

Between Villa and Town

Excavations of a Roman roadside settlement and shrine at Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire

by Steve Lawrence and Alex Smith

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Oxford Archaeology

Monograph No. 7

2009

Published for Oxford Archaeology as part of the Oxford Archaeology Monograph series

Also available concerning excavations in Higham Ferrers :-

Death and Taxes : The archaeology of a Middle Saxon estate centre at Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire
by Alan Hardy, Bethan Mair Charles & Robert J Williams, Oxford Archaeology Monograph No. 4

Designed by Oxford Archaeology Graphics Office

Edited by Paul Booth and Alan Hardy

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ISBN 978-0-904220-44-5

This book is part of a series of monographs which can be bought from all good bookshops
and internet bookshops. For more information visit www.oxfordarch.co.uk

Typeset by Production Line, Oxford

Printed in Great Britain by Information Press, Eynsham, Oxford

Contents

List of Figures	xi
List of Plates	xv
List of Tables	xvii
Summary	xvix
Acknowledgements	xxii

Chapter 1: Introduction *by Steve Lawrence and Alex Smith*

PROJECT BACKGROUND	2
LOCATION AND GEOLOGY	6
EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY	7
ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND	7
CHRONOLOGY AND PHASING	11
Phase 1: Early prehistoric activity	11
Phase 2: Iron Age settlement	11
Phase 3: Establishment of the Roman settlement (2nd century)	11
Phase 4: Development of the Roman settlement (late 2nd to 3rd century)	12
Phase 5: Expansion and decline of the Roman settlement (late 3rd to 4th century)	12
PUBLICATION STRUCTURE	12
ARCHIVES	12

Chapter 2: Early Prehistoric Activity (Phase 1) *by Kate Cramp*

INTRODUCTION	13
MESOLITHIC (<i>c</i> 8000 BC-3500 BC)	14
NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE (<i>c</i> 3500 BC-1000 BC)	16
Early/middle Neolithic	16
Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age	17
<i>Late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditch</i>	18
<i>Features in the ring ditch interior</i>	19
<i>Early Bronze Age cremation burial</i>	19
<i>Surface finds</i>	20
Middle/late Bronze Age	21
FLINTWORK <i>by Kate Cramp and Hugo Lamdin-Whymark</i>	21
Introduction	21
Methodology	21
Condition	22
Raw material	22
The assemblage	22
Mesolithic flint assemblage	24
Neolithic and Bronze Age flint assemblage	25
<i>Neolithic flint</i>	25
<i>Bronze Age flint</i>	27
EARLY PREHISTORIC POTTERY <i>by Emily Edwards</i>	27
Introduction	27
Methodology	27
Fabrics	28

Middle Neolithic pits	28
Early Bronze Age cremation burial (10000)	28
Deposit from the ring ditch recut	28
Prehistoric sherds from the shrine interior soil layer	28
Discussion	28
Catalogue	29
THE BRONZE AGE CREMATION BURIAL <i>by Annsofie Witkin</i>	30
Provenance	30
Condition of the bone and disturbance	30
Demographic data	30
Pyre technology and ritual	30
Discussion of burial ritual	30
CHARCOAL AND CHARRED PLANT REMAINS <i>by Dana Challinor and Mark Robinson</i>	31
Charcoal	31
Charred plant remains	31
 Chapter 3: Iron Age Settlement (Phase 2) <i>by Alex Smith and Jeff Muir</i>	
INTRODUCTION	33
THE EXCAVATION	33
Phasing	33
Phase 1	35
Penannular gully 151	35
Ditch 255	35
Enclosure 141	35
Phase 2	37
Enclosure 253	37
The penannular ditch (254)	37
Penannular gully (252)	38
Associated features	38
The finds	39
Phase 3	39
Features from the 1997 evaluation	39
THE IRON AGE POTTERY <i>by Dennis Jackson</i>	40
Fabric	40
Forms	41
Hardness and surface finish	41
Decoration and scoring	41
Discussion of the chronology	41
Catalogue of the illustrated pottery	41
Pottery from the 1997 excavation <i>by Alistair Barclay</i>	42
ANIMAL BONE <i>by Umberto Albarella</i>	43
CHARRED PLANT REMAINS <i>by Lisa Moffett</i>	43
THE NATURE OF THE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT	45
 Chapter 4: The Roman Settlement and Shrine (Phases 3-5) <i>by Steve Lawrence and Leo Webley</i>	
INTRODUCTION	47
PHASE 3: 2ND CENTURY	47
The road	49
The settlement	50
Enclosure 12310/12880	50
Building 10920 and well 12340	52
Building 10920	52
Well 12340	54

Contents

Building 10910 and well 12890	54
<i>Building 10910</i>	54
<i>Well 12890</i>	56
Building 11340	56
<i>Dating</i>	57
<i>Function and appearance</i>	57
Pits	58
Burial group 13040	58
PHASE 4: LATE 2ND TO 3RD CENTURIES	59
The road	59
The settlement	62
Plot A	62
<i>Buildings 10860 and 11370</i>	62
<i>Extension 12460</i>	65
<i>Extension 12450</i>	65
<i>Burial 11785</i>	66
<i>Bone dump 12913</i>	66
<i>Stone yard surface 11360</i>	67
<i>Wall 11410</i>	67
Plot B	67
<i>Boundary ditches</i>	67
<i>Wall 11758</i>	68
<i>Building 11620</i>	68
<i>Paved surface 11633</i>	71
<i>Pit 12826 and burial 12745</i>	71
Plot C	71
<i>Building 11630</i>	71
<i>Building 10850</i>	72
<i>Pits associated with building 10850</i>	73
<i>Building 10880</i>	73
<i>Infant burials within building 10880</i>	73
<i>Well 12140</i>	75
<i>Building 10870</i>	75
<i>External features associated with building 10870</i>	76
<i>Well 12885</i>	76
<i>Ditch 12980</i>	79
<i>Buildings 10900 and 10890</i>	79
<i>Internal features</i>	81
<i>Post-built extension 12990</i>	82
<i>Dating</i>	82
<i>Function and use</i>	83
<i>Gully 11755</i>	83
Plot D	84
Plot E	85
Plot F	85
<i>Enclosure ditches and waterhole 12955</i>	85
<i>Building 10810</i>	86
<i>Pit 10804</i>	89
The northern periphery of the settlement	91
<i>Boundary ditches</i>	91
<i>Burial group 13050</i>	91
<i>Well 8032</i>	94
<i>Well 8278</i>	95
The eastern periphery of the settlement	95
The shrine	98
Structure 12456	100

PHASE 5: LATE 3RD TO 4TH CENTURIES	100
The road	102
The settlement	103
Plot A	103
<i>Building 11370</i>	103
<i>Well 12890</i>	104
Plot B	104
<i>Boundary ditches</i>	104
<i>Building 11620</i>	104
<i>Structure 13030</i>	105
<i>Structure 13035</i>	105
<i>Pit 11803</i>	106
Plot C	106
<i>Building 10850</i>	106
<i>Building 10880</i>	109
<i>Building 11630</i>	109
<i>Building 10870</i>	109
<i>Well 12885</i>	111
Plot D	111
<i>Building 10840</i>	112
<i>Other internal features</i>	113
<i>Wall 11010</i>	114
<i>Burial group 13045</i>	114
Plot E	115
<i>Building 10820</i>	117
<i>Trackway 12920</i>	120
<i>Building 10830</i>	120
Plot F	122
<i>Enclosure ditches</i>	122
<i>Building 10800</i>	123
<i>Building 10810</i>	125
Plot G	127
<i>Boundary ditches</i>	127
<i>Pit 10885</i>	127
<i>Building 12900</i>	127
<i>Function, use and appearance</i>	130
<i>Burial group 13050</i>	131
The northern periphery of the settlement	131
<i>Building 8019</i>	132
<i>Limestone surfaces</i>	135
<i>Well 8032</i>	135
<i>Well 8278</i>	135
<i>Burial group 13105</i>	135
<i>Burial group 13110</i>	136
The eastern periphery of the settlement	140
UNPHASED BURIALS	140
THE RADIOCARBON RESULTS <i>by W Derek Hamilton, Peter Marshall, Christopher Bronk Ramsey,</i> <i>Gordon Cook, and Gerry McCormac</i>	140
Results	141
Stable Isotopes	141
General approach	141
Objectives	144
Analysis and interpretation	144
<i>Burial Group 1</i>	144
<i>Burial Group 2</i>	144
<i>Results from Burial Groups 1 and 2</i>	144

Chapter 5: Material Culture from the Roman Settlement and Shrine

THE ROMAN POTTERY by Jane Timby	147
Introduction and methodology	147
Description of fabrics and forms	147
<i>Continental imports: fine wares</i>	147
<i>Continental imports: Decorated samian pottery</i>	151
<i>Samian stamps</i>	151
<i>Continental imports: amphorae</i>	151
<i>Regional traded wares: coarse wares</i>	151
<i>Local wares: Lower Nene Valley wares</i>	153
<i>Local wares: grog tempered</i>	155
<i>Local wares: shelly wares</i>	156
<i>Local wares: sandy wares</i>	157
<i>Other sandy wares</i>	158
<i>Miscellaneous wares: unknown source</i>	158
Discussion by stratigraphic phasing	158
<i>Phase 2 (later prehistoric)</i>	159
<i>Phase 3 (early-mid 2nd century)</i>	159
<i>Phase 3-4 (early/mid-late 2nd century)</i>	161
<i>Phase 4 (mid/late 2nd century-early/mid 3rd century)</i>	162
<i>Phase 4-5 (3rd-4th century)</i>	164
<i>Phase 5 (late 3rd-4th century)</i>	165
<i>Phase 6 Post-Roman</i>	167
Graffiti	168
Catalogue of illustrated sherds	169
Discussion	178
<i>Shrine interior</i>	182
<i>Local and regional comparison</i>	183
COINS by Cathy King	184
Introduction	184
The composition of the coin finds	185
Coin distribution	186
Inter-site analysis	192
Conclusions	197
SMALL FINDS by Ian R Scott with contributions from Martin Henig and Roger Tomlin	198
Context group assemblages	199
Settlement assemblage	199
<i>Area G</i>	199
<i>Other Romano-British finds</i>	200
<i>Phases 3 and 3 to 4</i>	200
<i>Phase 4</i>	201
<i>Phase 5</i>	201
<i>Comparison of the phase assemblages</i>	202
Shrine assemblage	202
Distribution of the finds in the settlement and shrine	203
Comparison between the settlement and shrine assemblages	205
Brooches	205
<i>Higham Ferrers, Stanwick and Redlands Farm brooch assemblages compared</i>	208
Finger rings by I Scott and M Henig	209
Bracelets	210
Copper alloy and bone hair pins	210
Toilet items	211
Writing	212
Votive items	212
The lead sheets by Roger Tomlin	213

<i>Other classes of material</i>	213
Small finds catalogue	213
THE ROMAN GLASS <i>by H.E.M. Cool</i>	250
Catalogue of vessel glass	250
LEATHER OBJECTS <i>by Quita Mould</i>	251
METALWORKING DEBRIS <i>by Gareth Hatton</i>	251
Phase assemblages	252
<i>2nd to 3rd Century (Phases 3 and 4)</i>	252
<i>4th Century (Phase 5)</i>	252
<i>Saxon</i>	252
Conclusion	252
ROTARY QUERNS <i>by Ruth Shaffrey</i>	252
Catalogue of rotary querns	253
Discussion	254
Summary	255
OTHER WORKED STONE <i>by Ruth Shaffrey</i>	255
Catalogue of worked stone	257
Discussion	257
ARCHITECTURAL AND SCULPTURAL STONE <i>by Peter Davenport with contribution from Martin Henig</i>	258
Catalogue of architectural and sculptural worked stone	258
Discussion	262
CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL <i>by Cynthia Poole</i>	263
Fabric	263
<i>Group 1: Shelly fabrics</i>	263
<i>Group 2: Sandy fabrics</i>	264
Forms	265
<i>Tegulae</i>	265
<i>Imbrices</i>	266
<i>Ridge tile?</i>	266
<i>Bricks</i>	266
<i>Box tile: tubulus and tubulus cuneatus</i>	267
<i>Tesserae</i>	267
<i>Flat tile</i>	267
Markings	267
<i>Signature marks</i>	267
<i>Combing</i>	267
Discussion	267
<i>Tile production</i>	267
<i>Structural use of ceramic building material</i>	268
<i>Phase 4: the shrine</i>	268
<i>Phase 4: Building 10860</i>	269
<i>Phase 5: Building 8019</i>	269
<i>Use of brick and tile in minor structures</i>	269
Conclusions	271
Catalogue of illustrated tiles	272
FIRED CLAY <i>by Cynthia Poole</i>	272
Fabrics	272
Forms	272
<i>Hearth or oven floor</i>	272
<i>Oven plate</i>	272
<i>Oven furniture</i>	274
Discussion	274
Catalogue of illustrated fired clay	274

Chapter 6: Ecofacts and Environmental Evidence from the Roman Period

THE HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS <i>by Annsofie Witkin</i>	275
Introduction	275
Methodology	275
<i>Skeletal remains</i>	275
<i>Cremated bone</i>	275
Provenance	277
Cremation burials	277
<i>Condition of the bone and disturbance</i>	277
<i>Demographic data and pathology</i>	277
<i>Pyre technology and ritual</i>	277
Inhumation burials	278
<i>Preservation and completeness</i>	278
<i>Demography</i>	279
<i>Stature</i>	279
Dental pathology	279
<i>Caries</i>	279
<i>Ante-mortem tooth loss</i>	280
<i>Dental calculus</i>	280
<i>Dental abscesses</i>	280
<i>Peridontal disease</i>	280
<i>Enamel hypoplasia</i>	280
<i>Dental anomalies</i>	280
<i>Masticatory and extra-masticatory wear</i>	281
Skeletal pathology	281
<i>Degenerative joint disease</i>	281
<i>Trauma</i>	282
<i>Infectious disease</i>	282
<i>Conclusion</i>	283
Disarticulated remains	283
<i>Provenance</i>	283
<i>Condition and completeness</i>	283
<i>Quantification, age and sex</i>	283
Burial ritual	283
<i>Location of the adult burials in the landscape</i>	283
<i>Aspects of adult funerary ritual</i>	284
<i>Coffins</i>	285
<i>Grave goods</i>	285
<i>Decapitation burials</i>	286
<i>Neonatal burials</i>	286
<i>Disarticulated remains</i>	286
ANIMAL BONE <i>by Lena Strid</i>	287
Introduction	287
Methodology	287
The assemblage	288
The meat providing domestic mammals	289
<i>Cattle</i>	289
<i>Sheep</i>	289
<i>Pig</i>	291
Other domestic mammals	292
<i>Horse</i>	292
<i>Dog</i>	292
<i>Cat</i>	292

<i>Wild mammals</i>	292
<i>Deer</i>	292
<i>Wild boar</i>	293
<i>Lagomorphs</i>	293
<i>Birds</i>	293
<i>Fish by Rebecca Nicholson</i>	293
Animals from the shrine	294
Worked bone	297
Animal utilisation	297
Conclusion	300
MACROSCOPIC PLANT REMAINS (EXCLUDING CHARCOAL) AND INSECTS	
<i>by Mark Robinson</i>	300
Introduction	300
The samples	300
Methodology	300
<i>Charred plant remains</i>	300
<i>Waterlogged macroscopic plant remains</i>	302
<i>Waterlogged insect remains</i>	302
Results and interpretation	305
<i>Phases 3-4: 2nd - late 3rd century</i>	305
<i>Phase 5: late 3rd-4th century</i>	305
Discussion	309
THE WOOD CHARCOAL <i>by Dana Challinor</i>	309
Introduction	309
Methodology	309
Results and discussion	310
Conclusion	311
MICROMORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS <i>by M G Canti</i>	311
Methodology	311
Results	311
Chapter 7: Discussion of the Roman Settlement and Shrine <i>by Alex Smith</i>	
INTRODUCTION	313
SETTLEMENT ORGANISATION AND DEVELOPMENT	313
Settlement origins	313
The earliest settlement (Phase 3)	315
Settlement expansion and development (Phase 4)	315
Final expansion and decline of the settlement (Phase 5)	318
The end of the Roman settlement	322
MORPHOLOGY, ECONOMY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE	323
RITUAL AND RELIGION	325
The shrine	325
<i>Location and chronology</i>	325
<i>Structural organisation</i>	326
<i>The votive assemblage</i>	330
<i>Association with the settlement</i>	334
Other ritual within the settlement	334
THE SETTLEMENT IN ITS LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT	335
Settlement form and distribution	335
Agriculture, power and control of resources	338
Communications	340
Religion	340
The end of Roman occupation in the region	342
BIBLIOGRAPHY	343
INDEX	357

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

1.1	Site location	1
1.2	Previous archaeological investigations in the area	3
1.3	Geophysical survey of the Roman settlement	4
1.4	Geology of the area	6
1.5	Extent of excavation of soil-cut features across the site	8

CHAPTER 2

2.1	Location of early prehistoric features	13
2.2	Plan of ring ditch 5010	18
2.3	Section drawings: ring ditch 5010 and central pit 5011	19
2.4	Plan and section drawing of cremation pit 10002	20
2.5	Mesolithic flint from topsoil layer 10500	24
2.6	Neolithic and Bronze Age flint	26
2.7	Early prehistoric pottery	29

CHAPTER 3

3.1	Location of Iron Age settlement and evaluation area	34
3.2	Plan and sections of Iron Age settlement	36
3.3	Plan and sections of Iron Age features in Trench 5	40
3.4	Iron Age pottery	42

CHAPTER 4

4.1	Plan of all features in Roman settlement, set against geophysics plot	47
4.2	Phase 3: early to late 2nd century	48
4.3	Sections of roadside ditch (3-5)	49
4.4	Sections of roadside ditch (6-8)	50
4.5	Section through road surfaces (9-10)	51
4.6	Building 10920 and well 12340	53
4.7	Building 10910 and well 12890	55
4.8	Building 11340	57
4.9	Burial group 13040	58
4.10	Phase 4: late 2nd to late 3rd centuries	60
4.11	Plot divisions referred to in description and discussion of settlement	61
4.12	Building 10860 and wall 11410	62
4.13	Building 11370	64
4.14	Building 11620 and wall 11758	69
4.15	Building 11630	70
4.16	Building 10850 (Phase 4)	72
4.17	Building 10880 and well 12140	74
4.18	Building 10870 (Phase 4) and well 12885	75
4.19	Well 12885 section	78
4.20	Building 10900	79
4.21	Building 10890	80
4.22	Walls 12437 and 12438, layer 12436 and hearth 12641	84
4.23	Building 10810 (Phase 4)	86
4.24	Pit 10804	89
4.25	Burial group 13050	90
4.26	Burial 10740	91
4.27	Burials 10960 (Phase 4), 10965 (Phase 5) and 10780 (Phase 5)	92

4.28	Burials 12810, 12815 and 12820	94
4.29	Well 8278	96
4.30	Enclosure 13080	97
4.31	Shrine 10930	98
4.32	Phase 5: late 3rd to 4th centuries	101
4.33	Structure 13090 and wheel ruts 13085	102
4.34	Building 11370, Phase 5 alterations to extension 12450	103
4.35	Structure 13030	105
4.36	Structure 13035	106
4.37	Building 10850 (Phase 5)	107
4.38	Building 10870 (A: Phase 5 stratigraphically early features; B: Phase 5 stratigraphically late features)	110
4.39	Building 10840	112
4.40	Burial group 13045	115
4.41	Burials 10950 and 10970	116
4.42	Burial 12655	116
4.43	Burial 12725	118
4.44	Buildings 10820, 10830 and trackway 12920	119
4.45	Building 10800	122
4.46	Building 10810 (Phase 5)	126
4.47	Pit 10885	128
4.48	Building 12900	129
4.49	Waterhole 10589	132
4.50	'Temple' 8019	133
4.51	Burial Group 13105 (8010, 8123, 8132)	137
4.52	Burial group 13110 (8016, 8154)	138
4.53	Burial 11790	138
4.54	Unphased burials	139
4.55	Calibrated radiocarbon dates using the probability method of Stuiver and Reimer (1993)	141
4.56	Human bone isotope data	142
4.57	Probability distributions of radiocarbon results from burial groups 1 and 2	143
4.58	Ordering of the end probability distribution for burial group 1 and the start of burial group 2	144
4.59	Estimated duration of burial activity within burial groups 1 and 2	144

CHAPTER 5

5.1	Decorated samian pottery	150
5.2	Samian stamps	152
5.3	Mortarium and amphora stamps	153
5.4	Roman pottery	170
5.5	Roman pottery	171
5.6	Roman pottery	172
5.7	Roman pottery	174
5.8	Roman pottery	175
5.9	Roman pottery	176
5.10	Roman pottery	177
5.11	Relative proportion of local wares for Phases 3-5	178
5.12	Relative proportions of regional imports for Phase 3, 4 and 5	179
5.13	Functional analysis of samian (Phase 3-5)	180
5.14	Functional analysis of coarse wares (excluding samian) Phases 3-5 - expressed as % EVE	181
5.15	Vessel composition in shrine interior and Phase 4 settlement contexts	182
5.16	Primary distribution of 1st- to 4th-century coins within the site	187
5.17	Distribution of 1st- and 2nd-century coins	188
5.18	Distribution of 3rd- and 4th-century coins	190
5.19	Distribution of all finds (excluding coins) within the site	206
5.20	Weapons	214
5.21	Tools	215
5.22	Tools	216

List of Figures

5.23	Tools	216
5.24	Transport and trade	217
5.25	Transport and trade	218
5.26	Transport and trade	219
5.27	Votive items	220
5.28	Votive items	221
5.29	Inscribed lead sheet	222
5.30	Writing - seal boxes and styli	222
5.31	Personal - Dress fittings and brooches	224
5.32	Personal - brooches	225
5.33	Personal - brooches	228
5.34	Personal - brooches	229
5.35	Personal - brooches	230
5.36	Personal - other jewellery	231
5.37	Personal - other jewellery	232
5.38	Personal - other jewellery	234
5.39	Personal - other jewellery	237
5.40	Personal - toilet items	238
5.41	Household	240
5.42	Household	241
5.43	Household	242
5.44	Security	243
5.45	Security	246
5.46	Bindings	247
5.47	Objects of uncertain identification	248
5.48	Vessel glass	251
5.49	Rotary querns	253
5.50	Other worked stone	256
5.51	Architectural stone	259
5.52	Architectural stone	260
5.53	Limestone relief panel from the shrine	261
5.54	Ceramic building material	270
5.55	Ceramic building material	271
5.56	Fired clay	273

CHAPTER 6

6.1	Location of burials within the site	276
6.2	Human bone: adult and subadult preservation and completeness comparison	278
6.3	Human bone: prevalence of degenerative joint disease, including osteoarthritis	282
6.4	Dental ageing of main domestic species	290
6.5	Body part presentation of sheep and pig	295
6.6	Age structures of sheep and pig	296
6.7	Ageing comparison of major domestic species	297
6.8	Species groups expressed as a percentage of the total terrestrial coleoptera (ie aquatics excluded) from late Roman wells	302
6.9	Percentage of charcoal taxa by feature type (based upon fragment count)	309

CHAPTER 7

7.1.	Outline of the earliest (Phase 3) Roman settlement	314
7.2.	Outline of settlement expansion and development (Phase 4)	316
7.3	Outline of final phase (5) of settlement	319
7.4	The shrine	326
7.5	Examples of deliberately damaged objects from the shrine	331
7.6	Distribution of all finds on the western side of the road	332
7.7	Distribution within shrine of a) nails and hobnails b) finger rings c) brooches d) hairpins	333
7.8	Higham Ferrers in its regional Roman context	336
7.9	The Raunds Area Survey	337

List of Plates

CHAPTER 1

1.1.	Aerial photograph of Higham Ferrers site in the 1980s prior to any archaeological investigations (© Duchy of Lancaster)	2
1.2	Aerial photograph of Higham Ferrers site during 2002/3 excavations on the Roman settlement (© Duchy of Lancaster)	5
1.3	View of excavations looking northwards across the settlement with building 10850 in the immediate foreground and the road to the west.	7
1.4	View facing west over stone roundhouse 10920	11
1.5	View facing west over rectangular buildings 10860 and 11370 towards the Nene Valley	12

CHAPTER 2

2.1	The excavation of the inverted Collared Urn cremation from a ledge within pit 10002	20
2.2	The Collared Urn, after excavation and cleaning	29

CHAPTER 3

3.1	Machine excavating a section in the Iron Age site looking north-west across the Nene Valley . . .	33
3.2	Excavation of the Iron Age settlement looking north-west	35
3.3	Section across north-eastern side of Iron Age enclosure ditch 253 looking west	37
3.4	Section across southern side of Iron Age enclosure ditch 253 looking east	38
3.5	View across circular building 254 looking west over the Nene Valley	39

CHAPTER 4

4.1	Building 10920, facing east. Scale: 2 m	54
4.2	Buildings 10860 and 11370, facing north-east. Scale: 2 m	63
4.3	Building 11370, paved floor 11802 within extension 12460. Viewed vertically, west at top of photograph. Scale: 2 m	65
4.4	Building 11370, post row 12202, facing south. Scale to right: 2 m	66
4.5	Building 11620, general view facing east. Scale: 2 m	67
4.6	Building 11620, north wall 11747, facing east. Note the manner in which the outer face of the wall is set back from the outer face of the foundation. Scale: 2 m	68
4.7	Building 10870 and well 12885, facing north. Note radial partitions 11299 and 11678 in the northern part of the building.	76
4.8	Well 12885, facing east. Scale: 0.2 m	77
4.9	Building 10900, facing north.	81
4.10	Buildings 10800 and 10810, facing west. Scale: 2 m	85
4.11	Building 10810, drain 12846, facing north.	88
4.12	Burials 10960 (right) and 10965, facing south. Scale: 1 m	93
4.13	Burials 12810 and 12815, facing north-west. Scale: 2 m	95
4.14	Shrine 10930, detail of wall 10735 showing colonnette fragment SF 1225 in situ, facing south. Scale: 1 m	99
4.15	Structure 13030, drain 11611, facing east. Scale: 0.5 m	104
4.16	Building 10850, oven 11625 cutting pottery-filled pit 12698, facing east. Scale: 2 m	108
4.17	Building 10840, buried pottery vessel 11225. Scale: 0.5 m	113
4.18	Burial 12655, facing north. Scale: 0.5 m	117
4.19	Building 10830, facing west. Scale: 2 m	121
4.20	Building 10800, wall 10846, facing west. Scale: 2 m	123
4.21	Building 10810, tile hearth 11147 facing south. Scale: 0.2 m	125
4.22	Building 8019, pit 8035, facing north-east. Scale: 1 m	134
4.23	Burial 8010, facing north-west. Scale: 2 m	136

CHAPTER 7

7.1	View facing north-west over buildings 10820, 10810 and 10800 towards the Nene Valley	321
7.2	View facing south-west from the eastern shrine wall across to the Nene Valley	327
7.3	Pitched stone foundations of the monumental shrine 'entrance'	327
7.4	Artist's reconstruction of the monumental entrance to the shrine	328
7.5	Colonnade fragment (SF 1225) within western wall of the shrine	330
7.6	View of paving within shrine 'outer precinct' looking east towards the settlement	338
7.7	Overall view of excavations at Stanwick, with River Nene beyond (© English Heritage)	339
7.8	Excavations of the villa at Redlands Farm with River Nene beyond (© English Heritage)	339
7.9	Artist's reconstruction of the villa at Redlands Farm	341

List of Tables

CHAPTER 2

2.1	Summary of the struck and burnt unworked flint assemblages from Higham Ferrers	20
2.2	Detailed quantification of the struck flint assemblage	23
2.3	Classification of the microliths	24
2.4	Classification of the microburins	24
2.5	Catalogue of flints illustrated in Figure 2.5	25
2.6	Catalogue of flints illustrated in Figure 2.6	27
2.7	Weights of cremated bone within anatomical categories	30
2.8	Results of the charcoal analysis from the Bronze Age cremation pit	31

CHAPTER 3

3.1	Charred plant remains from the Iron Age settlement	44
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CHAPTER 4

4.1	Building 11370. Summary of internal features	63
4.2	Building 10870. Summary of internal features (Phase 4 and unphased)	77
4.3	Building 10850. Summary of internal features (Phase 5)	108
4.4	Building 10870. Summary of internal features (Phase 5)	111
4.5	Building 10840. Summary of internal features	113
4.6	Radiocarbon data	142-3

CHAPTER 5

5.1	Quantified summary of Roman pottery assemblage	148-9
5.2	Summary of Central Gaulish samian forms (expressed by EVE)	149
5.3	Quantified summary of pottery from Phase 3 contexts	159
5.4	Quantified summary of forms from Phases 3, 4 and 5 contexts	160
5.5	Quantified summary of pottery from Phase 3-4 contexts	161
5.6	Quantified summary of pottery from Phase 4 contexts	163
5.7	Quantified summary of pottery from Phase 4-5 contexts	165
5.8	Quantified summary of pottery from Phase 5 contexts	166
5.9	Quantified summary of pottery from Phase 6	167
5.10	Summary of sherds with post-firing graffiti	168
5.11	Summary of main wares by phase	179
5.12	Chronological quantification of all excavation coins	184
5.13	Summary of coins from the shrine and the settlement	186
5.14	Chronological quantification of the coins recovered to the west of the excavation	186
5.15	Detailed chronological quantification of coins dated AD 260-296	189
5.16	Chronological quantification of the silver coins	189
5.17	Chronological quantification and comparison of coins from Higham Ferrers and Stanwick	192
5.18	Regional comparison of periods of peak coin loss in nucleated/rural settlements, temples and villas	194-5
5.19	Summary quantification by context group, phase and function	198-9
5.20	Summary quantification by context group, phase and raw material	200
5.21	Summary quantification of personal items by context group, type and material	204-5
5.22	Summary of occurrence of brooches by type	207
5.23	Summary quantification of brooches from Stanwick	209
5.24	Summary of occurrence of finger rings by metal, type, context group and phase	210-11
5.25	Summary quantification of hobnails by context group	223
5.26	Summary of hinge fittings by context group	245
5.27	Structural fittings, excluding nails by context group and phase	246-7
5.28	Summary quantification of nails by context group and phase	246
5.29	Summary quantification of bindings by context group and phase	249
5.30	Summary quantification of industrial debris by context group, phase and material	248-9

5.31	Summary quantification of slag by weight (g)	252
5.32	Quantification of ceramic building material by tile forms and main fabric groups	263
5.33	Cutaway forms present and Warry equivalents	266
5.34	Quantity of tile forms from the shrine	268

CHAPTER 6

6.1	Summary of Roman cremated remains	277
6.2	Preservation and completeness	278
6.3	The age and sex of the articulated skeletal remains	278-9
6.4	Summary of dental disease	278-9
6.5	Summary of extra-masticatory wear	281
6.6	Summary of disarticulated remains	284
6.7	Summary of adult burial ritual	285
6.8	Summary of the location of neonatal burials	287
6.9	Number of identified bones by major chronological phase	288
6.10	Preservation level for bones	288
6.11	Number of gnawed bones	288
6.12	Number of burnt bones	288
6.13	Cattle sex estimation	289
6.14	Sheep sex estimation	291
6.15	Pig sex estimation	291
6.16	Epiphyseal closure of wild boar	293
6.17	Quantification of animal remains from the shrine area and settlement (phase 4)	294
6.18	Charred plant remains	301-2
6.19	Waterlogged seeds	303-4
6.20	Other waterlogged macroscopic plant remains	305
6.21	Coleoptera	306
6.22	Other waterlogged insects	307
6.23	Results of the charcoal analysis from Romano-British contexts	310

CHAPTER 7

7.1	Comparison of Higham Ferrers monumental structure with known Roman arches	329
7.2	Potential ritual deposits within the settlement	334

Summary

Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook a series of archaeological investigations on land around Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire, from 1993 to 2003. This work revealed occupation from the Mesolithic through to the medieval period, including part of a substantial Roman roadside settlement and shrine. This volume deals with the Roman remains, in addition to excavated early prehistoric and Iron Age activity in the local area. The important early to mid Saxon settlement and the medieval remains have been published elsewhere (Hardy *et al.* 2007).

The earliest occupation is represented by an extensive redeposited flint assemblage attesting to significant (probably early) Mesolithic activity at the site. Sparse Neolithic occupation was indicated by two pits and a scatter of tools. A late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditch surrounding a probable cremation burial was found to the east of the Roman settlement, while a second cremation burial, within an inverted early Bronze Age Collared Urn, was found in the far western part of the site.

A middle to late Iron Age settlement was located c 370 m north-east of the Roman settlement, and consisted of a series of enclosures with associated ring gullies and other settlement features.

The excavated part of the Roman settlement was established in the earlier 2nd century, with evidence for circular buildings, wells and a small cemetery. The settlement was bounded to the west by a ditch delimiting the eastern side of a north-south road. The layout of the settlement changed significantly during the late 2nd to 3rd century, with a series of mostly rectangular buildings aligned upon the eastern side of the north-south road. A gravel 'pavement' was constructed along the whole length of the roadside frontage of the settlement, while on the western side of the road, a monumental shrine complex was constructed.

During the late 3rd to early 4th century the settlement expanded to the north, although the shrine to the west of the road fell into disuse at this time. The religious focus may have shifted to a small 'temple' at the northern periphery of the settlement. The settlement (or at least the excavated part of it) was abandoned during the second half of the 4th century, with the buildings being subjected to stone robbing, a process that continued into the post-Roman period.

At the time of the Saxon reoccupation of the site (mid 5th century onwards), many of the late Roman boundary ditches still existed as remnant earthwork hollows.

Résumé

Entre 1993 et 2003, Oxford Archaeology (OA) a entrepris une série de fouilles archéologiques dans les secteurs de Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers et du Northamptonshire. Ces travaux ont permis d'attester une occupation continue entre le Mésolithique et le Moyen-Age ainsi que les vestiges d'une voie et d'un édifice cultuel d'époque romaine. Ce volume traite de l'ensemble du site et de ses phases à l'exception de la période saxonne qui a déjà fait l'objet d'une publication en 2007 (Hardy *et al.* 2007).

Les traces d'activités les plus anciennes remontent du Mésolithique. Elles se traduisent par la découverte d'un dépôt de silex, de deux fosses et d'outils. Toutefois, ces vestiges sont épars et paraissent davantage témoigner d'une occupation ponctuelle que permanente. Les phases comprises entre le Néolithique et le Bronze Ancien sont attestées par la présence d'un fossé circulaire qui a probablement dû entourer une sépulture à crémation et qui a été localisé à l'ouest de l'implantation romaine. Une incinération du Bronze Ancien a été clairement identifiée à l'ouest de cette dernière.

La fin de la Protohistoire est représentée par une série d'enclos du milieu du second Age du Fer implantée au nord-est de l'occupation romaine et

associée à des fosses circulaires et d'autres structures.

Les secteurs antiques fouillés ont livré des bâtiments circulaires, des puits et une petite nécropole du II^e siècle. La limite de l'occupation est matérialisée à l'ouest par un fossé barrant tout un secteur oriental alors bordé par une voie formant un axe nord-sud. Cette occupation se caractérise par plusieurs phases chronologiques distinctes. Autour des II^e et III^e siècles, un changement significatif s'est opéré. Il se traduit par l'apparition d'une série de bâtiments rectangulaires longeant le côté oriental du site. Cette dernière, délimitée par l'axe nord-sud, lui-même flanqué d'une allée constituée de graviers, fait face à un complexe cultuel alors implanté dans les quartiers ouest. Au cours des III^e-IV^e siècles, le site s'est étendu au nord alors que le secteur cultuel est laissé à l'abandon. On suppose que celui-ci a été déplacé en périphérie nord et remplacé par un seul édifice de taille bien plus modeste. Le site semble avoir été abandonné pendant la deuxième moitié du IV^e siècle et avoir servi de carrière de pierres, exploitation qui a continué bien après le Bas-Empire. Le milieu du V^e siècle se caractérise effectivement par une relative abondance de fossés attestant de travaux de terrassements.

Zusammenfassung

Oxford Archaeology (OA) unternahm zwischen 1993 und 2003 eine Reihe archäologischer Untersuchungen in der Umgebung von Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferris, Northamptonshire. Diese Untersuchungen wiesen eine Benutzung des Areals vom Mesolithikum bis zum Mittelalter nach, darunter auch eine große römische Straßensiedlung und einen Schrein. Der vorliegende Band behandelt die römischen Hinterlassenschaften und beleuchtet ebenfalls zuvor ausgegrabene frühgeschichtliche und eisenzeitliche Aktivitäten. Die Ergebnisse zu den wichtigen früh- bis mittelsächsischen Siedlungen und den mittelalterlichen archäologischen Überresten wurden bereits in Hardy *et al.* 2007 publiziert.

Die frühesten Besiedlungsspuren zeigen sich anhand von sekundär deponierten Feuersteinansammlungen, welche von einer starken mesolithischen (wahrscheinlich frühmesolithischen) Nutzung des Areals zeugen. Ein spätneolithischer / frühbronzezeitlicher Ringwall, welcher vermutlich eine Brandbestattung umgab, wurde östlich der römischen Siedlung entdeckt, während eine weitere Brandbestattung innerhalb einer frühbronzezeitlichen Halsurne tief im Westen des Areals freigelegt wurde.

Eine mittel- bis späteisenzeitliche Siedlung, bestehend aus einer Reihe von Einfriedungen mit zugehörigen kreisförmigen Wasserablaufgräben und anderen Siedlungsbefunden wurde ungefähr

370m nordöstlich der römischen Siedlung entdeckt.

Der ausgegrabene Teil der römischen Siedlung wurde im frühen 2. Jh. gegründet. Runde Gebäude, Brunnen und ein kleiner Friedhof konnten nachgewiesen werden. Die Siedlung war zum Westen hin durch einen Graben begrenzt, welcher die östliche Seite einer Nord-Süd verlaufenden Straße darstellte. Das Aussehen der Siedlung änderte sich beträchtlich zwischen dem späten 2. und 3. Jh., mit einer Reihe von meist rechteckigen Gebäuden welche entlang der östlichen Seite der Nord-Süd verlaufenden Straße angeordnet waren. Entlang der gesamten Länge der östlichen Seite der Straße wurde ein Bürgersteig aus Kies angelegt, während auf der anderen Seite ein monumentaler Schrein errichtet wurde.

Während des späten 3. bis zum frühen 4. Jh. expandierte die Siedlung gen Norden. Der Schrein verlor zu dieser Zeit an Bedeutung und wurde nicht mehr genutzt. Der religiöse Fokus könnte sich zeitgleich zu einem kleinen „Tempel“ am Nordende der Siedlung verschoben haben. Die Siedlung (oder zumindest der ausgegrabene Teil) wurde während der 2. Hälfte des 4. Jh. verlassen und Steine wurden von den Gebäuden entfernt. Dieser Prozess setzte sich auch in der post-römischen Phase fort.

Zur Zeit der sächsischen Wiederbesiedlung des Areals (ab Mitte des 5. Jh.) existierten noch die Reste vieler spätrömischer Begrenzungsgräben als deutlich sichtbare muldenartige Erdwerke.

Acknowledgements

The scale and longevity of this project ensures that there are many people who have provided contributions both large and small over the years, and we wish to gratefully acknowledge all of their work.

In particular, we gratefully acknowledge the central part played by the Duchy of Lancaster in supporting the project so generously through the years. The Duchy's initial representative was Ken Parsons, who helped formulate the initial project strategy. His successor, Roger Whalley, saw the archaeological project through the fieldwork stage - his cooperation, patience and forbearance in the face of the increasingly complicated archaeology were crucial to the success of the project, and our thanks are profound. Roger was succeeded by Nick Dart, who has overseen the final stages of the project with similar understanding and support. All post-excavation work leading to this publication has been generously funded by English Heritage, and the support of the Project Monitor Helen Keeley is greatly appreciated.

The cast of archaeologists involved in the projects is long and varied. The project was initiated by David Miles, then director of Oxford Archaeological Unit, and was initially managed by Bob Williams. The later stages of the fieldwork were managed by Alan Hardy and post-excavation managed by Alex Smith. A number of Site Managers have been heavily involved; Klara Spandl, David Score, Steve Lawrence, Emily Glass and Gerry Thacker all deserve our appreciation for maintaining such high archaeological standards in what were sometimes very difficult circumstances.

On the curatorial side the East Northamptonshire Planning Authority was initially represented by Glen Foard, who was the architect behind the formulation of a research strategy for the project, and contributed much to the formulation of working hypotheses during the excavations. Latterly, his

successor, Myk Flitcroft coped with the increasingly complex project, deftly walking the tightrope between client and archaeologist, between what was and what was not possible, and making valuable contributions to the understanding of the site.

The post-excavation programme drew on the wisdom and skills of a number of people apart from those credited. In particular, Paul Booth provided invaluable guidance and comments on the text, which is much appreciated.

The authors are pleased to express their thanks to three metal detectorists who participated over the years, Mark Gardener in the early days, and more recently Mark Davis and John Grey. We owe a huge debt to them for the discovery not only of large numbers of everyday items from the settlement but also the discovery and subsequent plotting of the finds defining the shrine. They are also commended for their tireless job of recovering all iron objects down to the last hob nail or tack from the shrine area.

To an archaeologist it is always rewarding when the local community lend support to a project such as this, and we are particularly grateful to the volunteer diggers, including John Richardson and Roy Cox. Without Roy's full time volunteering many features and large pottery assemblages would not have been excavated and collected, and he also provided help in the recovery of metal artefacts across the site. Thanks are also due to Dennis Jackson for his contribution to the excavation and interpretation of the Iron Age site.

Many thanks go to Olwen Mayes, local historian and Founder/Secretary of the Higham Archaeology Society for her inexhaustible enthusiasm and energy, organising several post-excavation local publicity and education events based around the Roman and Saxon excavations. Thanks must also go to Doreen Holyoak, for valuable information on the origin of Kings Meadow Lane.