RITUALS, HOARDS AND HELMETS:  
a ceremonial meeting place of the Corieltavi  
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In 2000 when a group of amateur archaeologists were field-walking on a hillside near Market Harborough they found a number of Iron Age and Roman coins. Subsequent extensive excavation revealed that the coins, along with other artefacts and animal bone deposits, belonged to an impressive ritual site with evidence of feasting. The site was probably a sacred place of the Corieltavi, the Iron Age people who lived in the area and who may have gathered here regularly in the years leading up to the Roman invasion.

THE DISCOVERY

When Ken Wallace started finding Iron Age coins on a Leicestershire hillside in 2000, he knew he had found something important. Six years later extensive excavations and research have revealed that 2000 years ago this field near Market Harborough was the scene of artefact deposition, ritual, and animal sacrifice.

The site was discovered by a local fieldwork group – one of many set up over the last 30 years by Leicestershire County Council to encourage interested people to become involved in finding out more about the county’s past. During a field-walking session in November 2000 the group found Roman and late Iron Age pottery and animal bone. Ken, who is an amateur metal detectorist obtained permission from the farmer to return to the site where, over a number of days, he recovered over 200 coins; these were identified by the British Museum as late Iron Age together with contemporary Roman denarii.

Knowing that there were more coins still in the ground it was quickly realised that, once the word got out, the site was in danger from illegal metal detectorists and there was still more work to be done. English Heritage agreed to fund the initial excavations and the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) started work in 2001 (Priest & Clay 2004).

EXCAVATIONS

Geophysical survey and trial trenching confirmed extensive 2nd–4th century Roman enclosures and ditches, as well as possible Iron Age round houses to the north-west of the site and a single ring ditch (possibly a prehistoric round barrow) to the south-east. Unfortunately, where the majority of the coins had been found,
there were no geophysical features; this suggested that they may have represented a single hoard that had become scattered by ploughing.

As Ken had plotted his finds onto a grid, ULAS were able to dig a small trench over the densest concentration of coins, where, to everyone’s surprise, six coin hoards were uncovered within the first few hours of excavation. The trench was widened and it soon became obvious that not only were there more hoards but that they lay in an entrance-way of an enclosure ditch. Further work over subsequent years, funded by, ULAS, the BBC, and the British Museum and by using volunteer help from the local field-work group revealed that the coins belonged to a rich ritual site that had been in use around the time of the Roman Invasion of Britain (AD 43).

The site sits on the brow of a small hill with extensive views to the south across the Welland Valley. A narrow ditch defines the site and its steepness along the eastern side suggests it may have been fenced. The ditch is geometrical in shape with an entrance-way to the east (Fig. 1). Although the southern ditch appears to continue beyond the excavations, the northern portion of the ditch ends with a rounded terminal. It is not clear whether this represents a second entrance or whether the ditch formed merely a partial screen around the site.

The entrance lay approximately 2/3rds of the way along the eastern side with a shallow pit in the centre dividing it into two at an angle. The terminals are also kinked almost as if to guide traffic in and out through two different sides (Fig. 1).

Thirteen coin hoards were found on the northern side of the entrance-way. A small post-hole just in front of the coin hoards may have held a pole or totem perhaps to restrict the exit. Although the hoards were grouped together in a small area they appeared to have been placed randomly and many of the coins formed distinct clusters suggesting that they may have been placed in bags (Fig. 2).

The Iron Age coins belong in the main to a series produced between 50BC and 50AD by local East Midlands tribe the Corieltavi, whose name may mean ‘army/host of many rivers’, which would suit the low-lying region. (The name was changed in 2002 from Corieltauvi due to a corrected reading of inscription RIB II.5, 2491.150 (Breeze 2002, Tomlin and Hassel 2003).) This rare discovery of so many individual coin hoards in one area is a rare opportunity for detailed analysis. The broad similarity of the profiles of the individual groups – each of which contain all of the major varieties of locally produced inscribed coinage – is highly suggestive of their having been buried over a relatively short period of time towards the end of the production of the local series between about AD 30 and 50.

The central pit within the entrance also contained the skeleton of a small dog lying on its side; its back had been damaged by a land drain (Fig. 3). The placement of the dog and in particular the strange angle of its front legs which had been pulled back under its body indicates a ritual burial. Dog burials in pits and graves, with suggestions of a ritual aspect, are fairly common on Iron Age and Roman sites in Britain and Europe, (Green 1992, 112). Dogs seem to have been used such as ritual offerings in pits previously used for grain storage in Danebury Hillfort (Grant 1984) and there are several examples of dogs buried in Roman graves in Leicestershire.
Fig. 1. The excavation plan shows the coin hoards just inside the entrance-way to the enclosure opposite the deposits of animal bones.
Fig. 2. One of the coin hoards which seem to suggest that the coins may have been put into the ground in bags.

Fig. 3. Skeleton of a dog buried in the entrance-way to the enclosure. The front legs have been pulled back beneath the body suggesting that it might have been deliberately placed there.
South of the entrance was a pit containing more coins and a mass of corroded iron that on closer inspection turned out to be fragments of a Roman cavalry helmet. The helmet had been placed upside down on the eastern side of the ditch along with a large group of coins. Due to its fragile nature, the contents of the pit were lifted as a single block and transported to the British Museum for careful excavation and conservation. The core of the helmet, which was constructed in iron, is largely corroded away leaving only areas of the gilded silver surface finish. It appears to be similar to one found at Newstead, and dated to the Flavian period (AD 69–96). The best parallel so far, however, is a helmet from the Roman fortress at Xanten in Germany, a foreign example and a military one.

The helmet appears to have been a dress, or parade helmet, decorated with stylised human hair over the bowl with a wreath of leaves and a floral motif on the neck-guard. There also appears to be at least four cheek-pieces (although only two were needed on the helmet). Recently the decorated side of one of these cheek-pieces was exposed, revealing an image of a male figure in Roman military dress, on horse back, with one hand raised in salute. The figure is being crowned by the

Fig. 4. Decorated cheek-piece from the helmet showing a victorious horseman. Behind his shoulder is a winged victory placing a laurel wreath on this shoulder whilst the enemy is trampled beneath the hooves of the horses.
goddess Victory. Beneath the horse a barbarian is seated in submission with his head in his hands. The imagery (especially the use of victory crowning the horseman) leaves little doubt that the depicted individual is either the emperor or a member of the Imperial family (Fig. 5).

More than 1,100 coins were buried with the helmet, thus dating the deposition to the same period as the coin hoards in the entrance-way (roughly AD 30–50). The remarkable similarity between the composition of these coins and one of the hoards from the entrance-way further suggests that the helmet may even have been deposited as part of the same votive act as at least one of these hoards.

The presence of a silver decorated Roman helmet at this local ritual site raises the question of how it got there. The depositor may have earned it while serving as an officer in a Roman cavalry unit at the time of the Roman Conquest or possibly even before. Alternatively it might represent part of the captured spoils of a battle although it is unlikely this parade helmet itself was ever worn in battle.

Just south of the pit containing the helmet an excavated section of the ditch produced a group of silver artefacts. These included a decorated silver circular mount with holes around the edge, presumably for attachment. The outer rim is damaged and further holes were made at a later date. Two large silver ingots – one semicircular and one triangular (the typical shape of known British mid to late Iron Age crucibles) – were also discovered in the base of the ditch. They both appear to have been made by melting down coins; and there are at least two coins protruding from the top of the triangular ingot. The ingots were deliberately placed upright on their edges within the ditch.

A silver bowl, similar in style to the early to mid first century copper alloy bowl from the Stanwick Hoard, was placed vertically against the triangular ingot (Fig. 6). There is a large linear cut in the bowl that may have been made in
antiquity although it should be noted that the bowl lay directly beneath a land drain and may have been made by a modern spade. Directly above the artefacts were more than 100 coins scattered in the upper ditch fill. Unlike the rest of the coins from the site, these were mainly earlier uninscribed coinage, suggesting that this area may have formed an earlier focus of ritual deposition, sometime during the last decades of the first century BC, or the early first century AD.

**FEASTING AND ANIMAL SACRIFICE**

No features were found within the interior of the site. However, outside the site immediately east of the entrance lay a large spread of animal bones. Excavation of the upper layers soon revealed a number of shallow pits packed with animal bones, some of which had clearly gone into the ground as articulated parts. The bones are still being processed but initial studies show that the majority are from pigs and although all parts of the anatomy were represented, there is a higher proportion of meat-bearing bones.

Most of bones were un-fused and over three-quarters of the animals died before they were one year old (some had lived for only a few weeks or months).
These animals would therefore not have reached their full weight suggesting that, although they may have provided food, this was not the primary reason for their killing. The lack of gnawing and generally good preservation indicates that the bones were quickly deposited in the pits and not left lying around for scavengers.

Bone from two of the pits was radiocarbon-dated at the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit (Samples: OxA-12249, OxA-12250). Both dates indicate a 95.4% probability that the animals died in the period 50BC-AD80 with a 68.2% probability that they were killed between 40BC–AD55. This implies they are contemporary with the coins and could be evidence of offerings and feasting associated with their ceremonial burial. Pigs are often associated in Celtic myth with feasting and the underworld (Green 1992, 1). An Iron Age bronze tankard handle was recovered from the topsoil above the pits and perhaps provides further evidence for ceremonial feasting (Fig. 8). Sacrifice of, and/or feasting on young animals of a selected species appears to be a particular feature of shrine sites. Comparisons can be made with assemblages from other temples and shrines of the period such as Hayling Island where the majority of the 20,000 animal bones were pig or sheep/goat (King & Scoffe 1991), the predominantly goat/sheep assemblage at Uley (Levitan 1993), and at Harlow where the majority of the slaughtered sheep associated with the shrine were young lambs (Legge et al. 2000.).
COINAGE AND DATING

The 5,294 gold and silver coins recovered suggests that the votive activity on site dates to the later 1st century BC and the first half of the 1st century AD. Most of the Iron Age coins belong to the series attributed to the people within the East Midlands at this time known as the Corieltavi, although there are a number of Eastern Iron Age issues of Cunobelin (c. AD 10–40) together with Roman republican denarii (struck before 31 BC), and early Imperial issues. The latest coin from a hoard context is a single issue of Claudius struck in AD 41/42. Analysis of the various distinct coin groups suggests that there are two main periods of coin deposition. The first is the deposit of mainly uninscribed coins and silver objects and ingots from the upper fill of the ditch south of the entrance-way. The uninscribed coinage would indicate this probably dates to early in the 1st century AD. A later series of depositions was then made over a short period of time between about AD 30 to 50; these include the 13 hoards in the entrance-way and the coin and helmet deposit in the pit immediately to the south of this area.

Although the radiocarbon dates could place the animal bone deposition to either of these periods it seems likely that it is linked to the later ritual phase. The
placement of the pits seems quite deliberately focused on the coins in the entrance-way where the coin hoards would be clearly visible through the entrance from the pits (and equally the animal bone pits would be visible from the coin hoards).

In addition a small number of early Gallo-Belic imported coins and gold British QC\(^1\) coins were recovered from within and above the animal bone pits. No other coins of this type were found elsewhere on the site. These coins all date to the immediate post-Caesarian period and may have belonged to an earlier hoard that was later disturbed by the digging of the pits for the animal bone.

The site therefore appears to have been in use as a place for ritual depositions from at least the mid 1st century BC. Despite numerous later Roman pits and features on the site, the top of the hill containing the Iron Age site appears to have been intentionally avoided, suggesting that although there is no direct evidence for its continued use after the 1st century AD it was known about throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.

**FUNCTION AND PURPOSE**

The site lies in a prominent position in the landscape and appears to have been an open air meeting place for specific ritual processes. Despite the lack of any structure associated with the deposits it shares many similarities with Iron Age shrines known from further south and there may well have been natural features within the site such as trees of stones. There is an open space defined by a geometrical boundary with an eastern entrance-way and deliberately placed deposits of coins and objects with no intention of recovery. There is strong evidence for feasting and offerings of specific types of animals as well as a distinct lack of domestic refuse such as pottery and environmental evidence from excavated contexts. The entrance-way appears to have been designed to control access with the angled terminals and a central pit serving to guide people in and out of the site.

The site would probably have served a wide area and may well have acted as a meeting place for the local Corieltavi people. Prior to this new discovery it had been thought that the Corieltavi were one tribe ruled by a single chieftain, with the various names inscribed on the coins (such as *Vep, Iatison, Aun, Volisos, Isuvprasy*) representing a number of individual successive rulers of this large regional tribe and with the coins being arranged in a typological sequence representing this. At this site however, the sheer numbers of well-preserved inscribed coins deposited over a relatively short period of time suggest that there might have been a number of small tribal groups co-existing within the region, each with their own ruler and coinage. The site, close to the River Welland, could have been a place where these groups met together to take part in social, political, and ritual activities as part of a larger regional community. The deposition of coins and artefacts, along with feasting, could serve say a religious purpose such as supplication to the gods, or could perhaps be part of more mundane acts such as the forging of alliances or the election of new rulers.

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1 Early coins are designated British A onwards. QC coins are generally attributed to the Atrebates tribe in Southern Britain.
Not only is this site unparalleled on a national level in terms of artefact recovery and the preservation of their original context, but it also has the potential to aid in the interpretation of other hoard sites. The question as to whether this site is a unique site is an interesting one. It is unique as of now but it is likely that there are others waiting to be found. A re-interpretation of some already-known sites might reveal other examples. Few other coin hoard locations have been as extensively investigated as this one which has important implications for several Late Iron Age sites both in this country and across other parts of north-west Europe.

The project has been an excellent example of community archaeology. Although the excavations were supervised by ULAS, much of the fieldwork and subsequent processing (e.g. pot washing and bone sieving) was undertaken by members of the local fieldwork group. It has been supported by English Heritage, the BBC, the British Museum, and Leicestershire County Council, along with local groups such as, professional archaeologists, local amateur archaeologists, not to mention schoolchildren and the general public, all demonstrating how these groups can work together to achieve great things.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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