

Harpole

The landscape of a Roman villa at Panattoni Park, Northamptonshire

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Front cover: Corndrying oven 2039

Back cover: Plan of the crop-processing area with the millstone reused in corndrying oven 2039

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Contents

List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	xi
Summary	xiii
Acknowledgements	xv

Chapter 1: Introduction

PROJECT BACKGROUND	1
LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY	4
ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND	5
Previous investigations	5
Prehistoric	5
Roman	6
Post-Roman	8
FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY	10
STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT	12
Presentation of the site sequence and phasing	12
LOCATION OF THE ARCHIVE	12

Chapter 2: Evolution of the Panattoni Park landscape from early prehistory to the early Roman period

PHASE 1: MESOLITHIC, NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE ACTIVITY	13
Early Mesolithic flint scatter in Area 4	13
Early prehistoric pits in Area 4	13
Late Bronze Age pit 5129	13
PHASE 2: MIDDLE IRON AGE	13
Features in Area 2	13
Settlement in Area 4	13
Pit alignment in Area 5	19
PHASE 3: LATE IRON AGE TO EARLY ROMAN	21
Settlement in Areas 1 and 5	21

Chapter 3: The villa landscape, c AD 150–400

PHASE 4: MIDDLE ROMAN	27
Enclosure complex adjacent to the villa	27
Building 1320 and the spring channel	31
Field system and crop-processing area west of the spring channel	37
Field system east of the spring channel	42
PHASE 5: LATE ROMAN	45
Enclosure complex adjacent to the villa	45
Building 1320 and the spring channel	51
Field system and crop processing area west of the spring channel	53
Field system east of the channel	62

Chapter 4: Artefactual evidence

WORKED FLINT <i>by Tom Lawrence</i>	71
Methodology	71
Flint scatter 4235	71
Flint from later features	74
Discussion	75
Catalogue of illustrated flint	75
PREHISTORIC POTTERY <i>by Alex Davies</i>	76
Methodology	76
Late Bronze Age	76
Early Iron Age	77
Middle Iron Age	77
Catalogue of illustrated sherds	78
LATE IRON AGE AND ROMAN POTTERY <i>by Edward Biddulph</i>	79
Introduction and methods	79
Assemblage composition and pattern of pottery supply	79
Chronological summary	86
Pottery use	87
Complete or near-complete vessels	88
Intra-site comparison	88
Pattern of pottery deposition	90
Site status and inter-site comparison	93
Conclusion	95
Catalogue of illustrated pottery	96
COINS <i>by Paul Booth</i>	99
Introduction	99
The assemblage	100
Distribution and phasing	100
Local comparison	101
METAL, CERAMIC, WORKED BONE AND GLASS ARTEFACTS <i>by Ian R Scott</i>	101
Introduction and methodology	101
Provenance and phasing	101
Late Iron Age/early Roman field system in Areas 1 and 5	101
Enclosure complex adjacent to villa	101
Building 1320 and spring channel	101
Field system and crop-processing area west of the spring channel	101
Field system east of the channel	102
Conclusions	103
Catalogue of illustrated artefacts	104
CERAMIC AND STONE BUILDING MATERIALS AND FIRED CLAY <i>by Cynthia Poole,</i> <i>with a contribution by Ruth Shaffrey</i>	107
Introduction	107
Ceramic building material	108
Fired clay	111
Markings	111
Stone roofing	113
Discussion	114
Catalogue of illustrated building material and fired	116

Contents

QUERNS AND MILLSTONES <i>by Ruth Shaffrey</i>	123
Discussion	123
Catalogue of stone objects	125
Chapter 5: Environmental and osteological evidence and radiocarbon dating	
ANIMAL BONE <i>by Martyn Allen</i>	127
Introduction	127
Taphonomy and provenance	129
Middle Iron Age (Phase 2)	129
Late Iron Age/early Roman (Phase 3)	129
Middle Roman (Phase 4) and late Roman (Phase 5)	130
Discussion	145
CHARRED PLANT REMAINS <i>by Julia Meen</i>	148
Late Iron Age/early Roman settlement in Areas 1 and 5	148
Middle to late Roman enclosure complex in Area 1	149
Middle to late Roman crop-processing area in Area 2	149
Weed ecology of arable fields	157
CHARCOAL <i>by Julia Meen</i>	157
Late Iron Age/early Roman settlement	158
Temple/mausoleum 1320	158
Enclosure complex in Area 1	159
Crop-processing area	159
Field system east of the spring channel	160
WATERLOGGED PLANT REMAINS FROM THE SPRING OUTWASH CHANNEL AND	
DITCH 2511 <i>by Julia Meen</i>	160
Spring outwash channel	160
Boundary ditch 2511	164
INSECTS FROM THE SPRING OUTWASH CHANNEL AND DITCH 2511 <i>by Enid Allison</i>	164
Methods	164
The assemblages	165
Conclusion	167
POLLEN FROM THE SPRING OUTWASH CHANNEL <i>by Mairead Rutherford</i>	167
Interpretation	167
Discussion	169
MARINE SHELL <i>by Rebecca Nicholson</i>	169
HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS <i>by Mandy Kingdom</i>	170
Unburnt skeletal remains	170
Cremation 6006	173
Discussion	175
RADIOCARBON DATING <i>by Andrew Simmonds</i>	175
Chapter 6: Discussion	
PREHISTORIC AND EARLY ROMAN BACKGROUND	177
Before the Iron Age	177
The pit alignment	177
Middle Iron Age settlement	180
Late Iron Age/early Roman settlement	181

THE VILLA AND ITS LANDSCAPE	182
The villa buildings	184
Farming at Panattoni Park	186
Religion and burial	190
Panattoni Park and the Nene Valley	196
AFTER THE VILLA	199
Appendix 1: Insects and other invertebrates from the spring channel and ditch 2511	201
Bibliography	205
Index	219

List of Figures

Chapter 1

1.1	Site location and previous excavations	2
1.2	Geophysical survey results and evaluation trenches	3
1.3	Plan of excavation and watching brief areas, with interpretation of the geophysical survey results	4
1.4	Area 5 during excavation, view to south-west across the Nene Valley toward Heygates Flour Mill and the M1 bridge	8
1.5	Excavation in progress on the south side of late Iron Age/early Roman enclosure 5448/5449, view to east	9
1.6	Ridge and furrow in baulk of Area 4, view to west	9
1.7	Features exposed in the Watching Brief Area: a) view to north; b) west end of the Preservation Area, view to south.	10
1.8	Backfilling the watching brief area.	11

Chapter 2

2.1	Plan of features in Area 4.	14
2.2	Early prehistoric pit 4224, view to east, scale 1m	15
2.3	Plan of all middle Iron Age (Phase 2) features.	16
2.4	Middle Iron Age features in Area 2	17
2.5	Sections through middle Iron Age ring gullies	17
2.6	Section through the west side of ring gully 4389/4390, view to north-west, scale 1m	17
2.7	Section through the south-west quadrant of ring gully 4392/4393/4394, view to north-west	18
2.8	Metalling 4226 in entrance to ring gully 4392/4393/4394, view to west, scales 1m and 2m	18
2.9	Pit alignment in Area 5.	19
2.10	Pit alignment – sections through selected pits	20
2.11	Pit 5107, view to south-east, scale 1m	20
2.12	Pits 5094 and 5095, view to east, scale 1m	21
2.13	Pit 5150, view to east, scale 1m	21
2.14	Late Iron Age/early Roman settlement in Areas 1 and 5.	22
2.15	Sections through late Iron Age/early Roman features	23
2.16	Late Iron Age/early Roman enclosure ditch 5448/5449 (middle and right) cutting boundary ditch 5529, view to north-west, scale 2m.	24
2.17	Section through north side of late Iron Age/early Roman enclosure ditch 5448/5449, view to north-east, scale 1m	24
2.18	Pot 571 in pit 570, view to north, scale 0.3m.	25

Chapter 3

3.1	Plan of all middle Roman (Phase 4) features	28
3.2	The enclosure complex adjacent to the villa, Phase 4	29
3.3	Section through middle Roman boundary ditch 1385 and late Roman enclosure ditches 1245 and 1246, in the enclosure complex adjacent to the villa	30
3.4	Butchered cattle carcass in fill 1088 of ditch 1385	30

3.5	Wall 464 and surface 465, view to east, scale 1m.....	31
3.6	Building 1320 during excavation, viewed across the spring channel. The spoil heaps to the rear show the location of the enclosure complex adjacent to the villa. View to west.....	32
3.7	Building 1320 and associated features.....	33
3.8	Building 1320 during excavation, view to west.....	34
3.9	Building 1320, the junction of the south wall and the cross wall, view to north.....	34
3.10	The north-east part of Building 1320 during excavation, with surface 860 to the right and foundation 990 at extreme left, view to north-east.....	35
3.11	Intercutting pits south of Building 1320, view to north, scale 2m.....	36
3.12	Sections through the intercutting pits south of Building 1320.....	36
3.13	Animal burial in pit 1045, view to south-west, scale 0.3m.....	37
3.14	The spring channel during excavation, with Building 1320 in the background: a) view to south-west; b) view to north-west.....	37
3.15	Section through the spring channel.....	38
3.16	Field system and crop-processing area west of the spring channel, Phase 4.....	39
3.17	Main N-S boundary in the crop-processing area, showing the gleyed lower fill of ditch 2511 cut by dark-filled ditch 2490, view to north-east.....	40
3.18	Corndrying oven 2050: plan and section.....	40
3.19	Corndrying oven 2050 with stone-lined pit 2094 to the rear, view to south, scale 2m.....	41
3.20	East end of corndrying oven 2050, showing stakeholes around the edge of the stokehole, view to south, scale 2m.....	41
3.21	Stone-lined pit 2094, cut by Phase 5 ditch 2450/2515, view to south, scale 2m.....	42
3.22	Field system east of the spring channel, Phase 4.....	43
3.23	Drainage ditches 20358, 20365 and 20395, view to north, scale 2m.....	44
3.24	Stone culvert 20002, view to north, scale 1m.....	44
3.25	Plan of all late Roman (Phase 4) features.....	46
3.26	The enclosure complex adjacent to the villa, Phase 5.....	47
3.27	Excavation in progress in enclosure 1245/1246, with oven 1247 in the foreground, view to south-west.....	49
3.28	Two shelly ware jars placed in the north-west terminal of enclosure ditch 1007.....	50
3.29	Building 3, view to north-west.....	51
3.30	Field system and crop-processing area west of the spring channel, Phase 5.....	52
3.31	Corndrying oven 2323: plan and section.....	53
3.32	Corndrying oven 2323 before excavation with part of threshing floor 2146 to right, view to north, scale 1m.....	54
3.33	Stone-lined pit 2018, view to east, scale 1m.....	55
3.34	Threshing floor 2146, with the corner of corndrying oven 2323 in the foreground, view to east, scales 2m.....	55
3.35	Stone-lined pit 2129 and corndrying oven 2130 before excavation, view to north.....	56
3.36	Corndrying oven 2130 with stone-lined pit 2129 to the rear, filled with groundwater, view to south, scales 1m and 2m.....	56
3.37	Corndrying oven 2130: plan and section.....	57
3.38	Recording stone-lined pit 2129, view to south-east.....	58
3.39	Stonework in the south-west quadrant of stone-lined pit 2129, view to south, scale 2m.....	58
3.40	Section through stone-lined pit 2129.....	59
3.41	Section through pit 2135 and ditch 2188.....	59
3.42	Stone floor in the north-east quadrant of pit 2135, view to west, scale 1m.....	59
3.43	Corndryer 2039: plan and sections.....	60
3.44	Corndrying oven 2039, view to north.....	61

List of Figures

3.45 Shelly ware jars SF 108 and 109 in the stokehole of corndrying oven 2039, view to north-east, scale 0.3m	62
3.46 Corndrying oven 2039, showing millstone SF 118, view to north-east, scale 1m.	62
3.47 Field system east of the spring channel, Phase 5.	63
3.48 Plan of structure 20035	65
3.49 Structure 20035, with surface 20042 in the foreground and wall 20045 to the left, view to north-west	65
3.50 Watching Brief Area and Area 3	67

Chapter 4

4.1 Plan of lithic scatter 4235 showing possible zones of activity	73
4.2 Worked flint	75
4.3 Prehistoric pottery rim diameters (no. vessels)	78
4.4 Prehistoric pottery.	78
4.5 Roman pottery: comparison of vessel function by landscape area, based on quantification by EVE	89
4.6 Roman pottery: plot of assemblages from ditches and pits in the late Iron Age and early Roman settlement in Areas 1 and 5, showing the relationship between mean sherd weight and mean EVE	92
4.7 Roman pottery: scattergram showing the proportions of jars and bowls/dishes	94
4.8 Roman pottery: correspondence analysis plot showing relationship between sites and landscape areas	95
4.9 Roman pottery, nos 1–31	97
4.10 Roman pottery, nos 32–66	98
4.11 Iron and copper alloy artefacts, nos 1–9	105
4.12 Copper alloy, ceramic, worked bone and glass artefacts, nos 10–20	107
4.13 Ceramic building material, nos 1–16 (bricks, flue tiles and tegulae)	117
4.14 Ceramic building material, nos 17–25 (tegulae)	119
4.15 Ceramic building material, nos 26–8 (imbrices and ridge tile)	120
4.16 Fired clay, nos 29–32	121
4.17 Ceramic building material, nos 33–45 (signature marks)	122
4.18 Querns and millstones	124

Chapter 5

5.1 Percentage NISP of the major livestock taxa by phase	130
5.2 Percentage MNI of the major livestock taxa by phase (middle and late Roman phases only)	130
5.3 Horned and hornless sheep skulls; a) gully 561; b) ditch 401	131
5.4 Cattle element representation	132
5.5 Cattle lumbar vertebra with developmental anomaly in the centrum from pit/ditch terminus 1064.	135
5.6 Cattle withers height data	135
5.7 Cattle distal metacarpal measurements from Panattoni Park, Grove Airfield and Sutton Courtenay Lane	136
5.8 Cattle distal humerus measurements from Panattoni Park, Grove Airfield and Sutton Courtenay Lane	137
5.9 Sheep/goat element representation	137
5.10 Sheep/goat distal humerus measurements from Panattoni Park and Sutton Courtenay Lane.	139
5.11 Sheep/goat distal tibia measurements from Panattoni Park, Grove Airfield and Sutton Courtenay Lane	139

Harpole

5.12	Pig element representation	140
5.13	Horse element representation	141
5.14	Horse withers height data	142
5.15	Toy dog skeleton from ditch 863.	143
5.16	a) Toy dog bones from ditch 454; b) cat bones from ditch 20590	143
5.17	a) Fallow deer antler from ditch 339; b) common crane humerus from ditch 1095.	144
5.18	Cone from a stone pine grown at the OA offices in Oxford.	149
5.19	Ratio of grain:chaff:weeds in soil samples from the crop-processing area	156
5.20	Proportions of seeds from different ecological grouping (by total seed numbers; note that seeds of <i>Urtica dioica</i> and <i>Juncus</i> spp. have been excluded).	161
5.21	Pollen sequence from the spring channel	168

Chapter 6

6.1	Pit alignments and other Iron Age settlements mentioned in the discussion.	179
6.2	The villa landscape at its greatest extent.	183
6.3	The mosaic, as drawn for Edward Pretty in 1849	185
6.4	Roman settlements and roads mentioned in the discussion.	197

List of Tables

Chapter 4

4.1	Quantification of the artefact assemblage by phase	71
4.2	The lithic assemblage	72
4.3	Comparison of length/width ratios with selected Mesolithic and Neolithic sites in southern Britain	72
4.4	Comparison of blade index to dated scatters at Bexhill, East Sussex	73
4.5	Condition of flints in lithic scatter 4235	73
4.6	Condition of lithics from features	75
4.7	Prehistoric pottery fabrics and quantities	76
4.8	Correlations between fabric and form, and estimated vessel equivalent (EVE)	77
4.9	Quantification of late Iron Age and Roman fabrics, and fabric concordance	80
4.10	Quantification of forms	82
4.11	Pottery from the late Iron Age/early Roman settlement in Areas 1 and 5 (Phase 3)	82
4.12	Pottery from ceramic groups dated to <i>c</i> AD 120–200 (Phase 4)	83
4.13	Pottery from ceramic groups dated to <i>c</i> AD 200–240/50 (Phase 4)	84
4.14	Pottery from ceramic groups dated to <i>c</i> AD 240/50–300 (Phase 5)	85
4.15	Pottery from ceramic groups dated to <i>c</i> AD 300–400/10 (Phase 5)	86
4.16	Samian forms by fabric. Quantification by number of vessels identified to form based on all sherds	87
4.17	Incidence of ‘sooting’ by form and fabric. Quantification by number of vessels based on all sherds	88
4.18	Roman pottery, quantities and condition of the pottery by feature type	91
4.19	Quantity and condition of pottery from pits and ditches by fill position	91
4.20	Roman pottery, comparative proportions of vessel classes	93
4.21	Roman pottery: correspondence analysis data, showing the number of sherds by ware type and site or landscape area	95
4.22	Quantification of Roman coins by issue period and phase	100
4.23	List of coins	102
4.24	Quantification of metal, glass and worked bone by function and phase	104
4.25	Quantification of metal, glass and worked bone objects by location	104
4.26	Quantification of ceramic building material by form and fabric groups	108
4.27	Flue tile combing designs	109
4.28	Signature types	112
4.29	Quantification of stone roofing material	114
4.30	Distribution of the ceramic building material	115

Chapter 5

5.1	Hand-collected animal bone specimens by phase	127
5.2	Animal bone specimens from environmental samples by phase	128
5.3	Associated bone groups	133
5.4	Cattle epiphyseal fusion data, Phases 4 and 5	134
5.5	Cattle dental wear data (number of specimens per age group)	134

Harpole

5.6	Sheep/goat epiphyseal fusion data, Phases 4 and 5	138
5.7	Sheep/goat dental wear data (number of specimens per age group)	139
5.8	Pig dental wear data (number of specimens per age group).	140
5.9	Horse epiphyseal fusion data	141
5.10	Charred plant remains from Area 1	150
5.11	Charred plant remains from the crop-processing area	152
5.12	Wood charcoal identifications from Area 1.	158
5.13	Wood charcoal identifications from Area 2.	159
5.14	Waterlogged plant remains from the spring outwash channel and ditch 2511.	162
5.15	Proportions of selected groups of terrestrial beetles (Coleoptera)	165
5.16	Summary of inhumation burials.	171
5.17	Summary of cremation deposit 6006	173
5.18	Summary of radiocarbon dating results	175

Summary

Excavations in advance of construction of a complex of logistics and industrial spaces at Panattoni Park, adjacent to Junction 16 of the M1 motorway, c 5km west of Northampton, uncovered part of a Roman villa and evidence for preceding prehistoric and early Roman settlement. The development area lay on the north side of the Nene Valley, and the sloping topography of the site necessitated the creation of landscaped terraces for construction by cutting some areas of the slope and infilling other regions with soil. Following an extensive geophysical survey and trial-trench evaluation, five areas of open excavation were undertaken where these cut operations would impact on the identified archaeological remains, as well as a watching brief on an area where archaeological features were exposed during topsoil stripping in one of the intervening preservation areas.

The period before the Iron Age was represented mainly by unstratified flintwork and a small number of pits, but a key find was an *in situ* knapping cluster dating from the Mesolithic period, where locally available flint cobbles were worked into blanks that were then used to produce a range of tools, some of which were utilised at the site while others may have been taken away for use elsewhere.

A pit alignment running down the side of the valley, perpendicular to the river, was constructed during the early Iron Age or at the start of the middle Iron Age. The Nene Valley around Northampton is the location of a particularly dense concentration of such boundaries, which may have been used in the context of pastoral farming. Some were particularly long lived, and the boundary at Panattoni Park was no exception, continuing in use into the late Iron Age, when the northern part was recut as a ditch that defined the western limit of an enclosure complex.

While the pit alignment boundary was still in use, a settlement comprising at least seven roundhouses was constructed at the edge of the floodplain, 450m to the east. No evidence was found for cultivation of arable crops, either in the form of charred plant remains, quernstones or other processing tools, or storage pits, and the settlement may have been entirely pastoral, engaged in grazing livestock, predominantly cattle, on the grasslands of the floodplain. Occupation may have been seasonal, and the roundhouses may not all have been occupied contemporaneously but instead may represent a longer sequence, with only a few houses in occupation at any one time.

An enclosure complex was constructed against the pit alignment boundary during the late Iron Age

and was occupied into the early part of the Roman period. No certain domestic focus was identified, although two successive enclosures at the southwest corner of the complex were defined by substantially larger ditches and may have served this function. Alternatively, the complex may have been the fields and paddocks of an enclosed settlement immediately to the north, at the top of the valley slope, that was excavated in 1966. This phase exhibited the first evidence for the adoption of a mixed farming regime. Cattle continued to be the most numerous species but were joined by arable cultivation, and the wider range of activities evidenced probably represent more permanent occupation. Activity here ended c AD 50/70 and a hiatus of about a century passed before occupation resumed with the establishment of the villa.

The site was recognised from the outset as having significant archaeological potential due to the proximity of a Roman villa that had been identified during the 1840s, when a mosaic was discovered. Most of the villa building complex was probably destroyed by widening of the A45 (now the A4500) in 1966, when limited trenching recorded the southeast corner of the main building and a stone-lined cistern, as well as a stone-lined drain that indicated the probable presence of a bath house somewhere near the east end of the main house. The Panattoni Park excavation uncovered an aisled building that was probably the southernmost structure in the main complex, as well as a large area of the associated agricultural landscape to the south and southeast. The villa was occupied continuously from the mid-2nd century until the end of the 4th century, if not into the 5th, although the 1966 excavation indicated that the final phase of occupation may have been in reduced circumstances since the cistern building was demolished and reused as a tannery. The villa was probably sited to take advantage of the grazing land that was available within the valley, and the predominance of cattle among the livestock continued, while spelt wheat was the main cereal crop. The pasture land within the valley may have functioned with little or no requirement for ditched boundaries, but the landscape immediately surrounding the villa was enclosed and divided into clearly distinct zones. These comprised an enclosure complex around the villa that probably served a range of agricultural functions, a rather isolated building adjacent to a spring channel that was interpreted as a temple or mausoleum, an area dedicated to crop-processing and, separated from the main complex by the spring channel, a large enclosure complex. Geophysical survey by CLASP has

indicated that a similar landscape developed to the north of the A4500. The temple-mausoleum had been severely affected by stone-robbing and truncation by ploughing, as a result of which little stonework remained in place. The robber trenches indicated a possible concentric ground plan analogous to a Romano-Celtic temple, and associated pits contained the burials of (sacrificed?) animals and deposits of calcined animal bone that may have been the deliberately burnt debris of ritual banquets, as well as a charred stone pine cone scale. Pollen evidence from the adjacent spring channel suggested that the building was associated with a walnut grove and may be the earliest definite evidence for cultivation of walnut trees in Britain. The crop-processing area was in use from the 2nd century until the late 4th century and comprised four certain and one possible corndrying ovens and four stone-lined pits. It is argued that these features were used primarily for malting, either as a cash-crop to supplement the income from the villa's more conventional produce or to provide ale for the workforce. The eastern enclosure complex was reorganised several times, forming a construction sequence that extended well

into the late 4th century and possibly beyond. From the late 3rd century until the mid-4th it took the form of a large circular enclosure with subdivisions and a smaller central enclosure, possibly representing a compound for livestock with a central roundhouse, although such an arrangement would be extremely unusual at this late date. This arrangement was replaced in the second half of the 4th century by an extensive complex of rectilinear enclosures interpreted as a stockyard for handling and processing livestock. Hay was evidently grown within or close to the complex, since one of the ditches produced a notable group of mower's tools comprising a field anvil, hammer and spud.

No Anglo-Saxon material was found, either at Panattoni Park or during the 1960s trenching of the villa buildings, and it would appear that when the villa was abandoned it was simply forgotten. Ridge and furrow earthworks and the historic Harpole Mill, which formerly stood on the adjacent part of the Nene, attest to the exclusively agricultural use of the area during the historic period, when it lay at the edge of the fields attached to Harpole parish.

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