Votive Finds Report - the range and significance of votive offerings at the religious complex of Marcham

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This report will look at a whole range of potential votive offerings of all periods and material types from the temple site at Marcham. This includes Roman artefacts such as copper-alloy small finds, copper-alloy and silver coins, iron small finds, worked bone items, glass items, a few custom-made votive metal and ceramic objects, and finally pottery and animal bone used in various votive activities and as votive offerings. Also discussed will be potential Iron Age sacred deposits including pottery and animal bone. All these different material groups have their own specialist reports on this website, so this report does not attempt a detailed summary of all these artefact types but aims to look at the general patterns of distribution of all potential 'votive' offerings and any structures associated with them across the site. This will highlight the range of object types which acted as votive offerings and indicate where the biggest concentrations of votive material were. The report will also look at whether the types of different votive artefacts indicate the worship of any specific deities for the Roman period.

The pre-Roman period

The large religious complex at Marcham is unusual in having good evidence of potential Iron Age shrine structures and other possibly sacred features preceding any Roman religious activity. As Bradford and Goodchild (1939) first suggested and our more recent excavations have supported (Kamash *et al*., 2010; Lock and Raven 2023), it seems likely that this was a sacred place well before the Roman temple complex was built here. For example, directly under the Roman 'rotunda' shrine within the *temenos* precinct was a unique Iron Age horseshoe-shaped circular feature. A very wide ditch with two deliberate 'islands' set within it enclosing a tiny area that seems to have no practical domestic function. The finding of clearly votive items in a square pit in the middle of this enclosure, in the form of a miniature late Iron Age sword and shield, is strong evidence for ritual activity linked to a cult or cults in this pre-Roman phase (Bradford and Goodchild, 1939, 11). Though this pit was clearly filled with clay in the Roman period (as Roman tile was also present), the deposition of these Late Iron Age miniature weapons suggests firstly that such cult Iron Age objects were already present on the site and secondly that the Roman temple builders honoured this sacred space by burying them under the 'new' rotunda shrine. Also in this unusual pit was a full-sized iron spearhead and a quern stone. Such objects suggest both a martial cult and an agricultural fertility cult, certainly in the early Roman period when these objects were buried, but perhaps also in the preceding Iron Age when the votive miniature weapons were made? There is evidence, in fact, of ritual activity on site even before the Iron Age with the Bronze Age Enclosure ditch [3113] in Trench MF 3. The broken sherds from an almost complete middle Bronze Age bucket urn appears to have been deliberately placed on the bottom of this ditch. The Bradford and Goodchild excavations within the Roman *temenos* precinct also found many sherds of high-status carinated and swag-decorated bowls from the Early to Middle Iron Age, in quantities unusual for this region. These may also be evidence of votive deposition or ritual activities in the prehistoric period. Pottery and animal bones found in pits and ditches across the wider site from the most recent excavations may also be part of some type of religious deposition, rather than simple domestic refuse disposal (Hill 1995). Which of these many seemingly ordinary items were dedicated to the gods and what deities may

have been worshipped on this site during the prehistoric era, are questions which are typically difficult to answer for this period.

Our excavations have put the Iron Age votive objects and structures from previous excavations into a much larger context and indicate widespread ritual activity in the Iron Age on this site, including extensive votive deposition. None of the many ditched and banked enclosures across the site appear to be domestic but rather hint at a ritual purpose with structured deposits of material culture, mainly of pottery and bone, within the ditch and pit fills. The large Barrel-Shaped Enclosure Ditch (Group [1016] and [2004]) in the MFNA zone for example is highly unusual in its form in this country and its function is probably ritual rather than domestic (as discussed fully in Lock and Raven 2023). Other prehistoric features like the large enclosure ditch in MF Trench 3, revealing in its second phase that it was made up of a series of linked pits rather than a straight-forward ditch, also appear to be non-domestic. The closely spaced round enclosures in the MFP zone with their entrances placed to the E/SE likewise do not appear to be domestic in their use. It has long been recognised that during later prehistory the deposition of material in pits and ditches was not random but probably represents intentional selection and burial, a process often called 'structured deposition'. For the Iron Age this was demonstrated in the detailed study of the enclosure ditch and internal pits at the Winnal Down settlement by Hill (1995) and is further expanded by Sharples (2010). Although Hill looked at the patterning of human remains together with more unusual material culture such as iron objects, quern stones and worked bone he recognised a constant background presence of animal bone and pottery arguing that all material remains had meaning beyond the pragmatic. So, the apparently everyday objects found in many of the ditches and pits across the site at Marcham may be part of the people's religious activities with a sacred significance we do not fully understand.

There are only about seventeen sites in Britain with definite evidence of a pre-Roman shrine and most of these are located in or near larger centres of population or political foci like hillforts. So, the rural location of the pre-Roman shrine at Marcham is not typical but may point to this location having a cultural or political significance in the prehistoric period that is not immediately apparent. Other prehistoric shrine sites in rural areas occur on some hilltop locations or near rivers or on tribal boundaries and probably in areas which were once forested and forming sacred groves. The nearby shrine site of Woodeaton, Oxfordshire (Goodchild and Kirk 1954; Woodward 1992, 30) produced evidence of trading on a large scale which suggests its siting may be due to a location on a tribal boundary or 'contact zone' where markets and trading were focused. The location of the site at Marcham close to the River Ock may well be very significant, as river boundaries were often important and bodies of water were often seen sacred portals to the world of the gods and of spirits. Perhaps also the nearby tribal boundaries between the Dobunni tribe north of the Thames and that of the Atrebates south of the Thames (Allen 2000, 27-29), is another possible factor in the siting of a pre-Roman shrine in the apparently purely rural location of Marcham. As with the religious complex at Marcham, many sites with Iron Age shrines that show occupation continuing into the Roman period, revealed Romano-Celtic temples built in stone placed near or directly over the pre-Roman shrines e.g. Hayling Island and Maiden Castle for example (Woodward 1992, 19-21). Some of these larger Iron Age shrine sites have produced considerable numbers of often quite spectacular finds which were most probably deposited as religious offerings. Finds such as bronze, silver, and gold coins, horse and chariot trappings, full-size and

miniature weapons, brooches, and currency bars have all been attested as votive offerings at some British pre-Roman shrines.

Marcham clearly lacks this variety and quantity of high-status pre-Roman offerings, apart from the occasional iron brooch and possible miniature tools/weapons. However, the rural shrine at Marcham may have had a different pattern of pre-Roman religious activity and deposition than some of these larger shrines. For instance, the occurrence of large quantities of higher status Iron Age pottery in the many prehistoric pits in Trench 4 in the MFP zone may indicate religious activity rather than rubbish disposal. Particularly when taken in association with the evidence of human burials in this area and the finding of talismanic objects such as the heart-shaped sea-urchin fossils in several of the pits and graves (see Paula Levick's Trench MFP4 report on this website). Unusual prehistoric features, such as the horseshoe-shaped feature from the 1939 excavations and the Barrel-Shaped Enclosure discovered in the MFNA zone, combined with activities such as specially placed animal remains or pottery deposits in some Iron Age pits and ditches across the site, all suggest deliberate religious activity in the prehistoric period. Also relevant is the lack of obviously domestic structures such as roundhouses and post-built structures which reinforce the argument that Marcham was a sacred place rather than a settlement. Therefore, though we cannot say how many of the deposits of pottery, bone, stone, and metalwork finds in the Iron Age features on the site were specifically 'votive', it is a strong possibility that many were.

The Roman period

With the wealth of finds and of parallels for votive deposition on many other Romano-British temple sites, it is easier to trace the patterns of votive deposition linked to key areas and structures and also to highlight what sort of finds were most probably offerings to the gods. However, the site at Marcham is very short on objects that precisely point to specific deities worshipped at the shrines there. Although the temple site produced a great range of Roman finds, many of which were probably deposited as offerings to the gods, it has not produced a single stone inscription, altar, or statue fragment, or a single depiction or naming of a god on any metal objects like inscribed plaques, or any figurines of the gods or their respective animals, or finally any votive plaques, lead curses/dedications etc. This is in great contrast to a Roman temple site like Uley, Gloucestershire (Woodward and Leach, 1993), which produced sculptures, altars, figurines, inscriptions and even religious cult equipment like *caducei* (winged staff or wands). Uley produced twelve altar or statue fragments, *c.* eighteen figurines or figurine fragments, over twenty inscriptions naming gods on lead or copper and six *caducei* linked to Mercury. This assemblage reveals that the main deity worshipped at Uley was Mercury but also with specific evidence for the worship of Mars and to a lesser extent deities like Sol and Jupiter, Cupid, Victory and Bacchus. Woodeaton, another Roman temple site even closer to the site of Marcham (Bagnall Smith, 1998), also produced a number of finds depicting Roman gods or associated with specific gods, mostly in the form of metal items like model figurines or votive sheet plaques. These included two heads of Minerva, a silver hand possibly from a Mars figurine, a model wing probably from Cupid, and various votive plaques depicting gods like Medusa, Mars and Cupid, and intaglios depicting deities like Neptune and Minerva.

Such specific 'deity related' objects are not common finds on Roman0-British temple sites, but most temple sites produce at least a few of these objects, allowing the excavators to

identify one or more of the gods worshipped at the site. Though the site at Marcham largely lacks any such depictions or descriptions of Roman deities, the range of deities represented at the two nearby sites of Woodeaton and Uley could indicate the kind of gods that may also have been worshipped at Marcham in the Roman period. There may be a number of reasons for the lack of such specific deity-related material at Marcham. Perhaps the specific pagan cult objects were deliberately cleared away, disposed of, or buried more efficiently at Marcham than some other sites when the temple complex came to the end of its life. Equally the excavated areas at Marcham may have simply missed any burial spots where such pagan objects were placed in an ending ritual. Perhaps larger stone fragments of objects like altars or statues were more prosaically simply reused as building material by later populations as the temple itself and its *temenos* wall were heavily robbed. It is also possible that any larger metal objects like figurines or cult equipment or priestly paraphernalia were melted down and recycled at the end of the temple's use. Finally, another important factor should be considered for the lack of deity-related objects at Marcham. In terms of the lack of copper-alloy figurines and large metal objects, more recent activity on the site may have had some impact, namely that of opportunistic metal-detecting. The excavated fields at Marcham were excessively (and illegally) metal-detected in the later years of the 20th century, according to the landowner. The site was on an international metal-detectors website during that period, promoting it as a site where lots of Roman material could be found. There is also lots of anecdotal evidence of various treasure seekers boasting about the Roman brooches and other items that they had dug out of these fields. Even while the seasonal excavations were going on, various 'night hawks' appeared and had to be encouraged to go away. According to our own 'archaeology friendly' metal-detectors attached to the project, heavier solid objects like figurines would register very strong signals and would be the first items to be dug up if detected. We will never know for certain, but there is a good chance that larger copper-alloy items may have been taken from the site, long before the excavations started in 2001.

So, for the most part the material assemblage from the site largely leaves us with only 'circumstantial' evidence for which deities were worshipped at Marcham, rather than objects which show depictions of specific deities. The only exceptions to this are a small number of gemstone intaglios found on the site, which bear images of gods or figures related to specific gods. Out of the five known intaglios from our excavations, three are related to gods or beings who are associated with farming prosperity and good harvests. These are all described in detail in Martin Henig's report on the Marcham intaglios on this website. But briefly, the first is an intaglio depicting Ceres, the goddess of fertility and good harvests (SF 252 from context 9012); the second intaglio (SF 3334 from context 18191) shows a satyr with grapes, which also invokes rustic prosperity and good harvests; the third is only a small fragment of a glass intaglio (SF 3833 from context 24002) which may show Bonus Eventus, a male god also concerned with good cereal harvests. The fourth intaglio (SF 2474 from context 18137) depicts a warrior which probably the Greek hero Achilles with helmet and spear, which Martin Henig suggests was probably seen as a representation of Mars, the Roman god of war. Lastly a fifth intaglio was discovered as a stray find on the ground surface of the temple site in 1993 by the landowner Mr. Will Cumber. This fragment of a cornelian gemstone intaglio shows a nude figure holding an ear of corn, also representing Bonus Eventus, the god of good things and good harvests (Goodburn and Henig 1998, 239-240). Though single intaglios like this are not proof that there were shrines or altars to Ceres and Mars on the site, they add to the evidence. This area of Oxfordshire was scattered with many Roman villas, and the good

farming land would have supported farms both large and small. So, the provision and need for a shrine dedicated to the god or gods of agricultural prosperity is very probable. Also, with early military activity evidenced at Roman town sites like Alchester to the north and Dorchester to the east, Marcham may well have had a shrine dedicated to Mars, the god of war. As we shall see later in this report, there are a few other metal small finds that may indicate Mars worship.

There is another small group of finds in the Marcham assemblage that does indicate specific religious or cult activity, even though they give no indication of the deity they are offered to. This is the category of 'custom-made' divine items which for the Marcham assemblage includes copper-alloy and iron 'votive miniatures', alphabet shapes spelling out the initials or whole name of a deity, pottery deity-related figurines, and finally miniature 'libation' vessels. Compared to other Roman temple site like Uley and Woodeaton, the Marcham assemblage has very few of these. The eleven or so copper-alloy custom-made 'miniatures' is made up of three possible miniature weapons or tools; four fragments of individual 'alphabet' shapes; one small pelta or crescent moon miniature; and three miniature bracelets (for more details see Sheila Raven's Copper Alloy Finds Report on this website). There are also seven possible iron miniature tools or weapons (see Sheila Raven's Iron Finds Report on this website). A rare late Roman miniature pottery 'libation' vessel (SF 4774) accompanied the burial of a sheep or goat in cut [15213]. Finally, there are two fragments of a ceramic bull figurine (SF 434 from MFNA Trench 7) and a ceramic bull horn (SF 69 from MFNA Trench 1) which could be a representation of cult figures in their own right or of animals associated with specific deities. The significance and location of these cattle related pottery figurines is discussed later in this report. Most of the potential offerings to the gods on the site do not however fall into this 'custom-made' category but are everyday objects from people's lives, some high status and expensive but many much more modest.

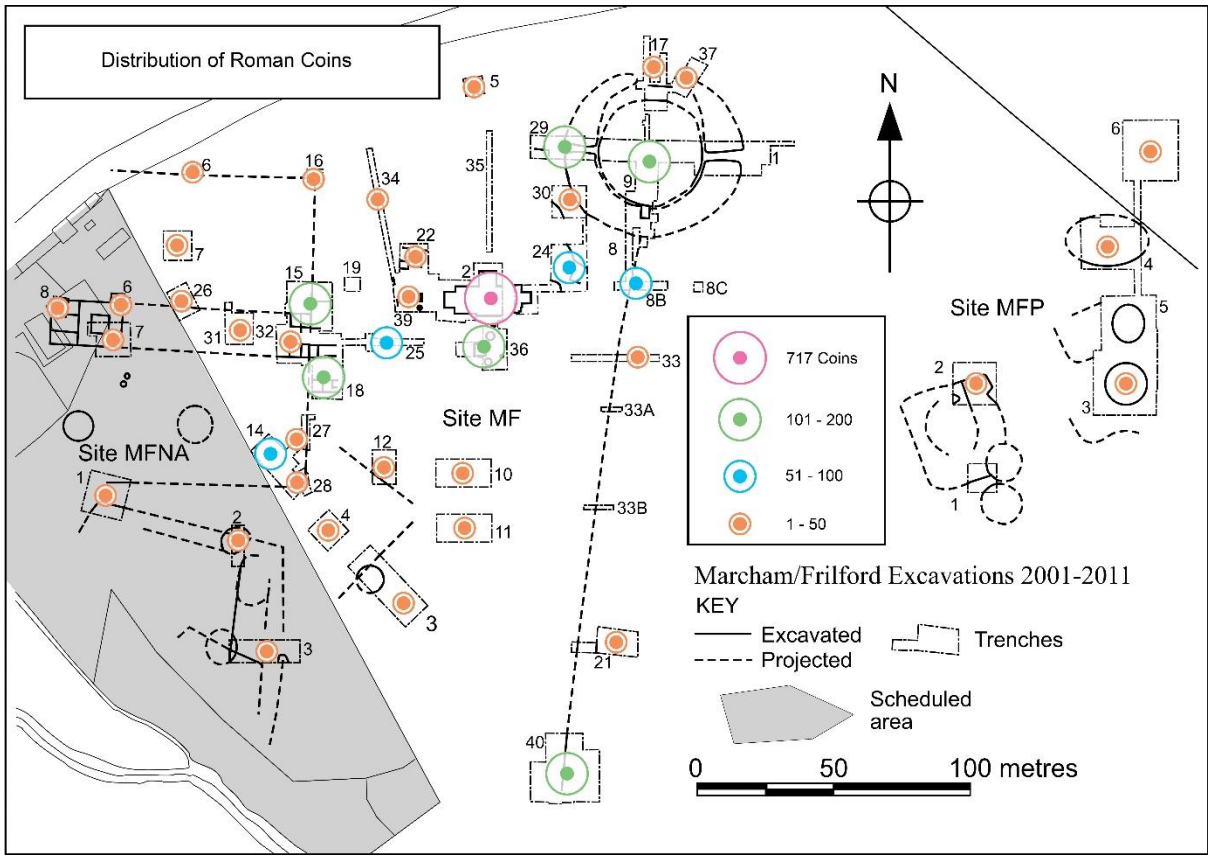
Before dealing with the range of potential votive offerings at Marcham and what deities they may be linked with, it is worth discussing how chronological trends for depositing certain types of objects changed through the Roman period and might affect the Marcham assemblage. Full sized tools and weapons and whole pots are often found in 1st century votive assemblages but seem to die out by the 2nd century and Marcham has very few examples of these. Coins and jewellery, particularly brooches, were objects that seem to have been deposited throughout the period in many Romano-British temples and shrines. Though even with these there are still noticeable chronological peaks. For instance, coin use itself is more common in the mid to later Roman period and coins as votive items on religious sites becomes much more common in the 3rd and 4th centuries than in the early Roman period. This is certainly the case at Marcham, where at least 75% of the *c.* 2,400 coins are of 3rd to 4th century date. The large assemblages of coins at the Roman temple sites of Bath, Uley, and Nettleton vary greatly in their nature compared to assemblages from excavated towns (Woodward 1992, 67-68). These temple assemblages are notable in containing many 'copies' or forgeries of late Roman coins like the *Fel Temp Reparatio* copies and coins of a very small size, known as *minims and minimissimi*. These are generally 4th century in date. The Marcham coin assemblage also shares this trait and includes many 'copies' and minims (see Paul Booth's Coin Report on this Website). Some of these small denomination coins may have been made on the temple site itself. This has been suggested for the site at Woodeaton (Bagnall Smith *pers. comm*) as well as evidence for general bronze-working (Bagnall Smith

1998, 179). The finding of a few simple copper-alloy rods of the right diameter at Marcham may point to this form of simple coin making happening at the Marcham temple site also. Just as at other excavated temple sites like Uley (with nearly 3,000 Roman coins) and Woodeaton (over 1,000 coins at least), at Marcham (with *c.* 2,400 Roman coins), coins are by far the most popular form of potential votive offering, particularly in the later Roman period.

It has long been recognised that certain types of objects appear to be linked to specific Roman gods or cults. Ann Woodward (Woodward 1992, 66-80) divided the main finds categories found on Romano-British temple sites into three major votive groups – objects of martial aspect (weapons, miniature weapons etc); different types of token ring and disc shaped objects, including coins; and personal trinkets like bracelets, pins, spoons and grooming items. The first group is not surprisingly linked to Mars worship, the second group, perhaps particularly the coins, can be associated with Mercury worship, and a number of the items in the last group are often associated with a healing cult, sometimes with a particular focus on female fecundity and childbirth. This extremely general division may be very helpful when looking at the pattern of votive offerings at Marcham and what potential deities they may be linked to. If we first deal with objects of martial aspect linked to Mars, the Marcham assemblage includes very few of these. No full-sized weapons have been identified, though of course a miniature late Iron Age sword and shield were found in the Bradford and Goodchild excavations underneath the rotunda shrine inside the *temenos* (Bradford and Goodchild 1939). There are also some eight potential copper-alloy or iron votive miniature weapons from the most recent excavations on the site, including one possible miniature axe (SF 2286); a possible miniature spear (SF 3108); and a possible miniature knife/blade (SF 4449). Because they are so small and sometimes fragmentary it is often difficult to be certain about these identifications. For the five possible iron miniature weapons this identification is even more uncertain as these small pieces are often corroded. The iron group includes potential miniature spears, knives and axes, and they are mostly focused in Trenches MF2 and MF24. Finally, there are two fragments of Roman scale armour from Trench MF24 (SF 4039 and SF 4046). These two separate sections of armour are of the *'lorica squamata'* type and may well be offerings to Mars from Roman soldiers visiting the temple complex.

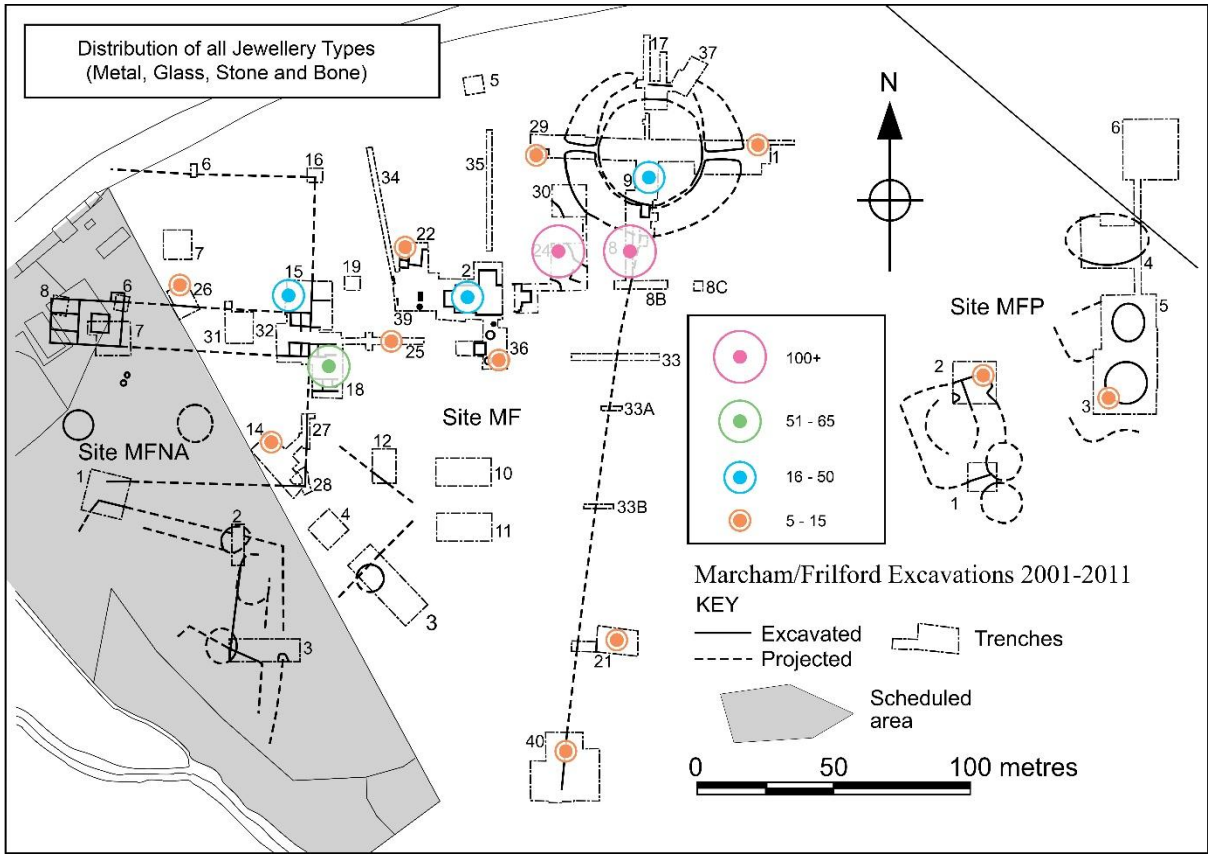
Turning to Woodward's second category of ring and disc shaped objects and coins, the Marcham assemblage does not include any of the specially made token disc or ring-shaped votive items as found at sites like Uley (Woodward and Leach 1993, 134-140), but as already discussed does include many Roman coins. Although coins were a favourite object for votive offerings in general, especially in the later Roman period, there are particularly close associations with Mercury in his role as the god of trade and commerce. As discussed in the Trench MF2 Narrative (see Sheila Raven's Trench MF2 and Trench MF36 narratives on this Website) the discovery of a massive 717 coins in the Trench 2 structure and a further 151 in the nearby square shrine in Trench 36, representing the largest group on the whole site, is strongly suggestive of Mercury worship in this area and in these structures. This premise is supported by the huge quantity of Roman hobnails in the same two trenches (3,099 in Trench 2 and 88 in Trench 36), which makes up *c.* 88% of the total hobnails across the whole site. It has been suggested at other sites like Uley where hobnails have been found in quantity and concentrated in specific places, that boots, shoes and even loose hobnails may have been given as offerings to Mercury in his guise as both messenger and the god of travel (Woodward and Leach 1993, 184). There are of course other reasonably large numbers of

Roman coins from other trenches, particularly in the two Trenches MF15 and 18 at the entrance to the *temenos* precinct, and in the arena area Trenches MF9 and 29. However, these trench assemblages have only produced coin numbers of 100 to 200 at most, so any link to a specific Mercury cult is not so secure. The popularity of the cult of Mercury increased in the later Roman period in Britain and this is supported at Marcham by the fact that the majority of the coins in the Trench 2 and Trench 36 shrines were late Roman.



Another area where there was a concentration of coins was the area inside the *temenos* enclosure surrounding the main Romano-Celtic temple and also just outside the t*emenos* entrance. Our excavations only explored small parts of the central path to the temple *cella* inside the *temenos* in Trenches MF26, 31 and 32, but they did produce together *c.* 156 mostly late Roman coins. Also, the 1939 excavations in the pathway area (Bradford and Goodchild 1939, 32), discovered 78 late Roman coins in the latest phase of this pathway. Most were 4th or early 5th century and interestingly neither of the earlier phases of this gravelled pathway contained any coins. In the discussion of the whole area inside and around the temple, Bradford and Goodchild observed that the surprising lack of many finds in the temple building itself was probably due to extensive robbing of the building and its contents. Presumably the gravelled path would not be a target for robbing, so the survival of many coins in the small area of the path excavated in 1939 may suggest this area was originally a focus for votive offerings like coins. The same lack of small finds in our trenches over the temple structure itself, Trenches MFNA 6, 7, and 8, may also be explained by extensive robbing and clearing inside the temple structure. Only one or two coins were found in MFNA 6 and MFNA 8, however the MFNA 7 trench, the only one of these three trenches to incorporate part of the temple path, did produce *c.* 26 Roman coins. Even the extension of the temple path leading from the *temenos* entrance eastwards towards the centre of the site in

Trench MF25, produced *c.* 80 Roman coins. It implies that certain votive offerings, in particular coins, were deposited by worshippers on their walk to or from the main temple. As most of these coins are from the late Roman period, it seems that this particular devotional practise only happened in the final 100 years or so of the temple's life. Whatever was also offered inside the walls of the temple itself was perhaps either cleared and stored elsewhere by the temple priests as well as being removed in later years during various structural robbing activities.



Woodward's final category of 'votive' material is that of "personal trinkets" including all types of jewellery and small personal items like grooming equipment and spoons etc. The category is well-represented at the Marcham temple complex and, aside from coins, is perhaps the most common type of votive offering found on the site. Obviously, most of the objects in this category are made of copper-alloy, but we must also include some iron objects as well as worked bone/antler objects like hairpins and probably also bone/antler needles. Statistically the very small copper-alloy assemblages from the two zones of MFNA and MFP, do not lend themselves to much comparative analysis. However, in the large MF zone assemblage with *c*. 867 copper-alloy finds well over half (at least 500 items) fall into the personal objects and trinkets category. Although not all objects in this general category are necessarily linked to healing cults, Woodward does draw attention to particular finds like hairpins, bracelets (and possibly finger rings) and feminine grooming/toilet articles being linked to healing cults (Woodward 1992, 77). Some of these items may echo the custom of women offering pins and bracelets at Greek temples for protection in childbirth. If we include the worked bone categories of hairpins from all three zones (150), point fragments either from hairpins or needles (247) and needles (36) – then the number of offerings potentially associated with a healing cult or cults is even higher. Though Trenches MF8B and 24 show a

marked concentration of copper-alloy finds in general, if we focus on specific objects like hairpins, finger rings, grooming implements, needles and fragmentary points (hairpins or needles) these categories show an even greater concentration in these two central trenches. The bone hairpins and points are likewise concentrated in these two trenches. There are also more Roman brooches in these trenches than in any other part of the site. Therefore, it seems very possible that there was a focus of activity linked to a general healing cult or a cult specifically linked to feminine healing and fecundity in this area. Though in Trench 24 a small potential shrine structure was discovered, no structure was revealed in the small area of Trench 8B. However, in both trenches several small clusters of partly upright stones were found (see Trevor Greer's Trench MF24 and Trench MF8B narratives on this Website). Some were positioned within the three-sided shrine in Trench 24, some outside this shrine and close to its west wall, others in an apparently open area in nearby Trench 8B. They were not associated with any cuts for postholes, nor did they show signs of burning, so their function is unclear but perhaps they represent small personal 'shrines' where individuals could make more modest offerings to a deity than might be made in the main temple structures on the site? Given the very large number of votive finds in these two areas, it is very possible that these upright stone clusters acted as foci for ritual offerings.

As discussed earlier, we have very scanty evidence for which specific deities were worshipped at Marcham. There are a number of Roman gods and goddesses that have some link with health, healing, and fertility that could have been the focus of offerings in this area, the goddess Bona Dea being one possibility. In Rome her worship included mysteries that men were barred from and her worshippers included plebians and slaves as well as the wealthier classes. Perhaps the modesty of these small personal 'shrines' in this area reflects the worship of such a deity open to all classes and one where women might offer dedications away from men? But there are many other gods and goddesses, major and minor, with strong links to fertility and childbirth, such as Venus and Diana, and others like Minerva who was linked to healing as well as wisdom and war. There may also have been a native local Mother Goddess, partly Romanised, that was the focus of belief and requests for help with healing, childbirth and fecundity in this area.

Under Woodwards's category of 'personal trinkets', we should include items of jewellery, made of materials other than metal, though there are far fewer examples of these than their metal equivalent. The glass assemblage does include *c.* 57 glass decorative beads. Only one of these is of Iron Age date, the remainder are Roman. Just as with the copper-alloy finds the largest concentrations of beads are in Trench MF8B (15), Trench 24 (12) and Trench 18 (8). This further reinforces the suggestion that these areas of the site were major foci for votive activities. Four rare glass finger rings were also found on the site, but these were widely distributed. A second category of non-metal jewellery are those made of shale or jet. There are only three items of jet in the whole assemblage, all of which are jet rings (SF 2866 from context 9308; SF 1661 from context 18026; and SF 2737 from context 18154). There are many more examples of shale jewellery in the assemblage, all but one being bracelet fragments. These 29 bracelet fragments have a very different distribution from the both the copper-alloy jewellery and other metal votive finds distribution. The largest groups come from Trench MF15 (10) and Trench 9 (6) , with none coming from the votive finds-rich Trench MF8b and only two and one respectively coming from the other finds-rich Trenches MF24 and 18. This may hint that these bracelets were being deposited by a different type of

worshipper or that they were being dedicated to a different deity than the deity or deities receiving the many copper-alloy or worked bone 'trinkets'.

As discussed above, the focus of brooches and other types of jewellery and 'trinkets' in Trenches MF24, and Trench 8B may well point to a specific cult here. Another smaller focus of copper-alloy items as well as coins can be seen in the joint *temenos* entrance Trenches of MF15 and 18. The lack of large numbers of small finds within the main Roman *cella* style temple itself is in great contrast to the cluster of metalwork and other finds discovered in the area just outside the *temenos* precinct in the vicinity of the *temenos* entrance in Trenches MF15 and 18. As we have discussed above in relation to the paucity of coins found actually in or very close to the temple structure itself, the temple may have been subject to more rigorous clearing of offerings contemporary to its use and possibly also more robbing when it fell into disuse. In contrast the temple path areas and the area outside the *temenos* entrance may not have been subject to either contemporary or later 'housekeeping' and robbing processes. At Roman temple complexes it is thought that booths and stalls and sometimes also shops selling trinkets and small votive objects to worshippers were erected in the zones close to *temenos* entrances. At Woodeaton for instance, finds were focused both in the zone between the temple entrance and the entrance to the *temenos* and also in the area just outside the *temenos* gateway (Woodward 1992, 73). As with other Roman temple sites, these discoveries suggest some commercial activity in these areas. So, the concentration of metalwork finds in Trenches MF15 and 18 in and around the temenos entrance may represent the existence of stalls selling votive objects and other things to visiting worshippers. The complex of buildings in this area also suggests a range of service buildings, perhaps encompassing functions such as inns for food and drink, shops, or even a hostelry. The hearths found in Trench 18 (see Patrick Daly's Trench MF18 narrative on this Website) may even be evidence of small-scale metalworking in this area at some point, perhaps making small votive objects to be sold at the nearby stalls. Simply constructed items like the rather flimsy 'trinket rings', some of the very basic grooming items like the plain tweezers and nail cleaners made simply from thin flat strips of copper-alloy, and even some of the tiny minim coins – may have been made in workshops somewhere on the complex.

As well as the variety of small finds made of metal, bone and glass, pottery vessels also clearly played a large part in both votive practices and votive deposition on Roman temple sites. It is not the job of this report to describe the range, type, and spatial distribution of the thousands of sherds of Prehistoric and Roman pottery found on the site (for this see reports on Prehistoric Pottery and Roman pottery, Lisa Brown and Jane Timby on this Website). However, mention should be made here of the few complete vessels found on the site which clearly signified ritual activity. Also significant are specific clusters of high-status Iron Age pottery in two distinctive locations. The first example of a complete pot is a large Middle Bronze Age cordoned urn buried as a potential foundation deposit in a ditch in MF Trench 3 (context 3082 in the large Bronze Age enclosure ditch 3113). Still in the prehistoric period, we have already mentioned the significance of the high-status swag-decorated Middle Iron Age bowls found in the vicinity of the Roman *cella* temple in the 1939 excavations. Equally, the rich assemblages of both animal bone and higher status Early Iron Age pottery in the pits and burials of MFP Trench 4 suggests religious rather than domestic activity. Moving to the Roman period, one of the animal burials (SF 4774 in cut [15213], Trench 15) contained a small miniature late Roman vessel, probably used for libations. Finally, the water-logged pit

[21010] in Trench MF21 included amongst its treasure of unusual votive finds, two complete late Roman greyware vessels, both carefully and deliberately pierced or 'killed' to mark them as offerings to the gods.

These examples of special pottery deposits throw a light on specific votive practises in specific locations, but of course the entire prehistoric and Roman pottery assemblage should be viewed as integral to religious practices on the temple complex. Ritual and celebratory feasting would have taken place at various locations and much of the pottery assemblage may have resulted from this. It is hard on a temple site to separate any focused ritual eating and drinking from what we might view as a more profane activity of consuming meals. Certain parts of the site, like the area explored in Trench MF40, which was both close to the river and where the long stone drain from the arena ended, did produce large numbers of broken Roman sherds including many tableware vessels from eating and drinking. However, there were no obvious buildings in this area which might signify shrines or other temple structures where 'ritual' drinking or eating might have taken place. This does not mean that such activity did not take place here, and the quantity of higher status table wares found in this area suggested it did. Another area of the site that also produced a concentration of fine Roman table wares alongside glass from fine Roman glass vessels, was the zone just outside the *temenos* precinct entrance, as explored in Trenches MF18 and 15. This area did contain a complex of Roman buildings which, as discussed above, may have had a number of functions (see Patrick Daly's Trench MF15 and Trench MF18 narratives on this Website), which may have included providing food and drink for worshippers as well as more ritualised feasting.

Also, of great significance for evidence of ritual activity is the discovery of two very unusual ceramic objects made of pottery fabric that are not pottery vessels but models of animals or animal parts. The first piece is SF 434 from layer 7022 in MFNA Trench 7, situated in the south-eatern corner of the Roman *cella* building itself, so in a key area of the main shrine structure within the *temenos* enclosure. This piece is the damaged head of a probable bull figure with the front muzzle and horns broken off, presumably deriving from a complete three-dimensional pottery model. Though the presence of horns does not necessarily denote male bulls on actual cattle, given the sacred nature of bulls as opposed to female cows in many ancient religious practises, a votive figurine of a bull is much more likely. The model is made from a red-colour-coated pottery fabric, which according to Paul Booth (*pers. comm*.) is an Oxfordshire potteries red colour-coat type which is generally of late Roman date. The surviving head length is *c.* 5.5mm, so with a restored muzzle it was probably *c.* 6mm in length and the head is *c*. 4mm across. If we calculate that the head might be *c.* 30% of a whole body, then a complete pottery bull figurine might have been as large as 18-20cm long. Which would make a sizeable figurine, though of course we will never know if this was just a 'bull's' head rather than a whole 'bull' representation. Closer examination of this fragmentary head showed that the front muzzle, ears, and horns were all cleanly broken off. It would be impossible for these sections to have been broken off 'accidentally' just from dropping the model. So, each part must have been broken off deliberately and carefully in what seems to be a ritual act. This is very reminiscent of the much-attested examples across prehistoric and Roman Britain of the 'ritual killing' of many types of votive objects. The breaking/defacing or 'killing' of such objects marks them as offerings to the gods or spirits and not fit for the world of the living. Interestingly this kind of deliberate breaking or repurposing is very similar to the condition of the cattle skull found in the water-logged pit

[21010] in Trench MF21 (see Sheila Raven's MF Trench 21 Narrative and her report on the finds within the waterlogged pit on this Website). This large cattle skull also had its front muzzle and horns broken off.

The second pottery 'model' piece found on the site is a broken pottery horn of a much larger scale than the bull model head described above. The final tip (*c.* 25%) is missing but the surviving length is. *c.* 10cm and the max. width *c.* 3.9cm. This piece (SF 69) was found in an upper fill (1089) of the outer ditch of the large Barrel-Shaped Enclosure [1014] in MFNA Trench 1. It seems to be made of a Roman reduced/grey pottery fabric. The long thin 'horn' shape presumably represents a cattle horn, again more likely to be a bull than a female cow. If this was also from either a bull's head or even a complete model, then it would have come from a very large ceramic figure. The original length of the horn may have been *c.* 15mm. A rough estimate for a complete ceramic model bull would be an enormous *c.* 0.5m or more in length. It seems unlikely it ever came from a complete cattle pottery figurine, as such a huge pottery beast would be very difficult to construct. The horn has lost its tip and is also broken at the wide end which allows you to see its hollow construction. Whether it was originally a whole bull or cattle head or just a separate horn, it is of great interest, especially as it was found close to the south edge of the temenos enclosure around the main Romano-Celtic temple. It seems likely it was a cult item of some sort for use in religious rituals.

The Roman pottery found in the upper fills of the ditch in which the pottery horn was found is mostly of 2nd century date, but the fills of this ditch also contain Iron Age pottery, some 1st century A.D. Roman pottery, and a 1st century coin, so clearly there was both Iron Age and early Roman activity in this area. These two potential bull-related objects, one found inside the Roman *cella* temple itself and the other found just outside the southern edge of the *temenos* enclosure in this ditch, are of course not enough to say this main shrine was dedicated to a deity directly linked to bulls. But a link to bulls and what they represent is a point worth considering. Bulls, just like boars, were sacred animals in many prehistoric and 'celtic' cultures, as a symbol of strength and power. Sacrifices of actual bulls or indeed of bull figurines would therefore fit in with native British religious beliefs. In the Roman world of deities, not many are strongly linked to bulls, apart from the military cult of Mithras. However, Mithraic shrines were largely confined to urban and military areas, so a rural temple site like Marcham would be an unlikely location. There are however various religious rites in the Roman world linked to the sacrifice of such bulls, as the 'taurobolium' connected to worship of the *Magna Mater*. This is more linked to important rites for the wellbeing of the people and the state and not known to be common in Roman Britain. Another Roman religious rite known as the *'suovetaurilia maiora'* involved the sacrifice of a boar, a ram, and a bull for public ceremonies, particularly at agricultural festivals, in honour of Mars requesting him to bless and purify the land. Such public sacrifices were also used to bless an army or to reconsecrate a temple. The sacrifice of lesser animals like a male pig, a lamb and a calf was also done to bless fields and encourage good crops. It may be that sacrificing a bull, displaying or burying bull's skulls, and even offering up ceramic figurines of bulls or bull horns represents the rural version of this religious rite to bless the land, albeit on a much smaller scale than the more public state occasions where this has been documented.

Aside from bull sacrifices, evidence of ritual activity in the general deposition of animal bones on temple sites is an important aspect of votive activity that needs to be considered. The consumption of animals and the disposal of the remains of domestic meals are generally

difficult to distinguish from the disposal of animal remains from special ritual activities like feasting and animal sacrifice. Indeed, for people in the past, especially on a sacred site like Marcham, the distinction between domestic and ritual behaviour may have been non-existent. However, at Marcham there are certain deposits of animal bones which clearly suggest ritual activity. The most obvious ones are the three examples of the burial of whole animals. The first is a complete cattle or cow skeleton buried in the bank area of the arena in Trench MF30 (SF 4373). The second is a complete sheep/goat burial accompanied by an Oxfordshire red colour-coat miniature pottery vessel in Trench MF15 (SF 4774 and pot SF 4841). And lastly another sheep/goat burial in Trench MF24 (context 24057). These must be votive offerings, as to discard a whole animal and its valuable meat for no reason would be extremely unlikely.

Besides this there are four areas of the site where the deposition of specific animal bones strongly suggests ritual practises. The first is in the water-logged pit [21010] in Trench MF21. The fills in this pit produced a range of gnawed animal bones including sheep, pig, cow, and calf, but also some more unusual animal remains. In the pit assemblage was a whole bull skull, a songbird skull, and a cattle hoof. The gnawed bones (some gnawed by dogs but some possibly by humans) may represent the remnant of ritual feasting. Ox skulls have been found under the floors of British temple sites like St Albans and Chanctonbury in Sussex (Woodward 1992, 79) and the heads or skulls of sacrificed beasts seem to have had particular religious significance. Two wooden stakes found in the same pit may even have been used to suspend objects like animal skulls over the pit.

A second area demonstrating the use of animals in religious rituals is found in the large Roman *favisa* pit [14295] in Trench MF14 in a corner of the *temenos* enclosure. This extremely large pit contained large amounts of metalwork, pottery, and animal bone and its position inside the *temenos* enclosure, together with the richness of the finds assemblage, points to it being a probable '*favisa'* pit. These pits were areas where sacred offerings to the gods, cleared away from shrines and altars for practical reasons, might be securely deposited in an area still sacred. This very finds-rich pit produced many cattle skull fragments, including three or four more substantial parts of whole cattle skulls, in the finds-rich fills. Whether these were male bulls or female cows is often difficult to determine. As well as the cattle skulls and many other artefacts, the assemblage included very large numbers of assorted animal bones including cattle, sheep/goat and pig assorted bones. Parts of pig skulls, sheep/goat skulls, a possible horse skull, and bird skulls were also found in this pit. These may well have derived from ritual activities including religious feasting and animal sacrifices within the temenos precinct itself.

Thirdly, the large rectangular structure in Trench MF2 includes unusually high percentages of certain types of animal bone, suggestive of specially placed deposits or offerings from specific animals. The high numbers of sheep/goat animal bones, and particularly their mandibles, is notable in the assemblage from this trench. Also unusual was the comparatively high number of bones from domestic fowl, probably chickens. The strong association of many aspects of the Trench MF2 finds assemblage with a Mercury cult has already been noted (see Sheila Raven's Trench MF2 narrative on this Website). Considering the association of Mercury with rams/sheep and cockerels, it seems very likely that this aspect of the animal bone assemblage is also significant and suggestive of ritual offerings to a Mercury cult. The fourth area of the site where specially placed deposits of animal bones is very evident is the collection of Iron Age pits and graves in MFP Trench 4. In this area which

is already very significant in containing Iron Age human burials (see Paula Levick's Trench MFP4 Narrative on this Website), a number of the pits also contained unusual assemblages of animal bone. Some contained animal bones or remains of animal carcasses more complete then would be expected from just the domestic remains of a meal. Other pits contained unusual animal species like horses, dogs, cattle skulls and wild birds, not commonly found in ordinary Iron Age domestic rubbish pits. These animal remains all seem to imply specially placed deposits. In particular, the presence of wild birds like corvids as found in some of these pits, is very rare and often significant.

Though the most recognisable type of 'ritual activity' on Roman temple sites is generally the offerings of all sorts of manufactured objects as well as the sacrificial offerings of animals and foodstuffs – there is also evidence on our site for cult activity centred around natural non-manufactured elements like trees or parts of trees. In the Iron Age where trees or groves of trees could be sacred places, the use of tree trunk 'totem poles' or even that of branches or twigs placed in pits or shafts or watery places could be a form of votive activity. The practise of depositing whole tree trunks or smaller elements as well as foodstuffs in ritual shafts and wells continued into the Roman period. At Marcham there is evidence for this in two places. The first is the 'ritual shaft' [36062/36123] in the centre of the square shrine in Trench MF36, where the evidence suggests the 'shaft' was once used to house a large post or tree trunk before that potentially rotted away and the space was re-used as a shaft for depositing coins as well as other offerings (see Sheila Raven's Trench MF36 Narrative on this Website). Whether the original post or trunk was carved like a totem pole or not we will never know, but clearly it was of sacred importance, as was the place where it was put. This Roman shaft was carefully and precisely positioned both between two large Iron Age pits and within another earlier pit positioned equidistantly between them. So, the location must have been of religious significance in both the Iron Age and Roman periods. The second example is the water-logged pit [21010] in Trench MF21, which produced a variety of offerings like whole Roman pots, and organic items like a shoe and a basket as well as various pieces of worked wood and leaves, including an anthropomorphic-looking fragment with a drilled suspension hole (see Sheila Raven's Trench MF21 Narrative on this Website). These two pits or shafts seem to span the world of ancient religious beliefs from the prehistoric to the Roman era, a phenomenon seen on other British sites. The deposition of larger and smaller parts of trees and nuts has been observed in a number of ritual shafts on British sacred sites (Woodward 1992, 78). This kind of ritual activity is very different from the offerings of small, manufactured items like coins and jewellery as seen at Roman style shrines and altars across Roman Britain, but at a site like Marcham it clearly did happen alongside the more 'Romanised' styles of honouring the gods.

Even though the rural temple site at Marcham lacks any large-scale definitive evidence for the deities worshipped here in the form of altars, inscriptions and figurines – the variety and nature of the votive finds and the votive activity does suggest that more than one God or Goddess was worshipped here. Mercury and Mars, as found on many temple sites in Roman Britain, are very likely candidates, as are the various deities representing agricultural prosperity like Ceres or Bonus Eventus. As a rural site in the middle of rich agricultural land it is to be expected that many offerings were made to request good harvests and success in all aspects of farming. With the closeness to the River Ock and presence of so many items such as rings, bracelets, trinkets, and bone hairpins and needles often linked to female health and

fertility, it also seems that parts of this site were linked to female fecundity and health and to the goddesses that protected women and their concerns.

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