



## Book Reviews

### RECTORY FARM, GODMANCHESTER, CAMBRIDGESHIRE: EXCAVATIONS 1988–1995 NEOLITHIC MONUMENT TO ROMAN VILLA FARM BY ALICE LYONS

*Cambridge, Oxford Archaeology East. East Anglian Archaeology Report 170, 2019. 478pp, 228 B&W and col figs, 29 pls, 136 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-907588-12-9, £45.00*

This report is very welcome. Since press coverage in 1991 and McAvoy's interim (2000) the site has generated a great deal of often wild discussion. In particular inflated claims of have been made regarding the apparent astronomical alignments marked by the posts of the great trapezoidal enclosure. Debate has also swirled around its dating and exceptional nature – 'There is nothing like the trapezoid enclosure at Godmanchester anywhere else in southern Britain (or indeed beyond)' (Bayliss *et al* 2011, 726–7).

Alice Lyons and co-authors are to be congratulated on synthesising work carried out by Frend in the 1960s and the Central Excavation Unit from 1998–1995 on the Roman as well as prehistoric sites. The opening narrative demonstrates the challenging conditions for excavation, some critical investigation taking the form of watching briefs as the quarry face advanced. As a result of occasional salvage conditions some features remained unplanned. Unlike the large area opened over the Roman villa/farmstead complex, investigation of the prehistoric features we learn was almost exclusively by narrow linear trenching. The impression of open area stripping given by the plan in the interim, and to some extent perpetuated in this report by the overly faint marking of trenches on phase plans, is illusory. The work, due to no fault on the part of the excavators, was akin to a modern evaluation programme informed, in this instance, by exceptional aerial photographs. The limitations of this approach are well known and exemplified here by what, seemingly, was the longest trench opened along the trapezoidal enclosure ditch. Designated ditch 2 (area 25), it produced 70% of the site's Earlier Neolithic pottery but in silts that *also* contained Iron Age and Roman pottery from a presumed recut (Fig. 2.4, section 18; Fig. 3.2 & p.142–3, 102: contexts unclear as absent from illustrated section).

Detailed specialist reports are valuable additions to the concise interim statement. Ruggles' painstaking reanalysis of the survey data upon which astronomical claims for the post array were based is exemplary. He concludes that the site was not an astronomical 'observatory' but that the two diagonal alignments of posts on the solstices, and probably also that on the equinox, were so strikingly precise as to have been almost certainly intentional. The main axis he suggests was

directed not to half-quarter days but to broader seasonal ceremonies. A fundamental problem with even this reduced ascription of significance, however, is that the three most impressive post pipes (P6,7 & 10: 0.4-0.6m dia; 0.75–1.0 m deep) are completely excluded; other pits/post pipes were considerably less impressive. Oddly those marking out the critical axial alignment appear insignificant. P13 (the backsight at the closed end) at first thought to be a large pit, was shown to be a modest hole (no dimensions or details given) at the base of a later pit, while the foresight (P1) was only 0.6 m deep. Both lacked post pipes. This raises the question of the significant visibility of posts (seemingly rarely higher than 2.75 m and with pipe diameters in the region of c. 0.5 m) across 300+m; 500+m from ring ditch 1 that is deemed an important sighting point. They are unlikely to have looked like the telegraph poles depicted in the reconstruction drawings (Fig. 6.1). Rather, pit size range suggests variable posts – conceivably untrimmed old oaks resembling, as suggested in the final discussion, an ancient grove.

The methodology employed to locate possible new post holes (extrapolating from the separation revealed in area 25 and cleaning up until an appropriate feature was found or selecting marks from aerial photographs), whilst understandable in very challenging quarrying conditions, also raises doubts about the totality of the data and conclusions that can validly be drawn from them (p.23).

Alex Bayliss' discussion of the limitations of radiocarbon dating at the site (eg, the unidentified nature of the samples and conflicting dates from placed deposits in opposing ditch terminals), needed regular repeating in the main text, where instead they are often treated as the foundations of secure periodisation. Thus, despite her conclusion that a mid-3rd millennium cal BC construction date is likely – broadly at the opening of the Middle Neolithic – relevant phase plans, the most frequently referenced elements of excavation reports, carry emphatic Early Neolithic titles. These are likely to determine casual perception. Use of the *terminus ante quem* of 1890–1500 cal BC from unidentified charcoal associated with a cremation cut into the filled transverse ditch to back project ditch digging to the Late Neolithic, and the underlying square enclosure to the Early Neolithic is also questionable. Since prolonged silting of the two shallow ditches (0.5 m and 0.9 m respectively: Fig. 2.5) is improbable and the inclusion of old heartwood in the pyre, probable, a Mid–Late Bronze Age date might equally be postulated and deserved discussion.

The important question of residuality recorded in the Sarah Percival's pottery report ('All of the (Early Neolithic) sherds appear to be residual' while 'most of the Later Bronze Age assemblage was redeposited') also merited greater discussion, as emphasised by the case of ditch 2 mentioned above.

Waterlogging at the base of pits cut into the fill of the trapeziform and cursus ditches at their intersection furnished valuable opportunities for a range of environmental sampling backed up by radiocarbon dates from three of the pits. From these a picture emerges of succession from Early Neolithic open, damp, weedy grassland maintained by grazing with adjacent woodland, through regenerated woodland browsed by cattle in the Late Neolithic to open, well grazed grassland in the Early Bronze Age–Middle Bronze Age.

Murphy's conclusion from plant remains that the cursus ditch was at least damp and probably seasonally held standing water, coupled with Wiltshire's suggestion that dampness ensured pollen preservation at lower levels, has been used in the final discussion to support a suggestion that both the cursus and trapezoidal enclosure may have been constructed to resemble islands, their ditches permanently full of stagnant water. Attractive as this image is, it should be noted that neither report suggests standing water was a permanent feature – lack of aquatic taxa amongst the pollen indicating rather that waterlogging was too short-lived to allow the usual succession. Water soon disappeared under accumulating sandy gravel (p.130). Nor was evidence of standing water recovered from the trapezoidal ditch.

There are a number of small frustrations with the report: wrong scales attached to Figures 1.6 and 1.7; an important figure (1.3) wrongly labelled and too small in scale to be of much value for site assessment; mistaken inclusion of dates from Anglo-Saxon pits in Figure 2.52; and recurrent difficulties locating individual features (most importantly ditch 2). There are also unexplained differences from the interim statement. These include removal, in plan, of a large gap along the north cursus ditch, despite this being referenced in a section of text (p.30) that appears to have been lifted from the interim; removal of a line of ditch running irregularly along the north side of the trapezoidal enclosure seeming to link enclosure 2 with transverse ditch 1; and minimal reference to the earlier record of the side ditches of the trapezoidal enclosure having been recut – in this report it is largely treated as a single Early Neolithic entity (eg, Fig. 2.3).

Use of cumulative period plans has the advantage of clarity but exclusion from them, in outline, of features judged to be later in date sadly removes opportunities to consider the site's 'horizontal stratigraphy'. Even the rather sketchy, small-scale plot of the aerial photographic evidence (Fig. 1.8) demonstrates the value of total presentation: ostensibly Iron Age/Roman field system and settlement cropmarks encompass the trapezoidal enclosure (particularly closely to the north) but *none* encroach upon it. This must imply respect/incorporation, not just at the outset of the Roman period but throughout – particularly strange behaviour in an area prone to flooding at that time, since the slightly higher land occupied by the enclosure (see Fig. 7.1 in the interim) would surely have been at a premium. This potential enclosure 'life span' of over 3–4000 years is only cursorily commented upon in the text where we read, conflictingly, that 'the monument does not appear to

have survived for many generations' (p.408) but that 'the monument bank remained (largely) upstanding, as is suggested by the respect given to its alignments by Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman features' (p.403).

Specific limitations created by the cumulative period plans approach are exemplified by that for period 1.1 (Fig. 2.7). This shows the claimed extension ditch of the cursus running alongside the trapezoidal enclosure ditch before ending enigmatically after about 40 m. It is only on the period 2.2 (Middle Bronze Age) plan (Fig. 2.16) that this termination can be seen to coincide with a corner of overlying enclosure 2. Viewed alongside the cropmark ditch shown in the interim (but missing in this report) extending from the opposite corner of enclosure 2 to a point close to the termination of transverse ditch 1, this strongly suggests irregular redefinition of the northern limits of the trapezoidal enclosure. In the only multiperiod plan of prehistoric features (Fig. 2.1) it can be seen that this alignment (on to which enclosure 2 was imposed) appears to extend north-eastward the line of the southern ditch of a trackway that ran from a T junction within Iron Age field system 1. The plan also reveals that the trackway running south-eastward from that junction, is broadly parallel to the south-west end of the trapezoidal enclosure, to the sides of enclosure 2 and to transverse ditch 1. All are set at approximate right angles to the suggested NE trackway. This points to incorporation of the northern and western ditches of the trapezoidal enclosure in a planned enclosure-field system of probable Mid-/Late Bronze Age – Iron Age date. Examples of cursus ditch utilisation in Iron Age – Roman period field systems have been noted elsewhere (Loveday 2006, 40–4) but seem to have been expedient responses to either surviving earthworks on chalkland or, conceivably, relict lengths of colonised hedgeline on far more mobile gravel soils. Here avoidance of the trapeziform enclosure's interior in the crowded landscape of Roman times argues for a more compelling explanation, as does the apparent 3000+ year survival of the shallowest section of the trapezoidal ditch (0.5 m: section 18, Fig. 2.4) until being incorporated and recut (ditch 2) as part of the hypothesised Roman field system 3.

McAvoy's interim (2000) ended with the statement that both Neolithic and Roman 'periods provide a major site...each approached from the south-west by a formal access; a cursus and a metalled road. Neither major site impinges upon the other although the access routes are superimposed. One aspect of (future) analysis, therefore, will be to seek to determine whether the spatial distribution is simply the result of land suitability and availability or, more significantly, continued historical association'. It is a great pity that the final report fails to attempt this task since it is surely key to the site. Beyond brief comment (p.25), Roman recutting of the trapezoidal ditch (ditch 2) is only apparent from table 2.27 of the ceramic report and a rather buried paragraph on p.143 where the limitations of excavation strategy are detailed.

There are, of course, no easy answers on a site bedevilled by problems of residuality and uncertain radiocarbon dates, and dominated by a unique primary feature. Yet if *Durovigutum* (Roman Godmanchester) had an official role associated with a mansio, or with a Fenland Imperial Estate, as hypothesised in the final discussion (p.422), might the very early trapezoidal enclosure immediately adjacent to a large but functional villa have been co-opted for the corralling of horses for the Imperial Post? It is tempting here to see a link with the accomplished copper alloy statuette of a cockerel from the villa site since it symbolises Mercury's messenger role. More tentatively reference to Abandinus, an otherwise unknown native river god worshipped at *Durovigutum* until the 4th century AD (p.423), raises the possibility of utilisation of the enclosure for religious purposes; one of the closest morphological (but not dimensional) parallels for the trapezoidal enclosure is the Iron Age ritual enclosure at Slonk Hill in Sussex. Apparent inclusion of the Rectory Farm site in a Late Bronze Age–Iron Age enclosure system, along with a lack of votive objects or cult structures, suggest not but the widely spaced, evaluation trench excavation strategy could hardly be said to have furnished a full record. Certainly, an enduring ritual role would seem to best explain longevity of respect and precise recutting of a very slight ancient ditch line. Such possibilities at least deserved airing, graphically and in discussion.

Characteristic Neolithic deposits of cattle bones in the ditch terminals of the trapezoidal enclosure, along with dates from post pits, leave no doubt regarding its mid–late 3rd millennium date whatever the source of the posts. It is also clear that in layout it most closely resembles cursus sites (*cf.* the similarly splayed ditches at the west end of the Greater Stonehenge Cursus that was later divided into a distinct unit by a cross ditch, and better laid out terminals and 80 m or so of side ditches at a number of sites (Loveday 2006, 120–2)). Yet placed deposits of cattle bones in the ditch terminals are not characteristic of cursus monuments. Rather this recalls causewayed enclosures or henges.

The contrasting size of trapezoidal enclosure and attached cursus at Godmanchester is similarly unique – cursuses invariably butt up against sites of comparable width. However, an atypical site, both dimensionally and morphologically, lying across the River Thames from the Dorchester-upon-Thames cursus, has a narrower, linear feature attached to one corner (Loveday 1999, 60–1). Neither of the elements are typical of the cursus series and, unfortunately, neither are dated, but this Dorchester Overy/Warborough complex perhaps holds out the possibility of better future understanding of a site of Godmanchester type, and potentially its longevity, through fieldwork undertaken away from pressures of the quarry edge.

The authors are certainly to be complimented for completing the mammoth task of compiling and interpreting the variable records of excavations at Rectory Farm, particularly those of the villa site not commented upon here. Greater recognition of recutting and problems of residuality when

periodising the sometimes flawed data relating to the prehistoric sites would, however, have encouraged consideration of alternative narratives for a trapezoidal monument unique both morphologically and apparently in terms of its survival in a crowded Roman landscape.

## References

- Bayliss, A., Healy, F., Whittle, A. and Cooney, G. 2011 'Neolithic Narratives: British and Irish Enclosures in their timescapes, in Whittle *et al.* 2011, 682–847
- Loveday, R. 1999 Dorchester-upon-Thames – ritual complex or ritual landscape? In A. Barclay & J. Harding (eds), *Pathways and Ceremonies. The cursus monuments of Britain and Ireland*, 49–63. Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers 4. Oxford: Oxbow
- Loveday, R. 2006 *Inscribed Across the Landscape – the Cursus Enigma*. Tempus
- McAvoy, F. 2000 The development of a Neolithic monument complex at Godmanchester, Cambridgeshire. In M. Dawson (ed.), *Prehistoric, Roman and post-Roman landscapes of the Great Ouse Valley*. York: CBA Research Report 119
- Whittle, A., Healy, F. & Bayliss A. 2011 *Gathering time. Dating the Early Neolithic Enclosures of Southern Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxbow

Roy Loveday

*Honorary Research Fellow, School of Arch and Ancient History, University of Leicester*

Review submitted: December 2020

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*