 2PG

Frilford is a site that occupies a special place in the sub-consciousness of Roman-British archaeologists. It is labelled as a 'rural shrine', where the ritual began in the Iron Age, and was then 'Romanised', with amphitheatre and temple. But there was very little sign of ordinary occupation - it remained 'rural'. This, then, is the image: what is the reality behind it? For the last two summers, Chris Gosden and Gary Lock, with a team from the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education have been taking a fresh look at this mysterious site.

Our excavations come at the end of a long history of work here. Between 1864-1870 John Akerman and George Rolleston (the latter a good friend of General Pitt Rivers) excavated the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon cemetery then being destroyed by quarrying. This is one of the few cemeteries in the country with good evidence of continuities between the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon periods. In 1885 Arthur Evans dug a villa nearby, one of a number known in the area, establishing this as a centre of Romano-British rural activity. Further excavations on the cemetery were carried out by Dudley Buxton to look at changes or continuities in skull type across the Roman/Anglo-Saxon divide. Arthur Evans advised two young members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society, John Bradford and Roger Goodchild to look at the land behind the Noah's Ark pub, which had produced Roman remains, and in 1937-8 they excavated a Romano-British temple, along with other Romano-British features, such as a round stone-built feature and a number of underlying Iron Age pits and postholes. Their major conclusion was radical one: that the underlying Iron Age remains were of ritual type and that there was direct continuity between an Iron Age shrine still in use in the late Iron Age and the Romano-British temple constructed at the end of the first



The Frilford site consists of a temple (top left) and a circular feature (top right): is this an amphitheatre - or a ritual spring?

century AD. Dennis Harding, bothered by these claims of continuity, returned to the site in 1964 to uncover a stake-circle 14m in diameter, a four-post structure and some pits. The Iron Age remains, he felt, dated from a number of Iron Age phases, spanning at least the middle and late Iron Age, but with no direct evidence for occupation later than the 1st century BC. The temple he redated to the later 2nd century AD, breaking any direct link of continuity. The majority of the finds seemed to come from the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the temple was probably added to and extended.

Last but not least was a campaign of fieldwork by Richard Hingley, who had grown up in Frilford and seen Dennis Harding's excavation as a boy. He carried out extensive fieldwalking and when the landowner took a photograph from a crop-dusting aeroplane which revealed a perfect circle several hundred metres east of the temple site, Richard was able to carry out some small-scale excavations. These revealed a substantial stone-built structure of Romano-British date, with surrounding outer bank but few obvious features inside the wall. Richard concluded that this was an amphitheatre. But the existence of an amphitheatre here was mysterious, since all other British amphitheatres are close to Roman towns or to forts. Occasionally in the literature Frilford is described as a Roman town, but none of the



This late Roman building was excavated between the temple and the amphitheatre



Left. Was this curved wall the wall of an amphitheatre - or is there an alternative explanation?



The 'royal box' on the south side of the 'amphitheatre', as viewed from a mobile elevated platform known as a cherry picker

evidence from the site bears this out, and the nearest known town is Abingdon five miles away. Frilford seemed to be composed of a temple, with its underlying Iron Age evidence, an amphitheatre and a large cemetery starting in the Roman period but continuing beyond it. Although there was considerable evidence of rural settlement in the area, there was nothing on the site itself to suggest a major habitation.

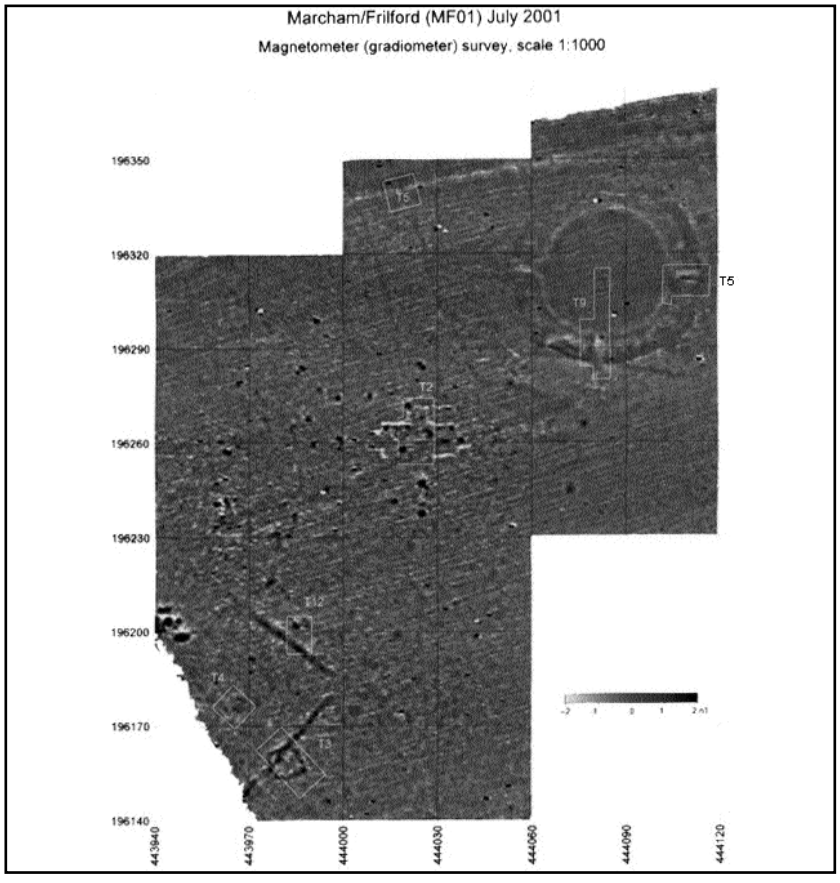
We started excavating the 'amphitheatre' reasonably happy with this interpretation, but as we proceeded doubts have accumulated. Before excavation we were aware that the overall shape of the structure is round and not elliptical, differing from most amphitheatres. We excavated two trenches on the southern side, where a rectangular structure showed up on aerial photographs, and on the east where magnetometry revealed a possible entrance. Two seasons of excavations revealed a 1.5m depth of wall in front of the bank, but the bank itself never appeared to be massive enough to hold a substantial audience. At the back of the bank to the south, an extra trench revealed a large number of bronze, glass and bone finds which looked as if they had been deliberately deposited, which we could not believe was amphitheatre activity. The front retaining wall may be of two phases. The upper part of the wall was plastered and painted red to give an effect of masonry. No plaster was found below the first 50 cm or so, and this may not be due to differences in preservation. Once the base of the wall was reached we started to hit water, and it was here that doubts really set in. Peter Salway visiting the site asked whether it might not be a pool, and produced a number of examples from northern France of springs and pools encircled by stone walls. The rectangular structure is still in the process of excavation and we are not sure of its purpose, an uncertainty linked our doubts about the structure as a whole. The entrance, if such it is, has not yet been

fully revealed.

The structure is situated at the northern end of a natural coomb, which shows up as green linear feature on aerial photographs, so obviously retains water to some degree. It is possible that there is a natural spring or runoff deeper than we have dug so far and that the Romano-British population enclosed the upper end of the coomb to create a pool. The rectangular structure, which might be a special viewing area ('the royal box' our diggers took to calling it) if it were an amphitheatre, or some means of regulating the water, if it turns out to be a pool.

At present we rather like the idea that this might be a pool, enclosed by a shallow bank with votive deposits round the outside. Quite what exists in the middle we hope to discover this summer. Of course, a compromise solution is always possible, with an early pool silting up, the upper part of the walls being plastered, and the whole used for meeting, theatre or ritual. One advantage of the pool theory is that it gives unity to the site as a whole, with a temple at one end, a pool at the other and a number of large buildings in between, and it may be that the temple was built because the pool was there. Whether there was any Iron Age use of this end of the site still remains to be discovered.

When we started excavating, we were interested in studying the continuity from the Iron Age onwards as this would throw light on issues of Romanization and of the Anglo-Saxon take-over, as well as defining the exact nature of the site. A magnetometer survey by Tony Johnson of Oxford Archaeotechnics provided more detail on the 'amphitheatre' and revealed a major building orientated east-west between the temple and the 'amphitheatre'. Our two seasons of excavation have concentrated on three other areas in addition to the 'amphitheatre': Iron Age features extending out from the garden of the former Noah's Ark pub on the west of the site; the temple's boundary or temenos wall and interior, also to the west; and the large central Romano-British building. We are still disentangling the Iron Age evidence, buried as it is in places beneath a thick midden layer of Romano-British material, but, in addition, to an Iron Age ditched enclosure with interior pits and postholes, we have discovered at least one Middle Bronze Age ditch with an almost whole pot, extending back the history of the site. Iron Age material is not found to the south and east of the site in anything other than isolated features. We have uncovered the temenos wall in several places and the interior of the temenos is relatively clean of finds, but may have revealed scoops dug into the bedrock in which bushes and trees were planted.



A magnetometer survey shows the circular structure (top right) and the late Roman building (centre).

The building aligned east-west has been excavated by David Griffiths on a large scale over two seasons and has revealed stone walls in shallow foundation trenches, leading us to believe that the main structure was wood rather than stone. The interior has a series of rough surfaces of tile and stone, with a mass of finds, including coins mainly dating to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. Whether it was used into the Anglo-Saxon period will be hard to establish given the paucity of finds from the early part of this period. As to the purpose of the building, a lodging house or mansio or even church have been discussed, although the latter seems unlikely.

We feel that the current work is now giving better shape to the Frilford site as a whole, and the various parts of the complex previously excavated are coming together to make a more coherent story. We are enjoying the puzzle of it all and hope for further enlightenment this year or next with regard to the 'amphitheatre'. We will keep you posted!