

Using a current archaeological research framework (regional or thematic), contextualise and synthesise data and results from an agreed archaeological project

Introduction

This work will involve the analysis of a project known as ‘Land south of Soar Valley Way, Enderby, Leicestershire’ to determine its potential contribution to the questions and strategies proposed in the East Midlands Historic Environment Research Framework (EMHERF) (2023a), as well as looking at how its results fit within existing knowledge of the region. The project was undertaken by University of Leicester Archaeological Services in 2015 ahead of a commercial development, and revealed evidence of an agricultural landscape which is believed to have seen activity from the Middle Iron Age into the 3rd century AD (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:1). The key features of the site were a 212m long pit alignment, Roman livestock enclosures, and a metalled trackway leading to a series of watering holes, one of which contained an Iron Age bark shield of national significance (*ibid*). Although the site’s archaeology was described in the report as “unremarkable but for... the bark shield” (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:139), it can be demonstrated that such a site is still able to contribute to the understanding of the region, particularly when looked at alongside other sites in the immediate vicinity (Figure 1).

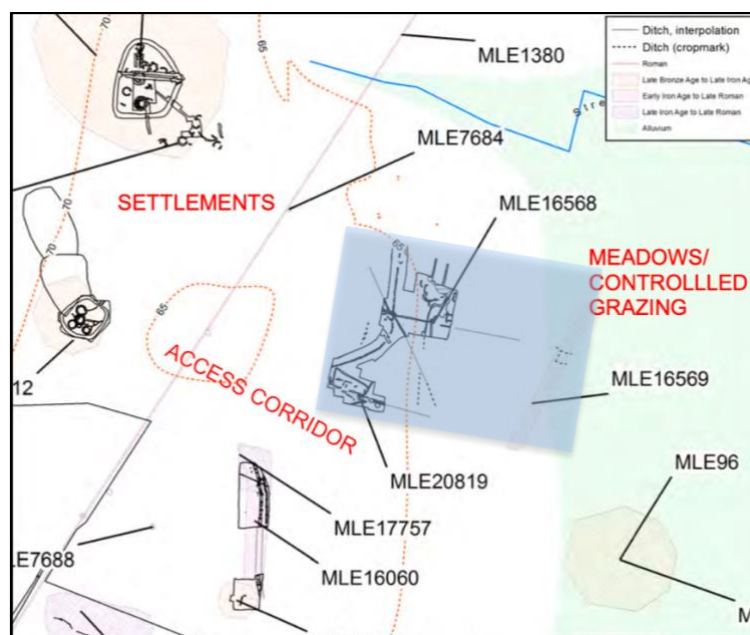


Figure 1. Map showing location of nearby sites (project site in blue) (adapted from Kipling & Beamish, 2019:146)

The current agenda and strategy of the EMHERF was implemented in 2012 (Knight et al., 2012), prior to the commencement of the excavation, and so stands as an appropriate reference point for this project. The report only notes potential contributions of the site to the understanding of the Roman period, as prior evaluations had indicated that this was when the site's most notable features dated from. However, its final conclusions have shown that it could also, and perhaps more meaningfully, contribute to the agenda for the Later Bronze Age and Iron Age as well.

The Later Bronze Age and Iron Age

There are three primary areas of the research framework to which this site can contribute to understandings of the Later Bronze Age and Iron Age. These are: field systems and major linear boundaries; ritual and structural deposition; and diet and land use.

Field systems and major linear boundaries

Relevant framework strategies and questions (EMHERF, 2023b; 2023c):

Strategic Objective 4F

Investigate intra-regional variations in the development of fields and linear boundary systems.

4.6.1: Can we shed further light upon the development of field and boundary systems?

4.6.2: What were the economic, social or political roles of the pit alignments and linear ditch systems that characterised many areas of the East Midlands?

The topic of boundary systems is perhaps where this site has the most to contribute. What we see in the arrangement and phasing of the pit alignment and intersecting ditches (Figure 2) is a progressive change in how the land was divided up between the Middle and Later Iron Age. Phasing of the site places the pit alignment as the earliest in the sequence (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:12), with features such as this believed to have functioned as larger landscape boundary demarcations, and although not unique to the Midlands, they are particularly concentrated in the region (Knight, 2007:197; Rylatt & Bevan, 2007:219-20; Thomas, 2008:144). Such alignments are still not fully understood, and the findings from this site can help further this knowledge, especially in respect to their relationship to water courses. Although the report

authors cast doubt on the idea that the alignment marks the edge of the floodplain, due to its distance from the edge of it, the sharp south-west turn in the alignment can be seen to correspond well with a turn in the nearby River Soar (Figure 3, pink line). This kind of parallel tracing of a water course is a known feature of other pit alignments in the region, notably at sites such as Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire and South Muskham, Nottinghamshire (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:140; Rylatt & Bevan, 2007:221-3; Thomas, 2008:151). The authors conclude that the alignment and the double ditch system on a site to the south may be linked to controlling access to the area, and this does fit in with the seasonal usage of floodplains for livestock grazing, a common activity from the Iron Age into the Roman period, with this believed to have been the function of similar alignments at sites such as Kilvington, Nottinghamshire (Chadwick, 2008:148; Rylatt & Bevan, 2007:226). If we consider the presence of the livestock watering holes, ditches possibly used to control access, and the tracing of the river, the evidence would certainly seem to support a potential connection between alignments and the pastoral use of floodplains in this case.

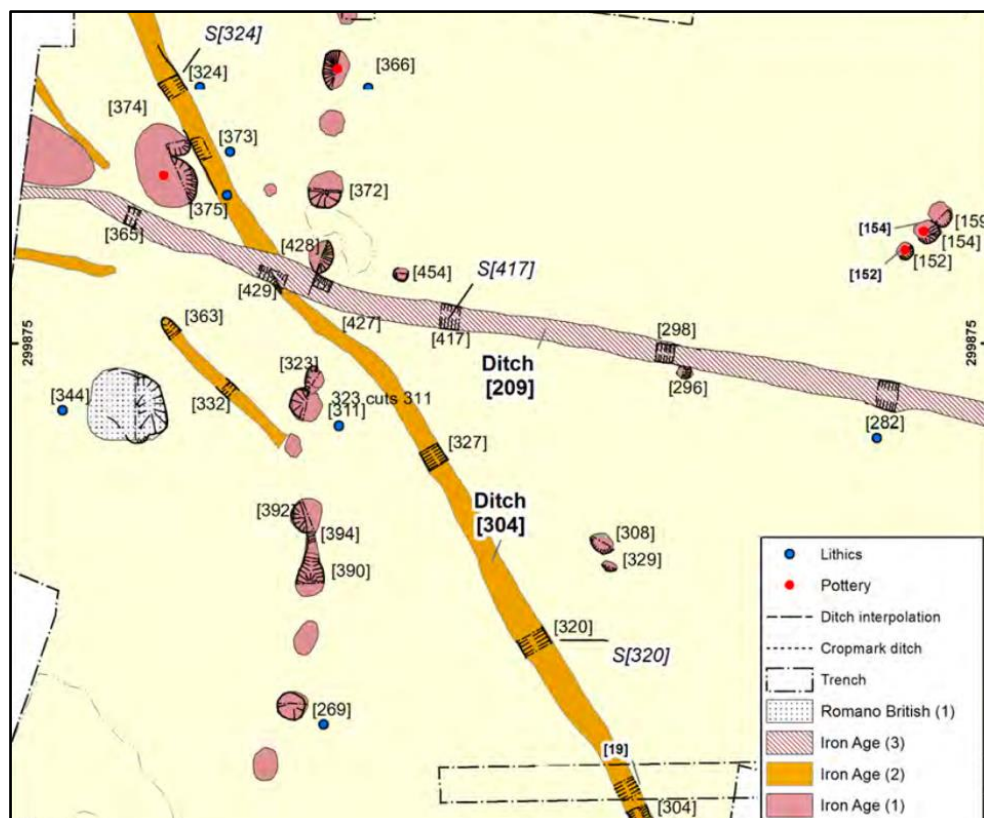


Figure 2. Cropped trench plan showing sequence of intersecting ditches and pit alignment (adapted from Kipling & Beamish, 2019:15)



Figure 3. Aerial image showing the site superimposed over the modern environment (pink - pit alignment, yellow - coaxial ditch) (adapted from Google Earth Pro, 2023)

Though there isn't stratigraphic evidence for the intersecting ditches being later features than the pit alignment, the earlier of the two can be seen to deviate to respect the alignment, and the therefore the alignment is thought to have still been visible in the landscape when these later ditches were created (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:12). The investigation of intersecting boundaries such as this was considered a priority in the prior framework (Willis, 2006:132), and this site's three intersecting boundaries, with different forms and orientations, make it a particularly interesting example. In aerial imaging (Figure 3), the latter of the ditches can be seen to be roughly in line with nearby coaxial field systems still in place, and may possibly be evidence of the introduction of this common Iron Age landscape division into the area (McOmish, 2011). Interestingly, none of these ditches match the character of the double-ditched feature to the south of the site which was dated to the same period, illustrating how complex prehistoric landscape division in the region likely was (Harvey, 2011:51).

The progressive creation of these ditches also brings about discussions of the ways in which the development of nearby settlements potentially related to changing landscape boundaries. The excavation area at the settlement enclosures to the west (Figure 1) was limited and so no evidence of boundaries was discovered during this work, but it was suggested that the northern enclosure may have 'replaced' the southern one (Meek et al, 2004:17-18). This raises the

possibility that such a change coincided with the introduction of new field boundaries, and evidence from the pit alignment may support this, as pottery was only found in pits on the northern side of the coaxial ditch (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:10).

Ritual and structured deposition

Relevant framework strategies and questions (EMHERF, 2023b; 2023c):

Strategic Objective 4H

Characterise placed deposits and sites of shrines or temples

4.7.1: What is the nature of structured deposits in this region and may sub-regional patterns or trends be discerned?

4.7.2: What roles may wet and other natural locations have performed and how might these have changed over time?

The bark shield is an obvious candidate for aiding our understanding of structured deposits. Though in some ways the deposition of a shield in a wet location is not necessarily unique, what perhaps makes its potential deposition different was its placement within a watering hole. Methods of structured deposition in the Midlands are in keeping with occurrences nationwide, with deposition of items of ‘war’, such as shields, occurring in locations such as boundary ditches or, when in watery locations, sources of flowing water (Willis, 2023). The only other known occurrence of a similar deposition in standing water in the region was the find of a quernstone at the base of a probable watering hole at Warren Farm, Lockington, but whether this was in fact structured deposition is uncertain (Thomas, 2013). What is perhaps most interesting about the shield’s placement is the proximity of the watering hole to the more typical deposition locations of the boundary ditches and the river. The use of a watering hole as a depositional location may also inform our understanding on the changing use of wet locations in the region, as the watering hole had been ‘partially infilled’ prior to being recut in the Roman period, suggesting it may no longer have been in active use as a watering hole at the time of deposition and had perhaps taken on a new function (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:25). The significant recut during the Roman period however means that any further evidence of depositional practice at this location would have unfortunately been lost when this occurred.

The agricultural economy and landscape

Relevant framework questions (EMHERF, 2023b):

4.8.2: How may diet and land-use have varied over time and between different ecological zones? Can we identify specialist pastoral zones and elucidate coastal resource exploitation strategies?

The environmental evidence from this site was more substantial than that from either of the two sites nearby and so helps provide a better indication of the surrounding environment and its usage. The plant remains suggested an open environment, with little evidence of arable land close by (Santer & Small, 2019:110), though the settlement site to the west did evidence a slightly higher level of arable crop seeds, so it is possible that such land existed further to the north or west (Meek et al, 2004:17-18). The environmental evidence also demonstrates that this was a reasonably damp environment, as might be expected due its proximity to the river, making it a good site for seasonal grazing (Smith, 2019:112; Willis, 2023). When this information is combined with the placement of the pit alignment, the presence of dung beetles in the samples (Hill & Smith, 2019), the animal bone evidence from the settlement site (Browning, 2004), and the watering holes, it would seem reasonable to suggest that this was an area with a strong pastoral focus. This aligns with previous work that has framed this part of the region as having a notably pastoral character, and the region in general as perhaps having a higher proportion of pastoral sites than might be expected (Clay, 2001; Clay, 2002:118; Willis, 2023).

Roman period

In addition to contributing to the general knowledge of the Roman period in the region as the report references, a more specific topic of the agenda which can be addressed is that of the relationship between Roman boundary systems and those of earlier periods.

Rural Settlement Patterns and Landscape

Relevant Framework strategies and questions (EMHERF, 2023d; 2023e):

Strategic Objective 5H

Investigate the landscape context of rural settlements

5.4.4: How did field and boundary systems relate to earlier systems of land allotment, and how did these boundary networks develop over time?

Although the building of enclosures and the quarrying pits during the Roman period suggests a possible intensification of activity on the site, there is no suggestion of a change from its previous pastoral nature (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:141). The pit alignment and ditches show no signs of being disturbed, suggesting they were possibly still visible in the environment and continued to be respected. The metalling/trackway to the watering hole continued to be used with the new southern enclosure built alongside it, and the primary new linear feature is the double ditch system which was possibly used simply to control livestock access to the watering holes from the northern enclosure (Kipling & Beamish, 2019:142). This continuation of use and undisturbed boundary features, together with the lack of evidence for Roman activity on the settlement site to the west, is in keeping with the earlier centuries of the Roman period in the region when Roman rural activity is believed to have been more likely to shift location within the existing field boundaries than rewrite them (Taylor, 2023). It is likely however that the Fosse Way Roman road (Figure 1, MLE7684), which would have passed between this site and the settlement to the west, would have cut through existing field systems, and this may have necessitated a degree of settlement reorganisation, which may account for the apparent absence of Roman activity at the settlement site and the intensification of activity in this area (Meek et al, 2004:12).

Conclusion

As can be seen, the information that this ‘unremarkable’ site has provided still adds nicely to our understanding of this part of the region and can contribute to numerous aspects of the regional framework, particularly the progressive nature of the way the landscape came to be divided up. Occurrences of intersecting boundaries that can be phased with a reasonable level of confidence, as was the case here, offer unique opportunities to develop our understanding of a period of time that saw a notable increase in landscape division (Knight, 2007:190). And while the discovery of the shield doesn’t necessarily change our understanding of the region in particular, it may help shape the understanding of Iron Age material culture on a national level, and the unusual nature of its possible deposition provides an intriguing suggestion of a

greater degree of variation in depositional practice in the region than is currently understood. It is perhaps the main flaw of commercial archaeology that without the discovery of the shield, this project might have simply joined the ever-growing grey literature archives and been given little consideration until further work was undertaken nearby. An individual 'unremarkable' site like this might sometimes be limited in what it can add to our understanding by itself, but there are many ways big and small that such sites can further our knowledge when viewed as part of the wider landscape and beyond that, the region as a whole.

Word Count: 2,181

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