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A *Viereckschanze* in Oxfordshire, England? Enclosure and Memory at Marcham

Gary Lock and Sheila Raven

The extensive archaeological site at Marcham includes a Romano-British temple complex overlying a series of Iron Age ritual features. One of these is an intriguing and unusual barrel-shaped enclosure. Here we describe the enclosure based on geophysical and excavated evidence and place its interpretation within the context of European and British ritual enclosures.

Keywords: Marcham, Iron Age, Romano-British, *Viereckschanze*, Enclosure, Memory

Background

The extensive archaeological site at Marcham[1] has a long history of investigation. In summary – as a result of quarrying in the mid-19th century a late Romano-British and early Anglo-Saxon cemetery was discovered north of the A338 road to Wantage (Akerman 1865; Rolleston 1869; 1880), with further excavation and analysis of the numerous graves continuing just after the First World War (Dudley Buxton 1921). More recent archaeological evaluation has confirmed the extent of the cemetery together with Saxon occupation (Cass & Ford 2008). In the 1930s, acting on the advice of Arthur Evans, Bradford and Goodchild (1939) excavated within the garden of the Noah's Ark Inn just to the south of the road and cemetery. Here they uncovered a series of Iron Age features, including an unusual 'shrine' with votive offerings, directly overlain by a stone-built Romano-British temple (Bradford & Goodchild 1939). Parts of the temple were explored further by Harding in the 1960s (Harding 1987). The surrounds of the temple, including the southern half of the Inn's garden and the adjoining field known as Trendles, were the focus of fieldwork by Hingley (1982; 1985), who pulled together the aerial photographic evidence and conducted surface survey. The importance of Hingley's work was in showing the extent of the archaeological remains, consisting of a series of buildings including a circular stone-built arena to the east of the temple, which he confirmed by excavation.

This accumulating evidence together with conflicting aspects of the site's interpretation established Marcham as a site of national importance and, encouraged by the generosity of the landowners, initial large scale geophysical survey and then excavations were conducted for 11 seasons starting in 2001, co-directed by Gary Lock and Chris Gosden.[2] These acted as training excavations for full- and part-time students at the University of Oxford as well as for many other people. In total, nearly 1000 were trained over the 11 years. With over 50 trenches excavated and a large amount of material culture recovered, the post-excavation and publication tasks are considerable and ongoing. Much of it so far has been supported by the National Lottery Fund, thus offering opportunities for local volunteers to be involved.

The extent of the evidence at Marcham was indicated by the geophysical survey (Kamash *et al*. 2010, fig. 2), although the core of the site comprises the areas in the garden of the Noah's Ark and in Trendles to the east. The circular arena has a stone wall *ca.* 40 m in diameter surrounded to the east, south, and west by a low earthen bank. To the north, excavated features suggest a possible platform giving rise to its designation as a semi-amphitheatre, a cross between an amphitheatre and a theatre, a form known in central and northern Gaul (Golvin 1988; for a fuller discussion of the Marcham amphitheatre see Kamash *et al.* 2010, 106). The main arena entrance is to the west and this and a series of other buildings and shrines were probably connected by

pathways to the temple eastern entrance through the *temenos* wall. To the east of the arena were a series of small circular and rectangular ditched Iron Age enclosures, with much material culture in the ditches and internal pits. These were clearly not domestic and appear to have a ritual function, as does a nearby defined area of intercutting pits which seems to represent a formal area of burial, containing both human and unusual animal remains, plus a wealth of Iron Age finds.

In summary, during the Roman period Marcham was a thriving rural sanctuary located in a busy landscape of villas across the Vale of the White Horse, close to a Roman road running to Wantage and close to the larger Roman settlement at Abingdon. While the Roman remains make Marcham an important site, it is their relationship with the extensive underlying prehistoric features which have placed it at the centre of discussion regarding continuity and change between the two periods. In this short paper, we will continue with this theme by concentrating on aspects of the temple and nearby prehistoric features, including a large Iron Age barrel-shaped enclosure.

Continuity and Change

Bradford and Goodchild (1939) argued for direct continuity between the Iron Age and Roman remains in both time and use as a persistent religious/ritual/sacred place. Their interpretation was based on three main lines of argument. Firstly, that many of the Iron Age features, specifically postholes and ditches, were intentionally back filled in the early Roman period when the temple was built, suggesting that they were surviving holes or hollows in the ground. Secondly, the spatial correlation of the Roman and Iron Age structures, specifically the 'rotunda' being constructed over the ditched 'shrine', and the temple itself being built over a post-built circular building. Thirdly, the early dating of the construction of the temple to *ca.* AD 80–90, based on coins found under the first phase path leading from the eastern entrance.

These arguments and counter arguments have been fully explored by Kamash and colleagues who have downplayed the need for direct continuity and shown that 'commemoration of the past' can be a different form of relating to past people, places, and events (Kamash *et al*. 2010). This happens by the significance of a place being passed down through social memory aided by the physical remnants of past activities surviving on the ground such as partially filled pits and ditches. One remarkable example of this is the small Roman shrine constructed over 60 m directly east of the temple *temenos* and linked to the eastern entrance by a long and aligned pathway. The shrine comprised a small square stone-built enclosure surrounding a 'ritual shaft' containing offerings including 4th-century coins and cockerel bones. This Roman shaft was created with great effort inside the fill of an earlier pit, which was flanked by two other large Iron Age pits, equidistant from the central pit and its later 'ritual' shaft. The fact that it would have been easier to dig the shaft straight into the ground rather than elaborately supporting a cylindrical shape inside the larger pit with layers of stones, may suggest the central pit was already significant and may also have been prehistoric. The later construction of the shaft inside it destroyed any dating evidence or indication of its original use. Close to this shrine was an unusual Iron Age crouched burial with animal skulls arranged round the grave also indicating the early ritual importance of this part of the site. The centre line of the temple runs through the *temenos* gateway and straight through the centre of this Roman shrine and its underlying pit, showing that the alignment of the temple was based on these pits, the outer two of which were still hollows in the ground when the temple was constructed based on Roman pottery in their upper fills and clear weathering cones (Kamash *et al*. 2010, fig. 4).

Excavations at Marcham subsequent to Kamash and colleagues' 2010 paper have yielded further evidence relevant to the discussions of continuity and the relationships in time, space, and function between Iron Age and Roman features. Central to this are three enclosures within and close to the Noah's Ark garden, and it is to these that we now turn. To the north is the rectangular *temenos* enclosure of the temple, shown by excavation to have been stone-built but now mostly robbed. South-west of the *temenos* wall, and very close to it, is a large barrel-shaped enclosure, while to the south-east are two sides of a smaller rectangular enclosure (Fig. 8.1). Based on the aerial photographic and geophysical evidence, the south-eastern enclosure appears to have been the earliest as it is cut and overlain by both of the other two thus destroying its northern and eastern sides and much of its interior. The early date was confirmed by excavation which revealed 273 sherds of an almost complete Middle Bronze Age bucket urn laid near the base of a deep V-shaped ditch. Intersecting with this was a circular, small Iron Age enclosure, reminiscent of Bradford and Goodchild's Iron Age 'shrine' in their Site C (1939, fig. 5), which started as a ring of pits later joined together by a ditch. The latter partially cut into the filled Bronze Age ditch, indicating recognition of its existence (Kamash *et al.* 2010, fig. 3). The line of the Bronze Age ditch was then recut in the Roman period.

The barrel-shaped enclosure is next in the sequence and details have been established through aerial photography, geophysics, and the excavation of three trenches, although it can be seen from Figure 8.1 that the enclosure is not complete as the River Ock and an associated reed bed cuts off the south-western half of it (Wintle 2007; Wintle *et al*. 2010). This is probably due to the Ock having changed its course and moved eastwards, as indicated by a series of dry oxbow lakes a few hundred metres to the south visible on aerial photographs. If the known shape of the enclosure is extrapolated, it could have originally been approximately

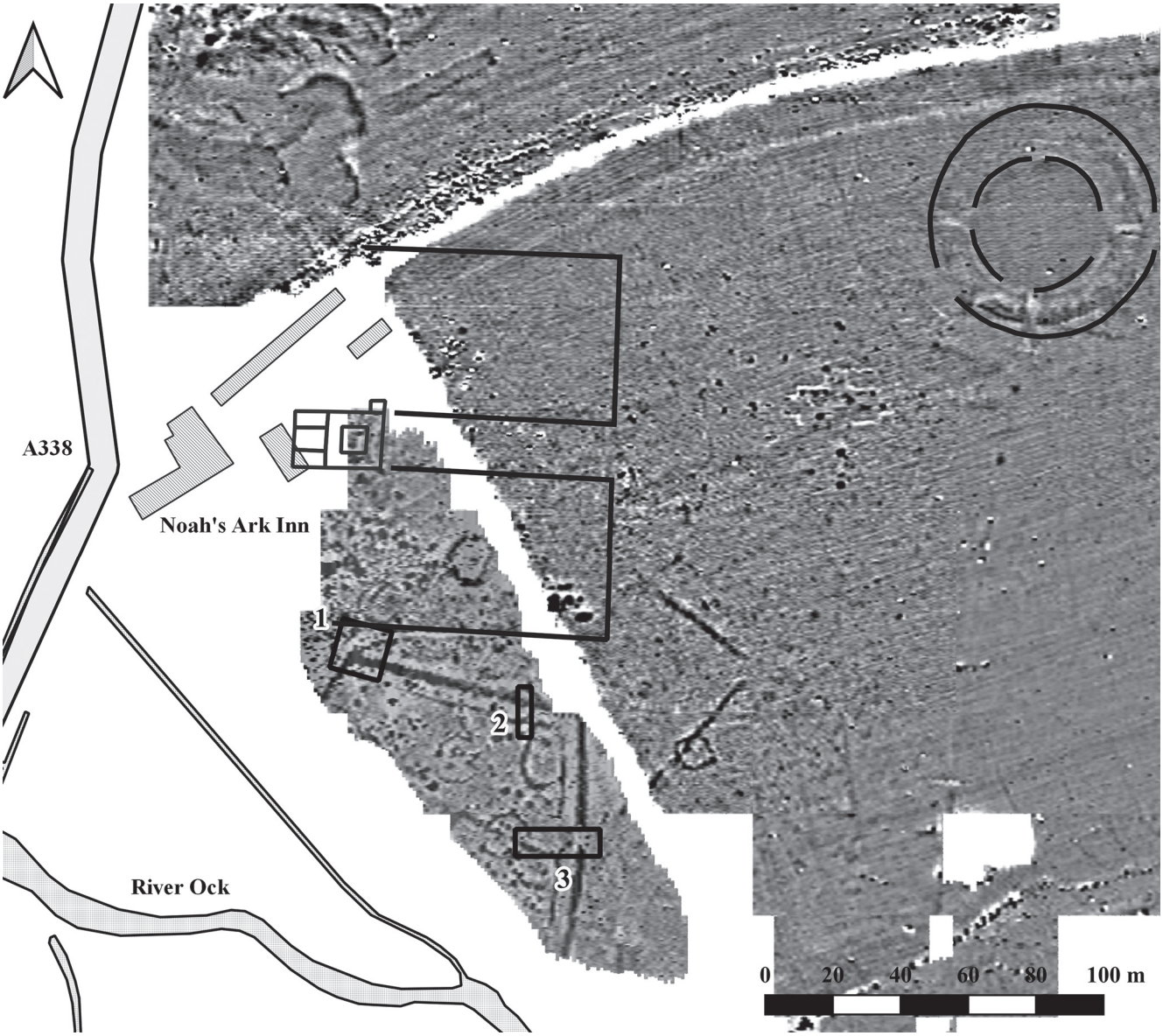


Figure 8.1 Geophysics of the western half of the Marcham site showing the three enclosures. The Roman temple and temenos *is to the north, the barrel-shaped enclosure south of it with excavation trenches marked, and the two sides of the rectangular enclosure to the east (Courtesy of William Wintle; Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2022. Geophysical survey by William Wintle & Tony Johnson).*

140 by 85 m and enclosed 1.2 ha. The main enclosure ditch was a stepped V-shape cut through bedrock a maximum of *ca*. 5 m wide and 2 m deep with middle Iron Age pottery (some of it very early Middle Iron Age, possibly 400–350 BC), contained within its primary fills in Trench 2. The bedrock here is unstable and collapsed into the ditch, which was then re-cut to the same shape but smaller. The geophysics clearly shows a narrower linear feature running parallel with the ditch *ca.* 4 m on its inside, which excavation revealed to be 0.65 m wide and 0.95 m deep with steep sides and a flat base (Fig. 8.2). This is probably a slot to hold a wooden inner revetment of the bank and it contained similar pottery to the outer ditch.

The enclosure had an entrance through the eastern side, the southern half of which was excavated (Fig. 8.3). The terminus end of the ditch was surrounded by an arc of four shallow pits/postholes, all with steep sides and flat bottoms measuring *ca.* 1 m in diameter and a maximum of 0.3 m deep. This unusual configuration was clearly related to the entrance architecture and may have held posts that were fixed together rather than being embedded in the ground. The geophysics and excavation show a series of small, ditched enclosures of various shapes within the enclosure, together with a series of pits/large postholes. Although it is difficult to make sense of many of these features, within the area excavated a row of at least five postholes running from

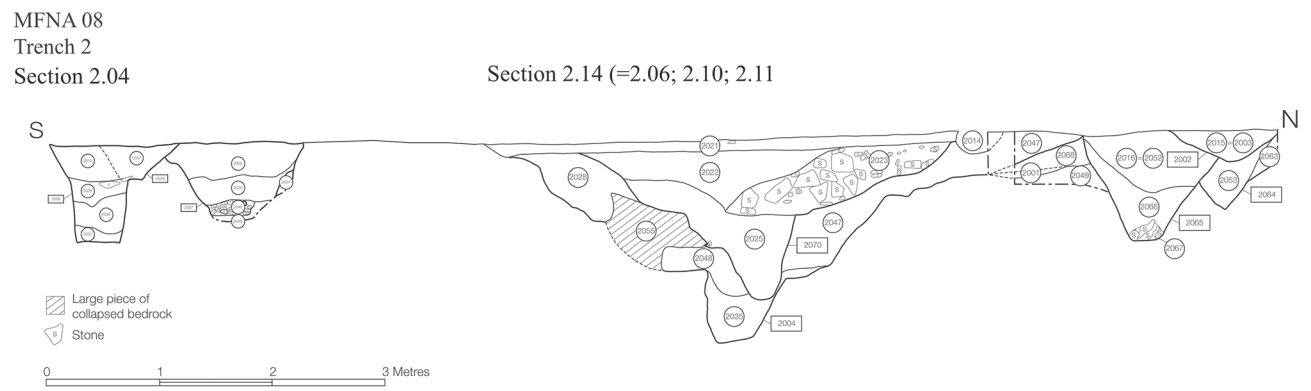


Figure 8.2 Section drawn across Trench 2 showing cut features (from left to right): the Iron Age bank revetment ditch, a ring ditch, the barrel-shaped enclosure ditch, and the ring ditch.

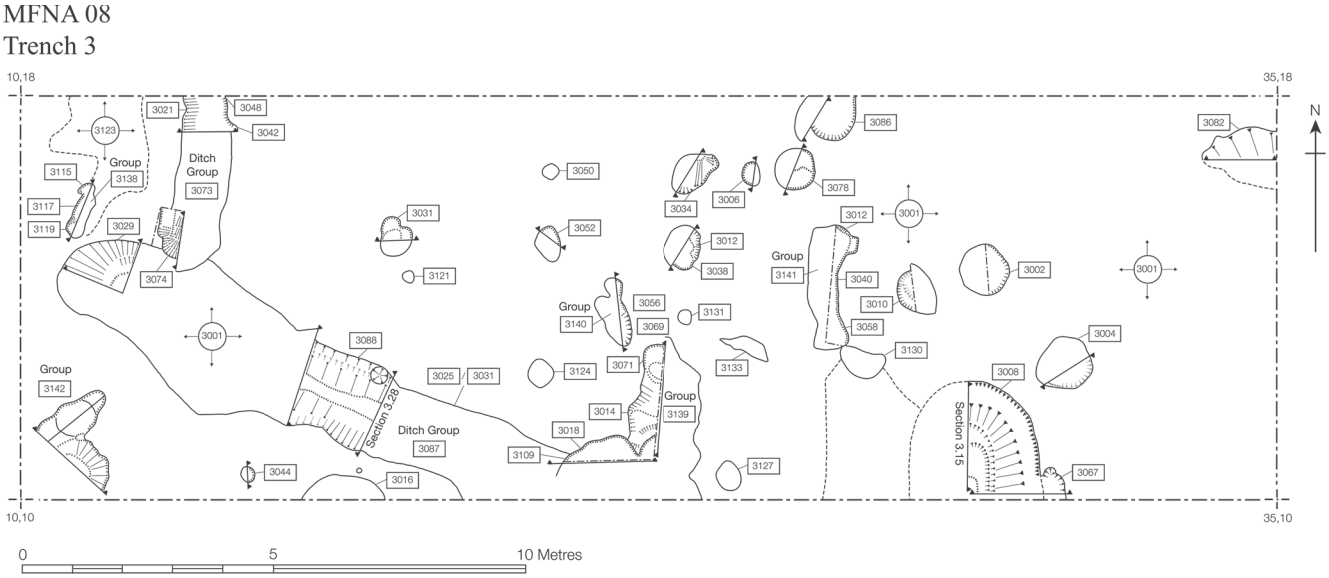


Figure 8.3 Trench 3 showing the barrel-shaped enclosure entrance with internal cut features. The main ditch terminal is to the bottom right with the four shallow postholes in an arc around it. Inside the enclosure are the central line of postholes and ditches representing smaller internal enclosures.

the entrance westwards seems to have divided the interior into two. These were spaced *ca.* 2.8 m apart and averaged 0.7 m diameter and 0.45 m deep. Other groups of postholes running north–south may have formed radial divisions from the central line. The whole area of the enclosure was a complex of inter-cutting ditches, some of which predated the barrel-shaped enclosure, based on stratigraphy and Early Iron Age/early Middle Iron Age pottery in upper fills.

The *temenos* wall of the temple enclosure at its south-western end runs very close to the northern ditch of the barrel-shaped Iron Age enclosure. The upper fills of the Iron Age ditch in this area, and only in this area, produced a very large assemblage of 1st century AD Roman artefacts including late Iron Age and very early Roman pottery, two asses (one of Domitian and the other a Claudian copy), and four early brooches (a Nauheim derivative, a T-brooch, a penannular brooch, and a Hod Hill type). It may be that a break in the *temenos* wall at this point was another entrance giving access to the area of the earlier enclosure, the ditch of which was still evident as a hollow in the ground.

A *Viereckschanze*?

It seems clear from the evidence that the barrel-shaped enclosure is not domestic, as its characteristics are so different to those of many enclosed farmsteads/settlements known in this area (for example Lambrick & Robinson 2009). Caution is advisable when applying the term *viereckschanze* however. Bradley (2003; 2005) amongst others has shown how its use can lead to confusion and complexity based on morphological evidence alone (at its simplest level it means ‘rectangular enclosure’). Also, the

term, its use, and interpretation, has become more confused rather than clarified, through increasing amounts of excavated evidence. Interpretation (again at its simplest level as a cult/ritual enclosure) can raise increasingly complex issues of what is meant by prehistoric ritual and how it can be recognised.

It seems useful here to briefly review some of the discussion concerning the term *viereckschanze*. Their recognition and original interpretation are usually accredited to Schwartz (1959), whose excavations of one of the two enclosures at Holzhausen, Bavaria, in the 1950s established it as the 'type site' for the 'Celtic cult enclosure model' (Buchsenschutz 1989). The usually cited characteristics of *viereckschanzen* in their core area of Bavaria, Bohemia, and southern Germany are rectangular, sometimes trapezoidal, enclosures defined by one or more bank and ditch, although not large enough to be defensive, with typically 0.4–1.0 ha enclosed area and 100 × 80 m maximum dimensions, often located away from settlements with a single entrance typically on the eastern side. Details established through excavation, again for the 'type site', include enhancement of the entrance with various posts and timber structures, a lack of material culture generally and domestic features in particular, one or two simple wooden square or rectangular buildings represented by postholes and/or bedding trenches and interpreted as temples, and pits/shafts, some up to 20–30 m deep, for the deposition of votive offerings. Subsequent to work at Holzhausen and the establishment of the model, some other excavated sites have reproduced some of these elements, for example Dornstadt-Tomerdingen also in southern Germany (Zürn & Fischer 1991).

With increasing evidence from excavations the 'type site' model within the core area has become challenged due to the difference between sacred and profane activities within the enclosures becoming blurred. Venclová (1993) uses evidence from excavated sites to argue against simplifying and generalising models showing that the evidence is much more complex and difficult to interpret. This is explored by Wieland (1999) who provides a detailed discussion of *viereckschanzen* in southern Germany and the Czech Republic, with a catalogue of 24 excavated sites and plans of their internal structures. Their changing interpretation is reviewed by Rieckhoff and Biel (2001) who suggest that many are more likely to be high status settlements with elements of ritual activity rather than purely ritual enclosures, a view supported by Von Nicolai (2009) and Webster (1995).

Feeding into the doubts regarding the ritual function of *viereckschanzen* is the recognition of enclosures which appear more convincingly to have been used for ritual purposes, for example the cult centres of northern France such as Gournay-sur-Aronde and Ribemont-sur-Ancre. Here the form of the enclosure itself, the internal structures, and the deposition of large amounts of material including weaponry and human remains indicate a different sort of site to *viereckschanzen* (Arcelin & Brunaux 2003). In Brunaux's (1988) overview of Celtic religious beliefs and practices he recognises four types of sanctuaries of which *viereckschanzen* and Belgic, *i.e.* the Gournay and Ribemont type, are two. He questions why the former show so few offerings and why they never developed into Gallo-Roman sanctuaries as the Belgic ones often did and suggests that *viereckschanzen* are either a special site limited to southern Germany and nearby, or they are not cult sites but places for assemblies partly of cult character. A further complicating factor is the increasing number of Iron Age enclosures known as shown by Haselgrove (2007) for northern France where, since 1992, 263 Late Iron Age sites have been excavated of which 70% are settlements with the rest being sanctuaries, cemeteries, and cult enclosures. The complication as shown here is that some sites categorised as domestic settlements show evidence of ritual practices (Haselgrove 2007, 501).

There are well-established and long-recognised religious/ritual structures in Britain (Cunliffe 2005, 561) including the shrines within Danebury, South Cadbury, and Maiden Castle hillforts, at Lancing Down and Stanstead and the temples of Hayling Island and Heathrow. The identification of purely ritual enclosures of the Iron Age, however, is more difficult. There are often-cited possibilities, with one of the more remarkable being the Phase III enclosure at Fison Way, Thetford (Gregory 1991), and others being the large ritual enclosure with burials replaced by a Romano-British temple at St Albans, Folly Lane (Niblett 1999) and also possibly Gosbecks Farm, Colchester (Crummy 1980). As well as the often-cited examples it must be recognised that with the increasing numbers of rectilinear enclosures known from aerial photography there is a possibility that some of them are of a ritual character. It is interesting to note that nearly 50 years ago, Harding (1974, 111) drew attention to a series of enclosures 'possibly related' to *viereckschanzen* within Berkshire and not far from Marcham. These are a list of nearly 30 sites produced by Cotton (1961), together with discussion of continental parallels, and three ditched enclosures at Long Wittenham possibly containing ritual shafts (Harding 1974, pl. XIX).

What's in a Name?

It can be argued that square/rectangular Iron Age enclosures form a continuum in terms of the ratio of sacred/profane activities carried out within them based on excavated evidence; even so, a defining characteristic is enclosure. The *viereckschanze* debate has shown how difficult it is to characterise the function of an enclosure based on morphology alone, although it is accepted that the act of enclosing is a key element of Iron Age sacred sites alongside natural locations such as groves and watery places (Webster 1995). Delimiting a specific space is seen by Brunaux (1988, 7)

as an 'essential feature' in creating a sacred place of 'assembly, passage and encounter', with entrances having a particular importance where 'the holiest forces meet the pressure of the profane' (Brunaux 1988, 27), hence their often-preferred orientation to the east, like the Marcham big enclosure and the later temenos enclosure, together with special treatment. Webster's (1995, 447) survey of Classical accounts of Celtic sacred places concludes that, despite any detail on construction and use of enclosures as cult sites, 'the formalized structuring of space, incorporating enclosing works, is suggested by most texts' reinforcing that 'enclosure was the primary and indispensable feature of Celtic cult sites'.

With the Marcham enclosure in mind, we can suggest that a second important factor in identifying ritual enclosures is 'sequence' as argued by Bradley (2003; 2005). He explores the confusion surrounding the evidence for ritual and the differences between ritual and profane practices and suggests that ritualisation is a process dependent on social context. So rather than isolated individual ritual acts, they fit together temporally and become an historical process through a 'prescribed liturgy' being passed on by social memory. The three enclosures at Marcham form such a sequence, the Bronze Age rectangular enclosure replaced by the Iron Age barrel-shaped one, which is then replaced by the Romano-British temple *temenos*. The earlier Middle Iron Age features, pits, and circular ditches, show a tighter sequence of activity during this period culminating in the construction of the large enclosure. The Iron Age/Roman continuity ending in a temple is not unusual with well-known examples being Hayling Island (King & Soffe 1998) and Thetford (Gregory 1991).

The question posed in the title of this paper is to a large extent 'tongue in cheek' and intended only to draw attention to the unusual characteristics of the Marcham barrel-shaped enclosure. Whether or not we call it a *viereckschanze* or just a ritual enclosure, there is no doubt that it is a significant feature within the Marcham Iron Age landscape. The shape of the enclosure is unusual, as are its internal bank revetment and its entrance architecture, together with the arrangement of posts leading from the eastern entrance and dividing the internal space. The lack of evidence for roundhouses or domestic activity suggests a ritual function and this can be seen as just one such element of the wider Marcham site, which has a series of small Iron Age enclosures and pit groups all appearing not to be domestic. As we have seen above, sequence is crucial here with Bronze Age features being within and around the barrel-shaped Iron Age enclosure, which is then replaced by the Roman temple complex. The deposition of very early Roman material in the upper fills of the enclosure's northern ditch is a powerful sign that the enclosure was still visible and maintained continuing significance. This adds to the arguments for continuity of this sacred place first put forward by Bradford and Goodchild (1939) and supports their suggested early date for the Roman temple in the second half of the 1st century AD. Kamash and colleagues added to the evidence for a continuity based on the persistence of landscape features and the strength of social memory (Kamash *et al*. 2010), and the evidence from the barrel-shaped enclosure strengthens this further.

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Notes

1. The site is sometimes known as Frilford which is the neighbouring parish, and sometimes as Marcham/Frilford.
2. Interim reports for the 11 seasons appeared in South Midlands Archaeology (32–42) and are available at: <https://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/vale-and-ridgeway-project> [accessed January 2022].

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