Trench MF17 narrative

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Introduction

Trench 17 was located on the northern wall of the arena within the area of the embankment. An initial exploratory trench was opened in 2003 as an extension of trench 9 with a focus to investigate the area from the centre of the arena northward across the northern arena wall [9200/17003]. The trench then continued for a distance of approximately 10m and in so doing enabled the investigation of a possible second wall like structure [17005] approximately 5m north of the arena wall. This was shown on the geophysical survey which also suggested that the arena bank had a break to the north so was not continuous all around the arena. This trench 9 extension later became trench 17 in 2004/5. The objective of the 2004/5 seasons was to establish the extent and possible functionality of these structural remains.

The 2004 excavations further examined the arena wall [17003] which confirmed that this section of wall was consistent in terms of construction with the arena wall in trenches 1 and 9, consisting of regularly spaced limestone blocks arranged to form a smooth surface on the south facing side (the inner arena wall) upon which white plaster was applied and to which red painted lines simulated ashlar blocks. The northern, inner, face of the wall being less well defined.

Trench dimensions

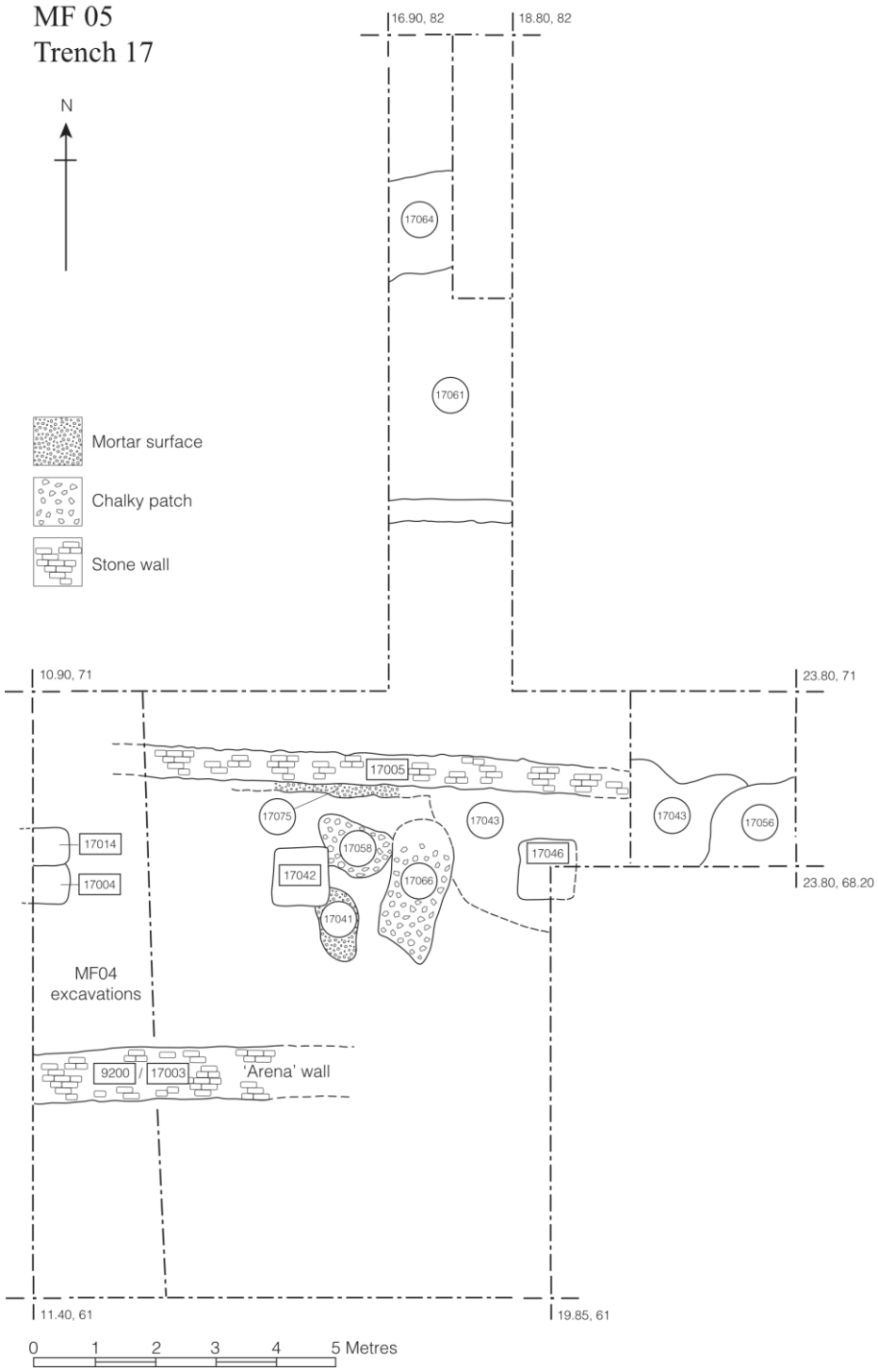
The initial 2003 northern extension of trench 9 was approximately 2.6m wide and 26m in length. This exploratory trench ran from the centre of the arena northwards across the arena wall for a further 10m.

The 2004 /5 trench was positioned 3.2m inside the arena south of the wall and spanned northward for a distance of 20.9m. The trench was 12.7m across at its widest point. The primary area of trench covering the main arena wall, the secondary wall and associated features was approximately 8.5m across and 10m deep, whilst a narrow trench 2m wide and about 11m long explored the area north of the main area of excavation (referred to as the northern extension).

The objectives of the excavation in 2004 were focused on establishing the possible function of the structural remains uncovered in 2003. These remains consisted of the northern arena wall [9200/17003], a length of wall foundation [17005] running east/west and approximately 5m north of the main arena wall together with two 60cm x 60cm square stone structures [17014] and [17004] that were thought to be possible post pads or plinths of some kind.

Excavations during the 2004 season further showed the second wall extended east to west for approximately 8m. This wall consisted of 2 courses of dry stones arranged in a distinctive herringbone pattern followed by a 10cm thick layer of mortar, which appears to consolidate an upper course of flat stones, much of which had been lost to ploughing. A large line of stone blocks together with packing stones formed the western end of the wall. Extending north of the second wall, an area of rubble/pebbles mixed mortar and clay [17006] was uncovered. This area may however represent the top of the second wall lost to ploughing. During 2004 the trench was further extended eastward in a square of approximately 6m with a two metre wide exploratory trench extending 15m northward to establish the presence of any bank material and to determine the extent of the pebble surface found in 2004. This extended northern trench confirmed the suspected break in the bank showing that no clear bank material existed unlike in trenches 1 and 9.

A further two post pad/plinth like structures were discovered [17042] and 17046] which when considered alongside features [17004] and [17014] appear to represent four evenly spaced features that were in line and parallel to wall [17005] and about 1m in front of it. Features [17042] and [17046] consisted of small angular stones placed vertically into the ground and arranged to form a 1m x 1m square. An area of patchy surface made of small pebbles and chalk [17058] and [17066] was uncovered that extended southward sloping toward the arena wall.



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Whilst no bank material was found in the northern extension trench two features of interest were uncovered. Firstly, approximately a third of the way up the trench a line of cobbles [17059] and [17060] was uncovered running east/west. Secondly, just beyond the centre of the trench the remains of a pebble surface was uncovered [17064] similar to that uncovered in 2004 that contained a mix of pebbles, occasional pottery and red mortar.

The excavations of 2004/5 provided considerable insight into the activity on the northern side of the arena. The wall and post pads would appear to represent either the foundations of a wooden platform or colonnade, or a formalized area for the display of statuary, pillars or other objects. Given the presence of the prepared pebble and chalk surface, and the post pads/plinths representing flat surfaces from which larger objects could be placed. There are almost no finds associated with these features, which does suggest that this area may have been intended just for viewing from both the interior of the arena and the surrounding bank.

Small finds
The small finds consisted of seven copper alloy coins dating to the 3rd and 4th centuries, five of which were from topsoil contexts [17000] and [17001], whilst two coins were from mid-layers (17031) and (17041) confirmed a late Roman date for this area.

Pottery
In total 144 pieces of pottery were found (this includes pottery found in the early trench 9 excavation), of which 23 pieces were Iron Age in date with 19 of these 23 pieces from topsoil contexts and the remaining scattered randomly across trench 17. No positive Iron Age presence could be found in trench 17 therefore. The remaining 121 pieces of pottery were of Roman date with a predominance of pottery types RCWO (39 sherds), RCWR (31 sherds), RWW (10 sherds), RFWR (21 sherds) and RFWR (10 sherds). However, 40 sherds of these types were from topsoil contexts.

Bone
A very small quantity of animal bone was recovered during the initial 2003 trench 9 investigation primarily from contexts within the Roman occupation levels within the arena section of the trench and consisted of cattle and sheep bones.

Structures
Structure [9200/17088]. Northern arena wall. Cut into bedrock but no foundation cut recorded.

Structure [17003]. A 30cm wide band of rubble with mortar running directly behind the arena wall (north side). Thought to be packing material between the wall and bedrock.

Structure [17004]. Possible post pad/plinth. A rubble course set in mortar and forming a square 65cm x 65cm.

Structure [17005]. A limestone wall consisting of a foundation double course of stones forming a herring-bone pattern. The wall was topped with a course of mortar and stone approximately 10cm thick. This wall, running east/west measured approximately 8m in length and was situated 5m north of the arena wall and running parallel to it.

Structure [176018]. Small spill of rubble 30cm x 50 cm. Not thought to be significant.

Structure [17020]. Small patch of stones 50cm x 75cm. Not thought to be significant.

Structure [17042]. Similar to [17004]. Carefully placed arrangement of stones set in mortar and forming a square 65cm x 65cm. Thought to be a post pad/plinth.

Structure [17046]. Similar to [17004], [17042] and [17014]. An arrangement of stones without mortar and forming a square approximately 30cm x 40 cm. Post pad/plinth.

Structure [17047]. Similar to [17042]. An arrangement of stones with evidence of mortar, forming a square approximately 1.25m x1.25m and in line with and equidistant between [17042] and [17046]. Thought to be a possible post pad/plinth.

Structure [9211]. An area of rubble, possibly part of the central drain close to the centre of the arena.

Structures [17059] and [17060]. A narrow band of cobbles spanning the northern extension trench approximately 4m north of the small wall [17005]. This was not excavated beyond the confines of the trench.

NB. Structures [17004], [17014], [17042] and [17046] are equally spaced with 3.3m between each structure, each in line and spaced 1m south of the second wall [17005].