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Excavations at King's Meadow near Cirencester

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Excavations at King's Meadow near Cirencester

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With contributions by Paul Booth and Angela Boyle

Abstract

In November 1991, following an evaluation, the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) excavated three small trenches at King's Meadow, just outside Cirencester, on behalf of Tesco Stores Ltd. In the western part of the site there was a cobbled surface sealed within Roman alluvial layers and a partially robbed wall footing aligned at right-angles to Ermin Street, the Roman road which joined Cirencester (*Corinium*) to Silchester. In the eastern part of the site an area of burnt material was sealed within the alluvium and overlay a palaeochannel. In the north, in Trench 17, there was a layer of silt with a few stones on a gravel ridge forming a ford aligned at right-angles to the line of Ermin Street. The evaluation located one, possibly two, cremations on the west bank of the palaeochannel indicating an area of early Roman burial. The evaluation also detected a gravel island, slightly higher than the rest of the site, with Roman ditches and charcoal-filled pits on it.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Following an evaluation in October 1991, the Oxford Archaeological Unit excavated three small trenches (Fig. 2, nos. 15, 16, and 17) at King's Meadow in Preston parish, close to Cirencester (O.S. Nat. Grid SP 034008), in advance of the construction of a Tesco superstore. The site, on the floodplain of the river Churn, lies on the Forest Marble beds of oolitic limestone, which are overlain by shallow deposits of river gravel and clay alluviation at a height of around 102 m above O.D. The site is bounded to the north-east by Ermin Street (Fig. 1) which crosses the floodplain of the river Churn at an angle of *c.* 30° to the line of the river. Preston Bridge, to the south-east of the site, may be the site of a Roman bridge which carried Ermin Street across the present course of the Churn.

Before the evaluation the presence of archaeological deposits on the site was not certainly established, but the position of the site, next to a Roman road, close to the gates of the Roman town of *Corinium* (500 m south-east of the walls) and south of cropmarks, made it seem likely that archaeological deposits would be found. There is Iron Age and early Roman activity nearby on the south flank of King's Hill and an Iron Age enclosure on top of the hill at the Nursery

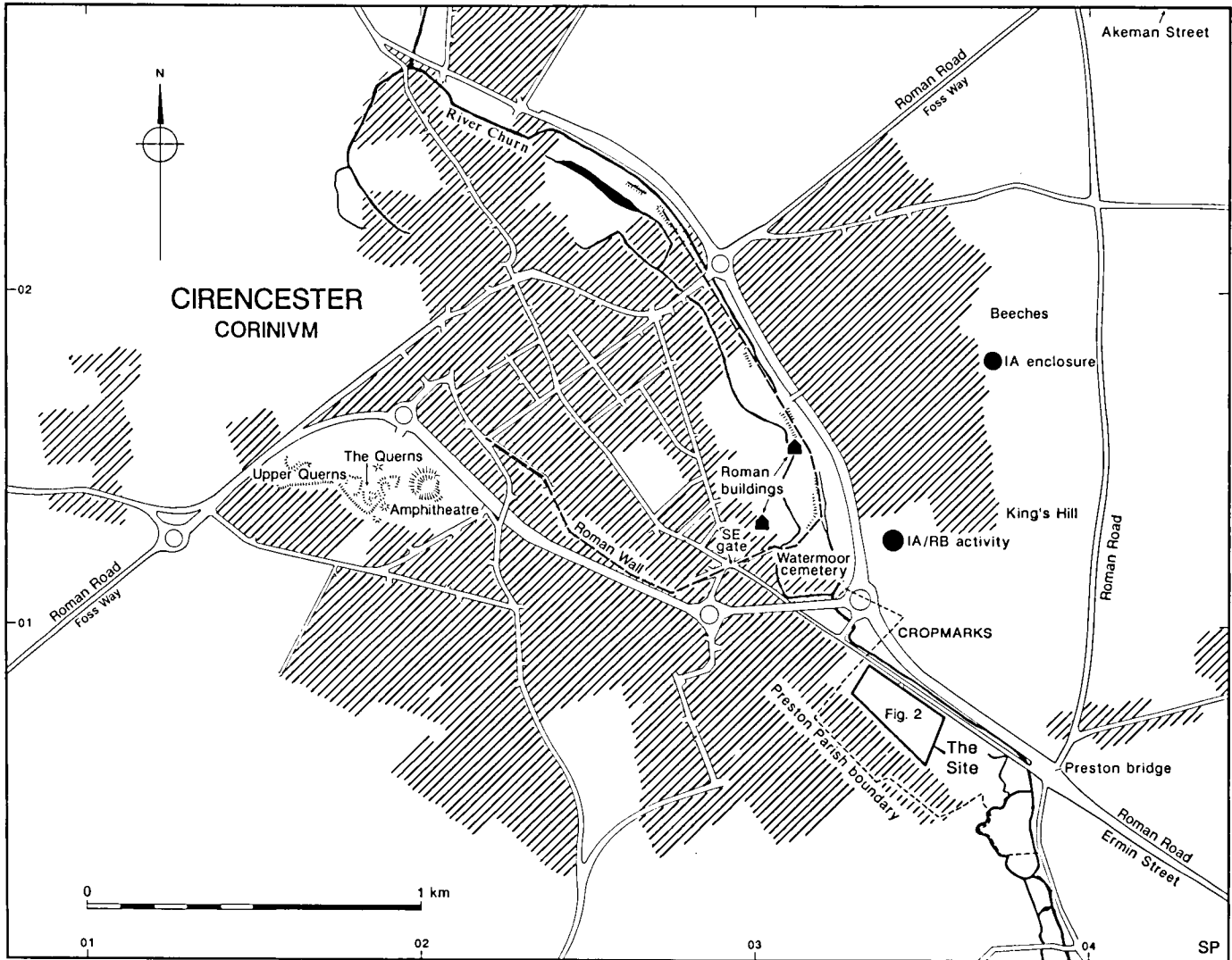


Fig. 1 Location of site outside Cirencester with historical background

Field, Beeches, further to the north (Reece 1990, 39–45 and 9–26). The site is on ground similar to, but slightly lower-lying than, parts of the floodplain of the river Churn enclosed within the town walls, where Roman buildings have been found (Glos. SMR nos. 669–70; McWhirr 1973, 203). In particular, the extramural location of the site suggests that evidence of Roman burials might be anticipated on the site. To the north-west, towards the walls of the Roman town, three Roman tombstones were found in 1835–6 (RIB nos. 108–10, Collingwood and Wright 1965, 32–3; Glos. SMR nos. 8979–81) and other funerary deposits have been found as Cirencester has expanded (Glos. SMR nos. 4950–3, 8899, 8975 and 9142–8). In 1950, for example, skeletons, pottery, iron fragments and a carved stone hand were found during construction of a water main outside the south-east gate (Glos. SMR no. 8909). In 1765 a cremation in a fine glass vessel was found at King's Mead 'about half-a-mile from the Town Wall' in the centre of a paved and walled enclosure, and in 1764 an inscribed tombstone was found at Watermoor Common (RIB no. 111, Collingwood and Wright 1965, 33). The presence of these Roman funerary deposits outside the south-east gate is thought to be indicative of a Roman cemetery at Watermoor (McWhirr and others 1982, 205–7).

The Evaluation

The week-long evaluation excavation in 1991 located several points of archaeological interest (Fig. 2). Generally the gravel was overlain by alluvium. Features had been cut into the alluvium and were overlain by more alluvium which did not appear to have been ploughed. In the south-east of the site, in Trench 6, a ditch aligned at right-angles to the line of Ermin Street may have been a Roman field boundary. Other ditches and pits, including a pit with a charcoal-rich fill in Trench 4 which cut into the gravel, were observed under the uppermost layer of alluvium in an area of high ground, which was not fully defined in the evaluation but corresponded to the area of Trenches 4, 6, 7, 8 and 14. An area of burnt stones and charcoal overlain by the upper alluvium was found in the east (Trenches 3 and 16) next to the line of a large palaeochannel. The palaeochannel was roughly parallel to Ermin Street and extended over the areas of Trenches 1, 2, 9, 12, 13, 16 and 17. It was thought that the area of burnt material might be a Roman cremation area (*ustrinum*) or pyre debris. A cremation was located in Trench 1, feature 105, and perhaps another in Trench 11, feature 1105, which was not recognised until after the evaluation trench had been machine excavated and it was not thought that sufficient remained to form an adequate sample (see below for comments on the size of cremation 105). In the west, in Trench 10, there was a wall at right-angles to the line of Ermin Street. In Trench 13, parallel to the road, there was an area of stones laid across the palaeochannel (Durham 1991), representing a possible ford.

Environmental analysis carried out by Dr. Mark Robinson during the evaluation and excavation indicates that the alluvial sequence of King's Meadow is very similar to that which has been established for areas further downstream in the Upper Thames Valley, with clay alluviation during the Roman period slowing or ceasing in the early Saxon period, and being followed by renewed sedimentation with silty clay from the late Saxon to the early medieval period (Robinson and Lambrick 1984). However, the somewhat coarser post-Roman alluvium at King's Meadow was confined to the area alongside Ermin Street and its deposition could have been a local event related to the presence of the river channels and in particular the palaeochannel located in the evaluation. Thus virtually all the alluvial clay on the site had been deposited throughout the Roman period and the archaeological features discovered were sealed within the Roman clay.

The Excavation

Trench 15 (Fig. 3) was located with the aims of uncovering 20 m of the wall found in the evaluation and determining whether there were any returns, or if and where the wall ended. The topsoil and topmost layer of alluvium were removed to a depth of *c.* 0.2 m. The wall and the cobbled surface adjacent to it

were hand cleaned. Sections were dug through the wall by hand and extended to encompass the cobbled surface, and areas of the cobbling were removed by machine to reveal the underlying deposits. The natural gravel was overlain by clay alluvium (1511), and the cobbled surface (1504) on top consisted of a layer of crushed limestone and small limestone blocks. A roughly vertical-sided, flat-bottomed wall foundation trench (1512, not shown on Fig. 3) cut the cobbled surface and underlying alluvium but did not penetrate to the gravel. The foundation trench was filled with a matrix of orange gravel (1506) and irregular small and medium blocks of limestone (1505), which appeared to have been tipped in.

The topsoil (1500) overlay a dark-grey silty clay with occasional sand (1501). Remnants of that layer left by the mechanical excavator were cleaned from the cobbled surface and yielded three Roman and two post-medieval sherds. The topsoil also tipped into the foundation trench.

Trench 16 (Fig. 4) was machined very carefully to either just above the burnt layer seen in the evaluation or the upper fill of the palaeochannel. An area measuring $c. 10 \times 20$ m was opened. The surface was hand cleaned and the burnt layers were removed by trowel. The evaluation trenches were emptied and the palaeochannel examined in section and in plan. Multiple soil samples were taken for analysis, particularly from the layers with burnt material.

The natural gravel was overlain by a layer of buff alluvium (2009/2006), which was cut into by a palaeochannel. This alluvium was overlain by a layer of mixed buff and dark grey clay (2010, not shown on Fig. 4) which underlay the burnt layers 2003 and 2004. The clay layer (2010) had long thin marks cut into its surface, interpreted as ploughmarks, which were filled with burnt material from layers 2003 and 2004. However, its surface showed no signs of scorching and this might indicate that the overlying burnt material had been dumped on the site and was not representative of *in situ* burning. The burnt layers, which extended for at least 4.5×8.1 m, were made up of small, grey, crumbly, slightly rounded pieces of limestone (2003) and a dark-grey/black clay with occasional charcoal and burnt clay flecks and frequent mollusc shells (2004).

A sample of 10 litres of burnt material (2004) was processed. Dr. Robinson identified numerous small charcoal fragments of sloe, hawthorn and hazel or alder. The remaining fragments were scanned for oak, which had produced the type of wood charcoal associated with the cremation (105 in Trench 1) found in the evaluation, but none was observed. Layer 2004 contained an iron object which may be a nail. A layer of ash-discoloured alluvium (2002) extended over the burnt layers, the alluvium (2009/2006) and the palaeochannel in the north. It contained two fragments of Roman pottery, two fragments of Roman tile and a piece of lead. A thin layer of buff alluvium (2001) with few mollusc shells was under the topsoil and over layer 2002. The topsoil was dark grey-brown silty clay with occasional mollusc shells.

The dating evidence is sparse. A sherd of 3rd-century pottery recovered from the burnt layer 2003 during the evaluation suggests that the samian sherd recovered from the overlying alluvium (2002) was redeposited.

Trench 17 (Fig. 5). After the evaluation trench had been emptied to locate the stones pitched on edge in the palaeochannel, Trench 17 was stripped to a depth of 1 m over an area measuring 10×10 m. The trench continually flooded during the excavation and, after the water was pumped out, the layer over the stones was removed by spade over an area of 4.8×2.5 m. Hand cleaning was impossible and work was abandoned on two days when the pumps could not siphon off all the water in the trench.

A natural gravel ridge (2512) was aligned roughly at right-angles to the Roman road and across the palaeochannel. A layer of 22 stones (2511, not visible on the composite section in Fig. 5) was under a layer of sandy alluvium (2506) and on top of the ridge. The alluviation to the north-west and south-east of the ridge suggests a differential water flow; to the north-west was peaty alluvium (2507) and to the south-east the alluviation was not peaty (2505, not visible on the section). Layers 2507 and 2505 were under 2504. The mollusc species also suggest a mixture of running and still water. Layer 2506 contained mollusc shells (*Bithynia tentaculata*) which indicated that running water was present. Other mollusc shells present were of species which can also tolerate stagnant water. The ridge caused a corresponding variation in the thickness of

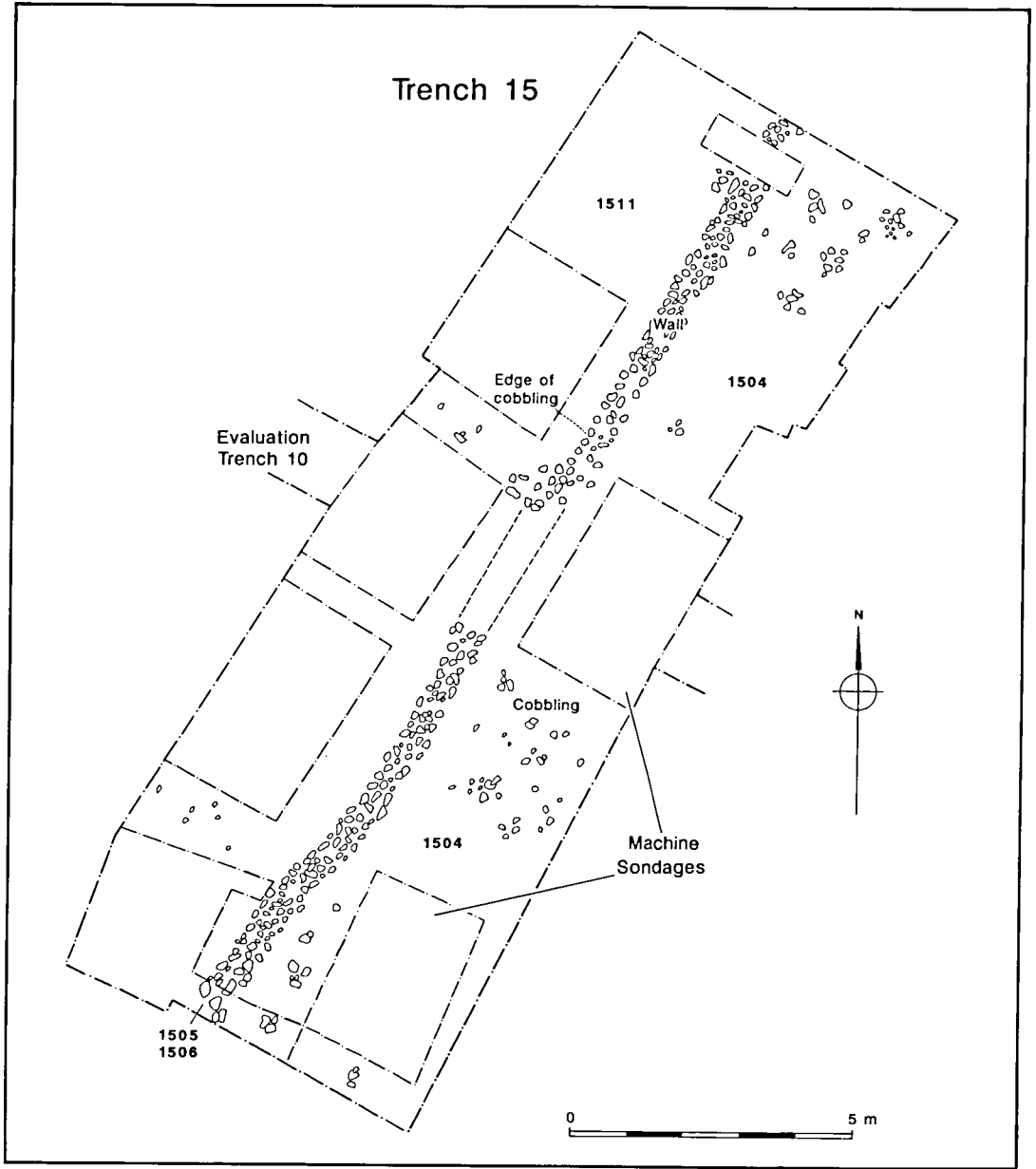


Fig. 3 Plan of Trench 15

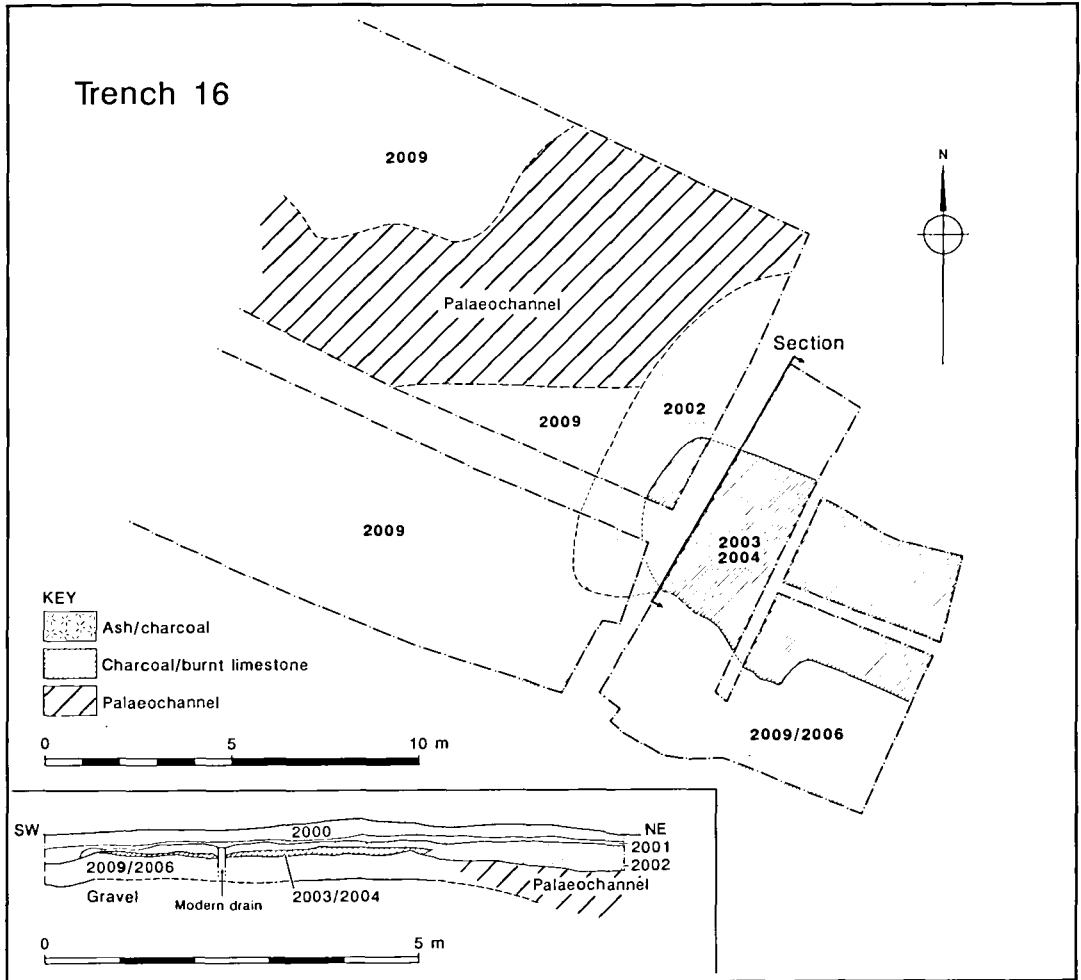


Fig. 4 Plan of Trench 16 and section from north-east to south-west, through the ashy layers and alluvium

the layers of alluvium 2504 and 2503 extending almost to the topsoil. The evaluation trench yielded a 2nd-century sherd from the turf layer (2501) and an amphora sherd of 1st- to 3rd-century date from the alluvial sequence. The evidence suggests that the gravel ridge and the bank formed by 2506 provided access to Ermin Street in the form of a ford, which was gradually buried in waterlaid clay during the Roman period.

Pottery by Paul Booth

Only six Roman sherds (weighing 37 g) were found in the excavation: three were South Gaulish samian, including a battered rim perhaps of form 27. Two of the samian sherds were in stratified contexts 2009 and 2002, the latter associated with a battered sherd of grog- and organic-tempered Severn Valley ware-like fabric for which a 1st- to 2nd-century date is likely. In addition to a samian sherd, layer 1501 contained sherds of black

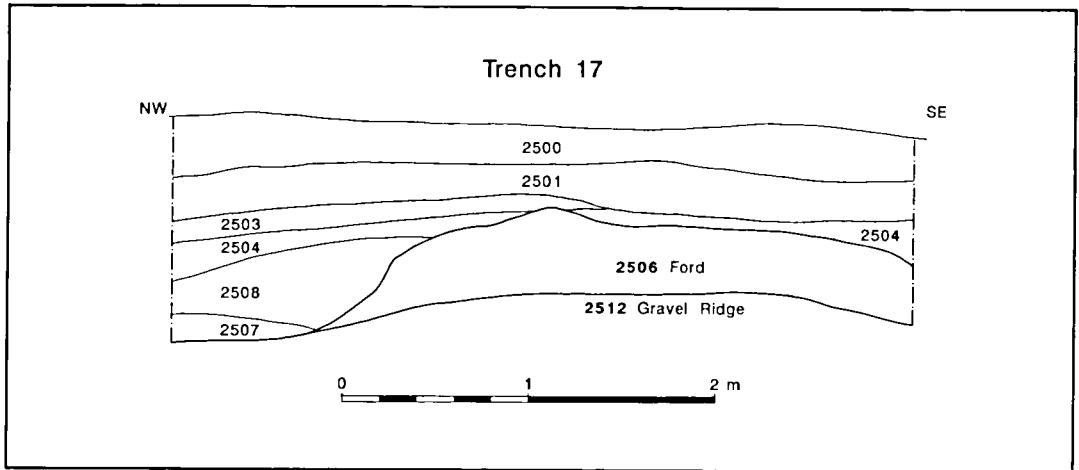


Fig. 5 Composite section of Trench 17

burnished ware (BB1) and pink grogged ware (Booth and Green 1989). The latter is more likely to be of 3rd- to 4th-century date in this context. The layer also contained two post-medieval sherds which may be intrusive.

Nine sherds, plus three tile fragments probably of Roman date, were recovered from the evaluation trenches. All were abraded body sherds and none was closely datable. Their distribution was as follows: Trench 1, layer 103 (alluvium), tile fragment; Trench 2, layer 203 (alluvium), samian (?Central Gaulish), oxidised coarse ware and tile; Trench 3, layer 304 (ash layer), Oxfordshire white ware mortarium; Trench 4, layer 401 (topsoil), samian (Central Gaulish); Trench 5, layer 502 (alluvium), fine oxidised white-slipped ware and fine oxidised ware; Trench 13, layer 1302 (turf), oxidised sherd, possibly Oxfordshire colour-coated ware; layer 1303 (alluvium), amphora (South Spanish Dressel 20) and oxidised coarse ware, probably from the North Wiltshire industry; Trench 14, layer 1401, tile and a sherd of 17th- to 18th-century date.

The finds indicate Roman activity on the site in the area of the channel (Trenches 1, 2, 5 and 13) and on the gravel island (Trenches 4 and 14). The only stratified sherd was from the burnt deposit in Trench 3. The dates provided by the pottery concur with the environmental evidence to indicate that the alluvium accumulated during the Roman period.

The Cremation by Angela Boyle

One cremation deposit was recovered from pit 105 in Trench 1. There was no associated pottery vessel. The weight of the deposit (approximately 250 g after sorting and removal of stones and charcoal) indicates that the sample was not the complete remains of one individual. The identifiable bones suggest an adolescent or young adult. This estimate is based on thickness of skull vault, suture closure and dental development, specifically root closure (Van Beek 1983).

Considerable variation in the colour of the bones was recorded. Observations at modern crematoria indicate that this is quite normal within the cremated remains of one individual (McKinley 1989). The wood charcoal from the cremation was exclusively oak.

Discussion

The landscape of King's Meadow in the Roman period was either wet meadow or wet marshland cut by river channels which were open until at least the 3rd century. Ermin Street,

the Roman road which linked *Corinium* to Silchester, ran across the meadows and was linked to higher gravel on its south-western side by a ford. Ditches, at roughly 45° to the road, suggest Roman activity on this slightly higher gravel part of the floodplain. One cremation and possibly another were found on the south-west bank of the channel next to the road. Alluviation deposited clay on the site throughout the Roman period, finally filling the channel which flowed to the south-west of, and roughly parallel to, Ermin Street. A cobbled surface and a large deposit of burnt material and ditches at right-angles to the road (Fig. 2) suggest later activity on the accumulating alluvium, which was linked to the road by the ford as long as the channel remained open.

As the site is adjacent to Ermin Street and c. 500 m from the south-east gate of *Corinium*, it might be anticipated that the area would have been a preferred location for extramural burial. The Querns cemetery extends for a distance of approximately 800 m from the town's western gate (McWhirr and others 1982, 107), and Roman burials are known to the north and east of Cirencester, along Ermin Street and on the link road to Akeman Street (Fig. 1). Certainly the tombstones of Dannicus, Sextus Genialis and Philus which were found to the north of the King's Meadow site suggest that the area nearby was used for early Roman burials, and the one (or two) cremations found during the evaluation indicate that at least limited burial took place on the site. The use of the cremation rite would indicate that these burials are likely to be of early Roman date given the well-attested transition from cremation to inhumation within the Roman period. No further burials were located during the excavation, although the widely dispersed trenches could have missed many small discrete features. As the ditches observed on the gravel islands are sealed within the Roman alluvium they are almost certainly Roman and may be early Roman in date. Unfortunately, they did not contain any dating evidence to provide grounds for any precise phasing although they hint at possible early Roman agriculture on the gravel islands in otherwise marginal land. There was no evidence found during the evaluation to indicate ploughing taking place as the alluvial layers were laid down. However, ploughmarks in Trench 16 which cut through the burnt deposits into the lower alluvium suggest that ploughing took place while the overall ground level was rising due to alluviation, and imply that agriculture may have spread from the gravel island across all the site. Roman ploughing may have truncated cremation 105 and this may account for the small size of the deposit and the very small size of the other possible cremation from the evaluation (1105).

The ford or trackway in Trench 17 probably linked the activity at King's Meadow to the road. The channel crossed by the ford could have been a quarry ditch for the embankment and may have served as a flood relief channel. However, a quarry ditch might be expected to be next to the road on the line of the present drain (Fig. 2) and to have a more regular shape. It is more probable that the channel was a braided course of the Churn, which flowed through the walls of *Corinium*. The ford itself was apparently in use throughout the period of Roman activity on the site. It is visible as a layer up to the top of the alluviation, which is dated to later than the 3rd century. The construction of the large bank of Ermin Street across the floodplain and braided stream courses of the Churn would have caused changes in the behaviour of the river, and perhaps even an alteration in its course, resulting in alluviation and the silting up of the river channel detected in Trench 17. If this was the case the construction of the ford on the unalluviated gravel bottom of the channel may have been more or less contemporary with that of Ermin Street.

The supposed cremation area of pyre debris found during the evaluation did not contain any burnt bone and the burnt layers were not *in situ*, but had been redeposited. The nail suggests that some of the wood was not freshly cut timber, although the types of charcoal, sloe, hawthorn and hazel or alder, suggest clearance of scrub or hedge. The layers are not definitively dated by

pottery as only one sherd was recovered. However, the palaeochannel in Trench 13 contained pottery of the 3rd century which suggests that the burnt layers may be later. No oak charcoal was located to link the burning with that of the charcoal of the cremation found in the evaluation, which was exclusively oak.

The area of cobbling in the west was irregular in plan, as far as could be determined within the confines of the trench. As it was covered by alluvium containing late Roman pottery it was probably Roman, but was itself undated. The cobbles showed no postholes or post pads and so were probably not associated with the interior of a structure and there was no wall around the edge of the cobbled area. The slippage of the cobble spread or surface into the wall foundation trench may show nothing more than the disturbance caused by the construction and subsequent robbing of the wall.

The wall is represented by a partially robbed footing. The date of the wall is unclear, although 19th-century pottery was found in the robber fill. It appears to have been robbed recently, as the modern topsoil tips into the robbed wall trench; in addition, the wall trench did not quite reach the gravel, suggesting a later rather than an earlier date. A wall built while the alluvium was forming could reasonably be expected to be seated on the gravel rather than to have had its foundations perched in shallow wet clay. It is unlikely that, together, the cobbling and the wall represent a mausoleum with a paved surface and an enclosing wall, although tombs with these features have been found in the immediate vicinity to the north.

No boundary corresponding to the wall was visible on the maps consulted, of which the earliest was a sketch of Cirencester, made in 1721 (P. Markham, personal communication).

Conclusion

The most widespread change in the nature of King's Meadow was during the Roman period. The low-lying wet area with braided stream courses slowly silted up and became covered with alluvium. While the alluvium accumulated, the driest area, the gravel island to the south, may have been divided by ditches into agricultural plots, perhaps with access to the road across the ford. Cremations, probably of early Roman date, were deposited in the area. A cobbled area was constructed and a large amount of burnt material was deposited next to, and partly into, an almost silted up water course.

A watching brief was carried out subsequently by Paul Booth (of the OAU) on pipe-laying along the centre of Ermin Street. Unfortunately this shed no light on the relationship of the road to the surrounding area nor on the nature of the road itself.

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