

# **HARLOW TEMPLE EXCAVATIONS 1985-86**

An Interim Report

Richard Bartlett



**Occasional Paper No 1**

HARLOW TEMPLE EXCAVATIONS 1985/6

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## FOREWORD

This is the first report in the Harlow Museum Occasional Paper Series on current archaeological research undertaken by the Archaeology Section of the Museum.

The format adopted is similar to the occasional paper series produced by Essex County Council, Archaeology Section. It is hoped that this report may stimulate interest and will provide a detailed assessment of the excavations to date. Since it is envisaged that a further season of excavations at the Romano British Temple will be desirable, the final report will not be available for archaeologists for perhaps three years. However, the need to circulate information about the general character of the site is recognised in order that discussion may be forthcoming and that the final report may thus be enhanced.

This paper is an interim statement of the results based on stratigraphic and provisional finds dating. Some of the interpretations are tentative and may be subject to revision at a later date. In particular the dating and life span of some of the features (pits, depressions and gullies) is difficult to assess. However, the main interpretations are unlikely to change.

The term Belgic is used to refer to features dated c.50 BC to AD 50 since it is recognised that some Belgic pottery and artifacts continued after the Roman Conquest.

The final excavation report will be published in Essex Archaeology and History.

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Harlow Museum  
March 1987

## SUMMARY

An Iron Age settlement preceeded the Roman Temple and may perhaps be part of a late Iron Age/Belgic religious complex. Traces of a circular middle-late Iron Age round house lay beneath the Roman Temple Courtyard. Two phases of surfacing for the Courtyard together with much destruction debris, including the stone head of Minerva were also found. Landscaping of the site in 1972 resulted in probable damage to the structure of the Roman Temple and the present layout, whilst accurately representing the size of the remains, is inaccurately sited.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavation was directed by the author on behalf of Harlow Museum and the Department of the Environment. Access to the site was kindly given by the New Towns' Commission. Financial assistance was generously provided by Harlow District Council, BP International Limited and Harlow Chemical Company Limited.

The excavation was supervised by Geoff Tann and Richard Cleal assisted by Betty Gobel and Wally Davey. Post excavation work has been carried out by Betty Gobel, Richard Cleal, Roy Harold, Hazel Martingell and members of the Harlow Archaeology Group, all of whom helped in the compilation of the illustrations.

I am grateful to the following specialists whose information has been used in this report: Chris Going (Roman pottery); Nigel Brown (prehistoric pottery); Dr. Miranda Green, Catharine Johns and Dr. Martin Henig (sculpture); Dr. John Kent (coins); Hazel Martingell (flints); John Evans (geophysical survey).

Betty Gobel and Wally Davey gave valuable information and advice about previous excavations on the site. The finds were illustrated by Betty Gobel, Hazel Martingell and Roy Harold and the plans were drawn by Richard Cleal and Roy Harold. The report was typed by Ann Wallett of Harlow Museum, while valuable comments on the drafts were made by members of Essex County Council Archaeology Section, especially Dave Buckley and Ian Jones, Museum Curator, Harlow Museum.

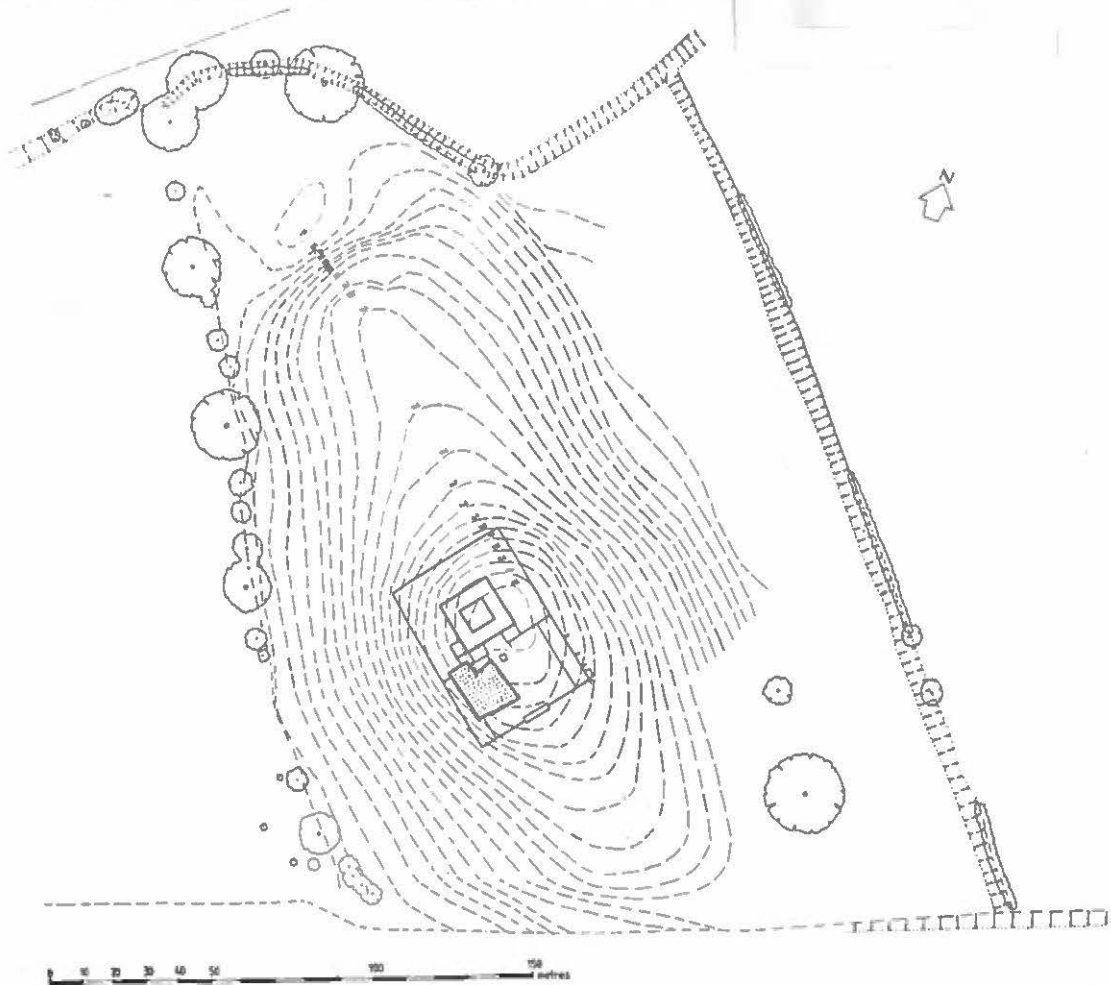
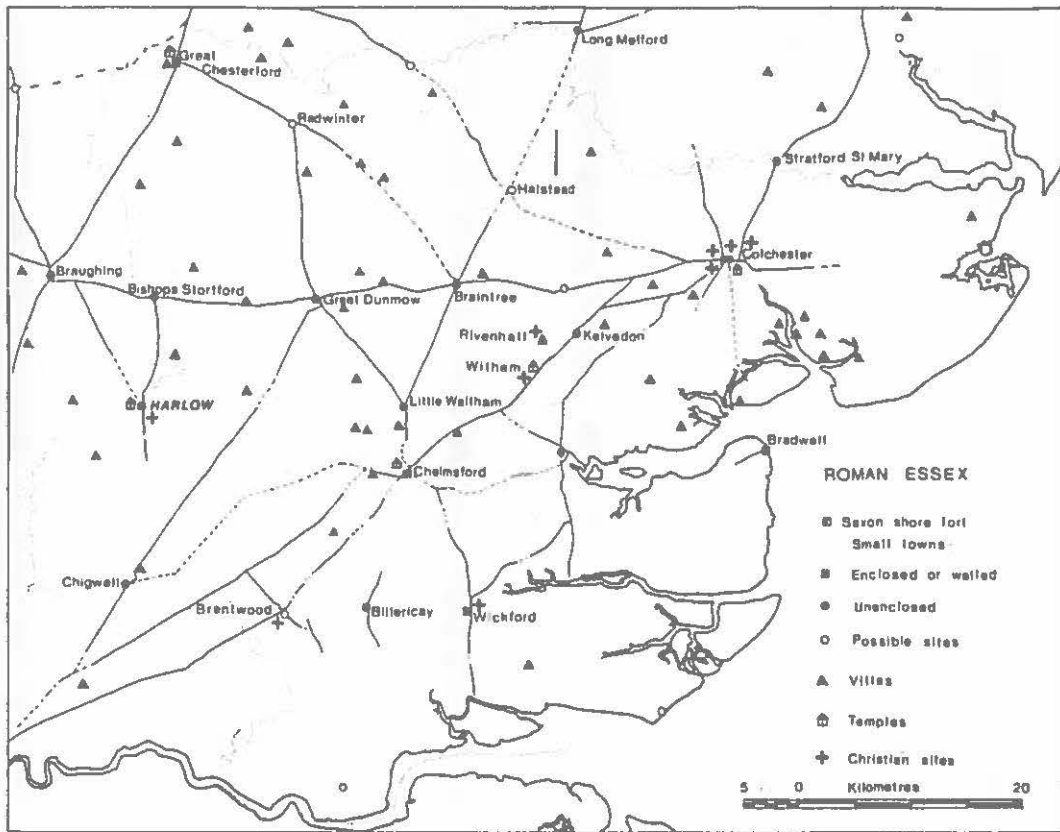


fig.1 Location plan.

## INTRODUCTION

### LOCATION AND SURFACE GEOLOGY (Fig.1)

Harlow Temple (TL486123) is situated on a small elongated oval hill (Stonegrove Hill), south of the River Stort, 1.2km north west of Old Harlow. The hill rises 6m above the flood plain of the River Stort and borings suggest that it had once been surrounded by marsh. It now lies in the middle of the Riverway Industrial Estate and has been extensively encroached upon on the northern and eastern side by modern factory buildings. The southern slope was truncated and levelled in 1841, during the construction of the London to Bishops Stortford Railway Line. The hill was surrounded by a ditch 4.5m wide (Wheeler 1928). A causeway crossed the ditch at the southern end of the hill and the presumed course of the Roman road from the Temple to Little London is marked by old field boundaries, a sunken Hollow Way and ditches marking the Harlow-Latton parish boundary. The subsoil over the top of the site is a coarse yellow sandy gravel with boulder clay on the lower slopes, in part covered by sandy soil produced by weathering of the upper part of the hill. These glacial deposits are believed to have once been surrounded by a meander of the River Stort. The site has been farmed since and possibly before the medieval period and the lower slopes have been ploughed. It is unlikely that the upper slopes could have been used for anything other than grazing due to the presence of substantial wall footings close to the surface.

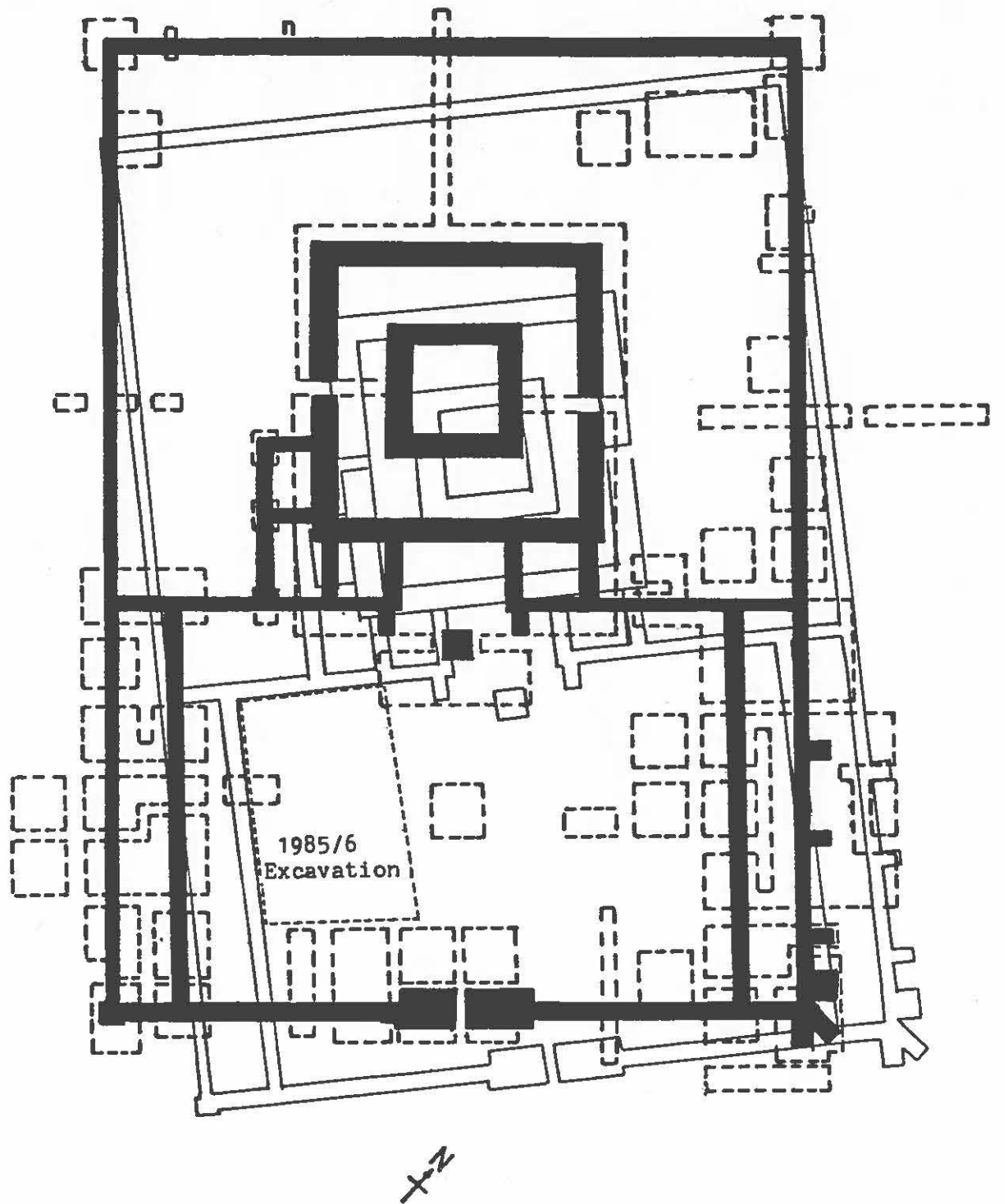
### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site has been known since 1764 when the antiquary Richard Gough recorded bricks and foundations being disturbed by ploughing (Bodl. M.S. Gen.Top. e.18, fo. 160). John Barnard, in 1821 reported to the Society of Antiquaries in London that 'There is a field called Standing groves, situated a mile south (sic) of this town, near the River Stort, of an oval form rising gradually all round to the centre ..... In digging into this hill, a few years since, the workmen discovered some very strong walls which they were unable to penetrate' (Barnard 1821).

Speculation about the nature of the hill's occupation history continued until 1921 when the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments concluded that sufficient evidence for a Roman building or buildings and pre Roman occupation existed and stated that excavation was desirable.

The site was first excavated in 1927 by Miller Christy who trenched the summit of the hill and revealed the Cella foundations. R.E.M.Wheeler visited the site and described the structure as a typical Romano Celtic temple in his classic paper on known Romano Celtic Temples (Wheeler 1928). Further excavations were carried out in 1935-37 by Mr. A.T.Hill and Mr. Cotterill of the London Museum, who traced parts of the southern Courtyard buildings (VCH. Essex. 1963)

The major investigation of the hill was carried out by the West Essex Archaeological Group (W.E.A.G.) from 1962 to 1971. Due to the encroachment of Industrial development, they were requested by Professor Sheppard Frere to re-investigate the temple before the site was obscured by the surrounding factories. Their report on the eight seasons of work (directed by N.E.France and Betty Gobel) entitled 'The Romano British Temple at Harlow' was published as a monograph in 1985. Extensive trenching revealed the ground plan of a square temple of conventional Romano British type with a central Cella surrounded by an



KEY: Known walls outlined in black  
Modern layout unshaded  
Excavation trenches outlined in broken lines.



fig.2 Plan showing position of known excavations and post landscaping layout



ambulatory, built in the Flavian period. It was subsequently enlarged in the early AD C3rd with the addition of flanking buildings to the south with the whole site enclosed by a curtain wall including a formal gateway. In addition, prehistoric material together with middle-late Iron age (Belgic) features were uncovered but the resources available did not allow these features to be fully investigated.

In 1972, Harlow Development Corporation, together with the Department of the Environment, authorised the landscaping of the hill. The intention was to lay out the known remains with concrete paving slabs, while preserving the archaeological levels beneath a level capping of imported topsoil and ballast. Trees were also planted with the intention of returning the hill to its original appearance.

However, the work appears to have been unco-ordinated and contemporary reports suggest that the landscaping was less sensitively carried out than might have been expected. Large areas of the known site were damaged by earth moving machinery including the partial removal of the wall footings on the north and north west side of the temple. Neither the excavators, (W.E.A.G.) nor Harlow Museum were informed about the starting date of the landscaping, nor was the responsible officer within the Harlow Development Corporation. A considerable amount of archaeological material was disturbed, including the only known Romano British Christian artifact known from this area. The site, which had been marked out by W.E.A.G., was so disturbed that the final positioning of the paving slabs, indicating the walls and the orientation of the whole structure was inaccurately carried out. The resultant layout has subsequently been found to be positioned too far south and too far east. In places the discrepancy between excavated walls and the paving slabs, is as much as 6 metres. More seriously, it appears that the damage to the north and west of the structure may have resulted in the almost total removal of known features and unexcavated areas.

In 1984, with the publication of the W.E.A.G. excavation imminent, it was decided to reapply to Scheduled Monument Consent to investigate a large cropmark to the south of the temple gateway (site A) together with an investigation of the areas within the courtyard previously unexcavated by W.E.A.G. (site B). The aim of the latter excavation was to establish whether the pre Roman features found during the earlier excavations might in fact be part of an earlier Celtic shrine, as had been suggested by Rodwell (Rodwell. W. 1980).

Excavations were preceded by a geophysical survey carried out by John Evans of the North East London Polytechnic in the area of both the cropmark south of the gateway and within the courtyard south of the cella.

#### Site A (Fig.1)

Resistivity surveys of the area between the railway line and the temple gateway indicated that the cropmark visible on the 1962 aerial photograph (University of Cambridge, St. Joseph) was caused by a major variation in the resistance of the subsoil, possibly indicating the existence of a large structure. An area of 437m<sup>2</sup> was opened up in order to investigate this area but the results obtained were disappointing. Upon investigation, the anomaly proved to be caused by a large pocket of natural sand which was lying close to the surface. The depth of topsoil covering this (natural) feature was only 30cm and it appears likely that ploughing and natural weathering had removed any traces of archaeological deposits that may have existed. All material recovered from this area was very heavily abraded and no stratified deposits were found.

## Site B

This site lay on the western side of the courtyard of the Roman temple. An area 9m x 22m was opened and it soon became apparent that the present layout, following the landscaping was misaligned by several metres. Previous (W.E.A.G.) excavation trenches occupied the southern part of the site and it was decided to concentrate on the largely unexcavated northern area of the cutting. Because of the misalignment, the area investigated in 1985/6 is at an angle to the previous trenches.

### IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

The site lies on the top of the Temple mound. Flint tools dating from the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age periods have been recorded. Cremation urns from the late Bronze Age were found during the 1962-71 excavations and are described in the W.E.A.G. report. (France and Gobel 1985).

The earliest structural features uncovered both by W.E.A.G. and during the 1985/6 excavations belong to the Iron Age. Residual early Iron Age handmade coarse flint gritted pottery was found in small quantities but the earliest pottery which can be used to date specific contexts is handmade, sometimes burnished, sandy middle Iron Age pottery. The quantity of wheel thrown 'Belgic' grog tempered pottery recovered was limited, but some contexts have been dated to the late Belgic period by the inclusion of Belgic metalwork.

#### PHASE I MIDDLE IRON AGE (Fig.3 )

No contexts earlier than middle Iron Age date were identified in the current excavations, although residual late Bronze Age and early Iron Age pottery was recorded. It is possible that an earlier settlement on this site has yet to be identified or may have been disturbed during the various construction phases of the Roman Temple.

The major middle Iron Age (3rd-1st BC) features uncovered beneath the courtyard was a semi-circular gully belonging to a round house which matches up with the small portion of gully excavated by W.E.A.G. The gully was V shaped in profile and averaged 40cm deep and 1m wide. It lay beneath the 'Belgic' loam layer which once covered the site. No clear evidence of recutting was recorded and most of the pottery appeared to be deeply stratified in the silted up ditch fill.

The interior of the round house has not yet been fully excavated but the eastern half had been badly disturbed and in places removed by late Roman activity probably associated with the late AD 4th destruction.

The round house was represented by a deep continuous gully, the western side of which was found during 1962-71. This gully may represent a beam or post trench or even a drip gully (Drury 1978, 121, fig.67). The diameter of the circle formed by this gully is about 13m. Similar round houses of this period have been found at Little Waltham (Drury 1978) and at Ivy Chimney's Witham (Turner 1982).

The interior of the round house had largely been removed, by a late Roman pit and by a small excavation trench cut by W.E.A.G. (F.9) A number of pits and post/stake holes cut into the natural sand were excavated within the interior of the round house. These have been dated to the later Belgic phase. No features of middle Iron Age date within the structure were identified.

✓ HARLOW TEMPLE EXCAVATION, 1986 TRENCH B, PLAN 3

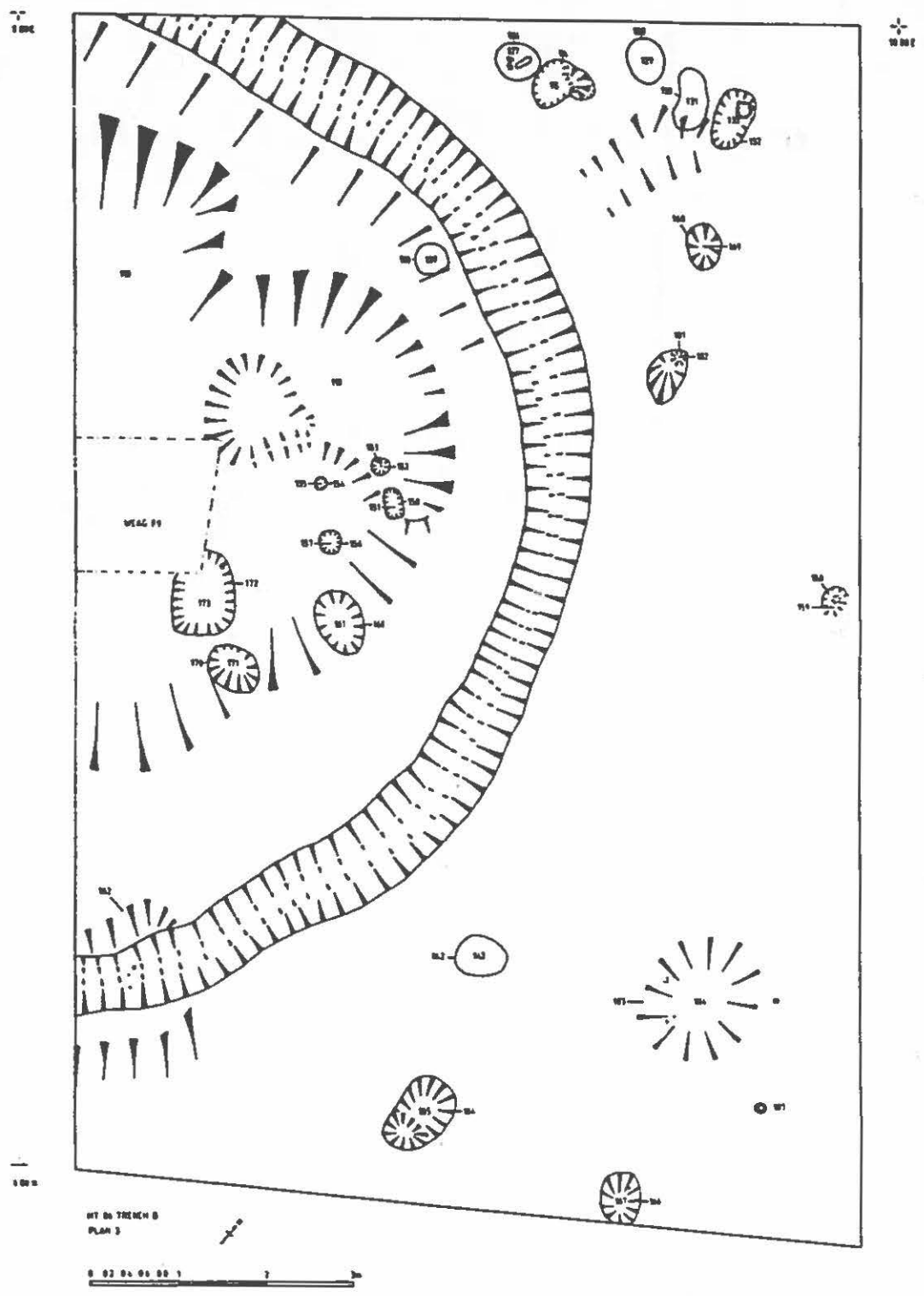


fig.3 Major features 1985/86  
(Iron Age and Belgic features)

Analysis of the animal bone found in the gully fill has not yet been completed but cow and sheep were present. A number of earlier flint flakes were also found.

## PHASE 2. BELGIC (Fig.3)

A number of features (post holes, post pits and stake holes) dated to the later Belgic period by associated metalwork were found beneath the loam layer which originally covered the site. These include the features found within the interior of the earlier round house.

Some of the features were fairly shallow whereas some were deeper and may have been recut. Four smaller post/stake holes within the interior of the round house may represent a four post structure but an interpretation of the purpose of these features within a comparatively small area could be misleading. A larger area needs to be investigated before their function can be assessed.

## DISCUSSION.

The principal aim of the excavations was to examine the possibility that a pre Roman religious shrine may have existed on the Temple mound. The very large number of (votive) Belgic coins recovered during previous excavations suggested that a focus for this activity lay in the south western area of the later Roman courtyard.

The site appears to have been occupied throughout the Iron Age as is shown by the range of pottery found both during the W.E.A.G. excavations and during 1985/86. The W.E.A.G. excavations concentrated on the investigation of the Roman religious aspects of the site and only a small area of the Iron Age settlement was sampled. Late Bronze Age/early Iron Age flint tempered pottery was recovered during the excavations which suggests a possible start of occupation in the mid C8th BC.

The large scale construction associated with the Roman Temple and the later destruction and robbing of the site has clearly disturbed and, in part, removed earlier occupation levels. The size and extent of the settlement during the Iron Age is unclear and may have been far more extensive than is known at present.

The presence of a large number of late Belgic votive artifacts (coins, brooches and pins) both within the upper fill of the round house gully and within the interior of the structure invites speculation. It could be argued that the middle Iron Age structure may have continued in use or whose site may have been used into the Belgic period. Although it cannot be stated with any certainty, the possibility that the area associated with the round house may have been connected with the religious use of the site in the late C1st BC-early AD C1st cannot be ruled out.

Drury (1980) argues that smaller settlements in the Iron Age may have had a religious role and the position of this circular structure beneath the later Roman Temple may support this. Circular 'Celtic' shrines are known from Maiden Castle, (Wheeler 1943), Frilford (Handing, 1972) and Hayling Island (Downey, King and Soffe 1980) (fig.4). Drury (1980) has put forward the theory that circular structures with a religious function may have been more common than has been recognised and may have been identified as secular buildings. Wait (1985) in his analysis of Celtic Shrines refers to an Iron Age Shrine at Harlow but appears to have misinterpreted the early AD C2nd pallasade as being an enclosure of Belgic origin. This makes some of his references to Harlow debatable.

No trace of an entrance into the circular structure has so far been identified. Wait (1985) refers to most Iron Age 'Shrines' having an eastward facing orientation. However, the later Roman Temple was orientated to the south and it is possible that its Iron Age predecessor was likewise south facing. It is hoped that further excavation may demonstrate this.

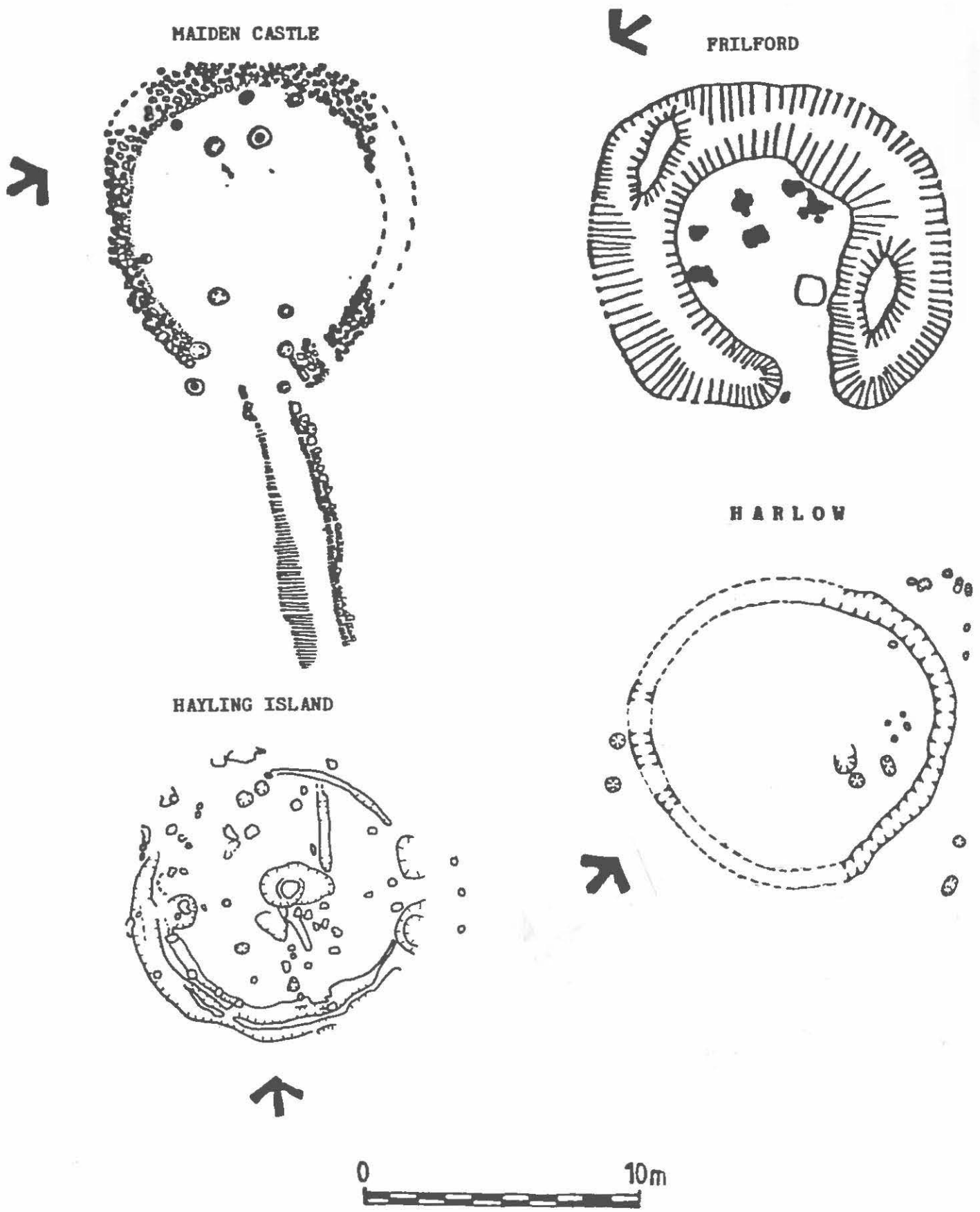


fig.4 Belgic circular shrines.

## ROMANO-CELTIC ACTIVITY

With the construction of the Romano-Celtic Temple on the site c.AD C80, a considerable amount of site leveling appears to have occurred. The previous excavations (France and Gobel 1985) demonstrated that in all phases of construction (Flavian-AD C3rd) the site was subjected to massive disturbance. This was later compounded by extensive robbing of the fabric of the Temple in the later Roman period and beyond. Natural erosion and weathering of the site has likewise removed some of the archaeological evidence.

### PHASE.3. EARLY ROMAN.

The earliest recognisable pottery recovered during the 1985/86 excavations were Flavian London-Essex stamped ware dating from AD C70-100. Other pottery, mainly Belgic coarse pottery with some Romanising influence suggests that up until the first phase of construction, the site was entirely native in character. The possible continued circulation of Celtic Coins in the post conquest period also supports this idea. Activity on the site appears to have been continuous.

The examination of the Roman levels in this part of the courtyard parallels the results obtained from test trenches excavated by W.E.A.G. (France and Gobel 1985).

Compacted small flint cobbling (late C1st) was found along the north-eastern edges of the site. This was in turn overlain by a fine sandy loam (probable levelling of the site) within which a considerable amount of iron strips were found. These appear to have haphazardly deposited and may represent construction debris from the first building phase. The strips were irregular and their function remains unclear.

The loam layer in turn was buried beneath large flint cobbles, identical to those found by W.E.A.G. in other parts of the courtyard. The extent of this cobbling was limited, being confined to the north eastern part of the trench. It is likely that the large cobbling covered the whole courtyard and was largely removed during the later destruction phase.

### PHASE 4. LATER ROMAN. (Fig.5)

A number of late Roman features, including a large (semi) circular pit in the western part of the cutting reflected extensive activity in the later AD C4th at the time of the destruction. The pottery from these contexts included late AD C4th shell tempered and Romano-Saxon wares. In addition, very large amounts of broken tile and brick, painted plaster and mortar and dressed limestone fragments were found. The latter included part of a Purbeck marble inscription, a small crudely carved 'Celtic' figurine and the defaced lifesize head of a helmeted deity, probably Minerva.

### POST ROMAN ACTIVITY.

The later history of the site has been confused by the 1972 landscaping. A single sherd of middle Saxon pottery was recovered from the disturbed former ground surface. However, the nature of the landscaping has undoubtedly removed important evidence for any post Roman activity that may have existed on the site.

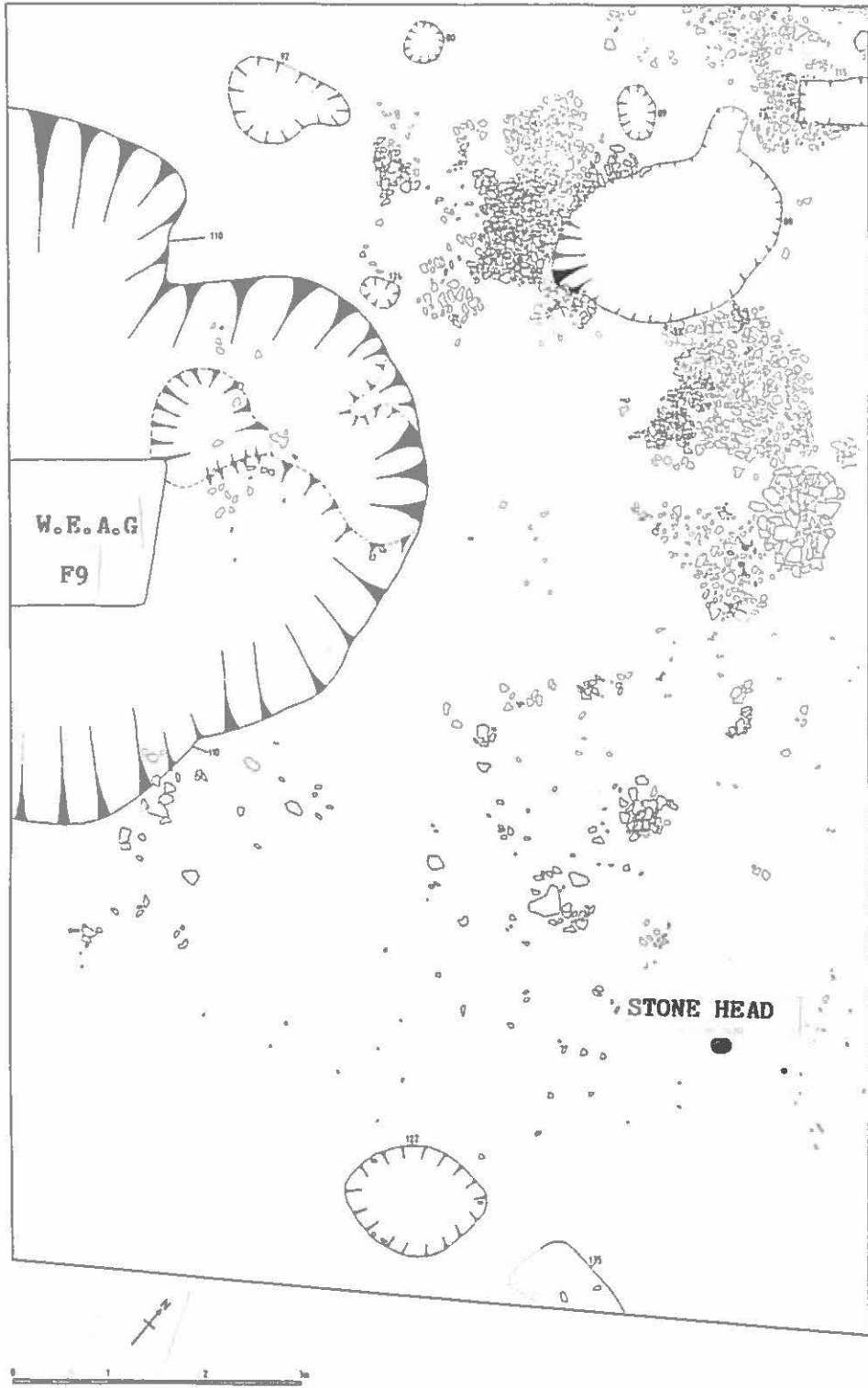


Fig.5 Later Roman Features

## VOTIVE FINDS.

A considerable number of small finds were recovered during the 1985/86 excavation, and many of them may be described as votive in nature. The range of objects is very similar to those described by France and Gobel (1985) although a number of them were previously unrecorded from the site.

The practice of leaving votive material on religious sites is well attested and reflects the practice of depositing certain items when making vows. Since these objects were not removed from the site during its occupation, a large accumulation of votive debris accrued. In addition to artifacts, the soil contained shells and animal remains, especially lamb bones and probably reflect religious feasting or the ritual offering of food.

The finds can be separated into two main categories.

### BELGIC VOTIVE FINDS. (Fig.6a)

By far the largest quantity of Belgic votive material recovered consisted of coins. In all, 274 Celtic coins, in gold, silver and copper alloy were found. These, together with the 232 coins found during previous excavations, brings the total from the site to over 500. The concentration of coins within this area of the courtyard clearly points to a focus of Belgic religious activity.

The coins recovered range from gold quarter staters (c.50-25BC) to coins of Cunobelin (AD.10-40). They include coins of the Kentish Kings, Addedomaros, Eppilus, and Amminus, Icenian and Coritanian uninscribed coins, as well as large numbers of Catuvellaunian coins (Tasciovanus and Cunobelin). Many were in mint condition and included four previously unrecorded types.

Other finds included a number of brooches of pre-Flavian date, both in copper alloy and in iron, iron tools, such as plough shares and socketed implements as well as a number of iron bar fragments which may have been part of currency bars.

### ROMAN VOTIVE FINDS. (Fig.6b)

The wide variety of votive material from the Temple has been discussed at length by France and Gobel (1985). A similar collection of material was found during 1985/86 season of excavations and included brooches, coins (the majority of which were AD C1st and included two copper plated iron cored As of Claudius), iron knives and tools, a socketed spearhead, styli and toilet implements in addition to a large amount of iron fittings discarded during the construction ( and later destruction) phases of the building.

Of particular note were the architectural and clearly religious carved stone statue fragments. Part of an inscription in Alwalton marble was recovered from the destruction rubble as well as additional pieces of carved sandstone, similar to the inscribed altar inscription to the Numen of the Emperors, found by W.E.A.G. The major religious finds were the badly defaced head of a helmeted deity and a small crudely carved figurine, both found in the later AD C4th destruction rubble.



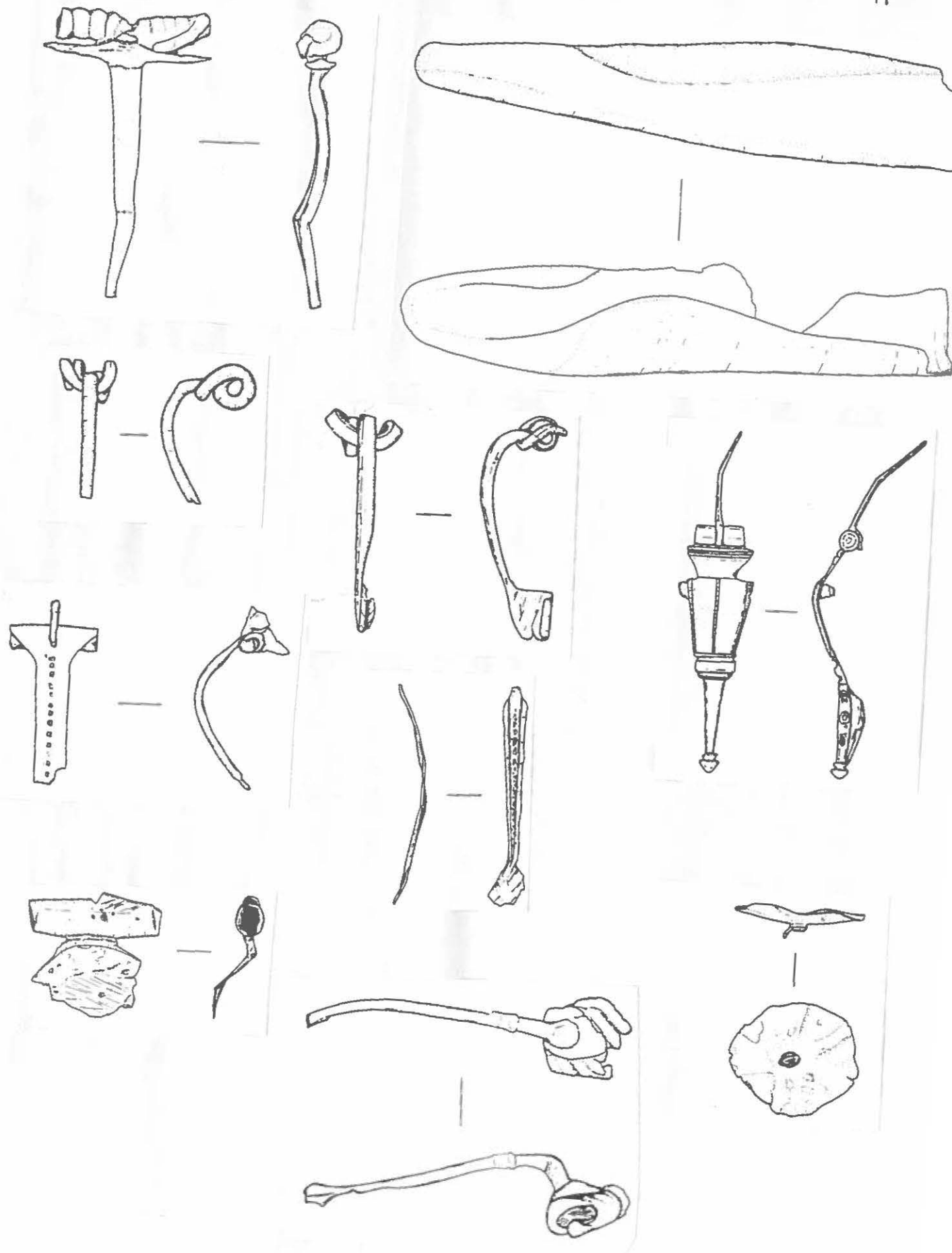
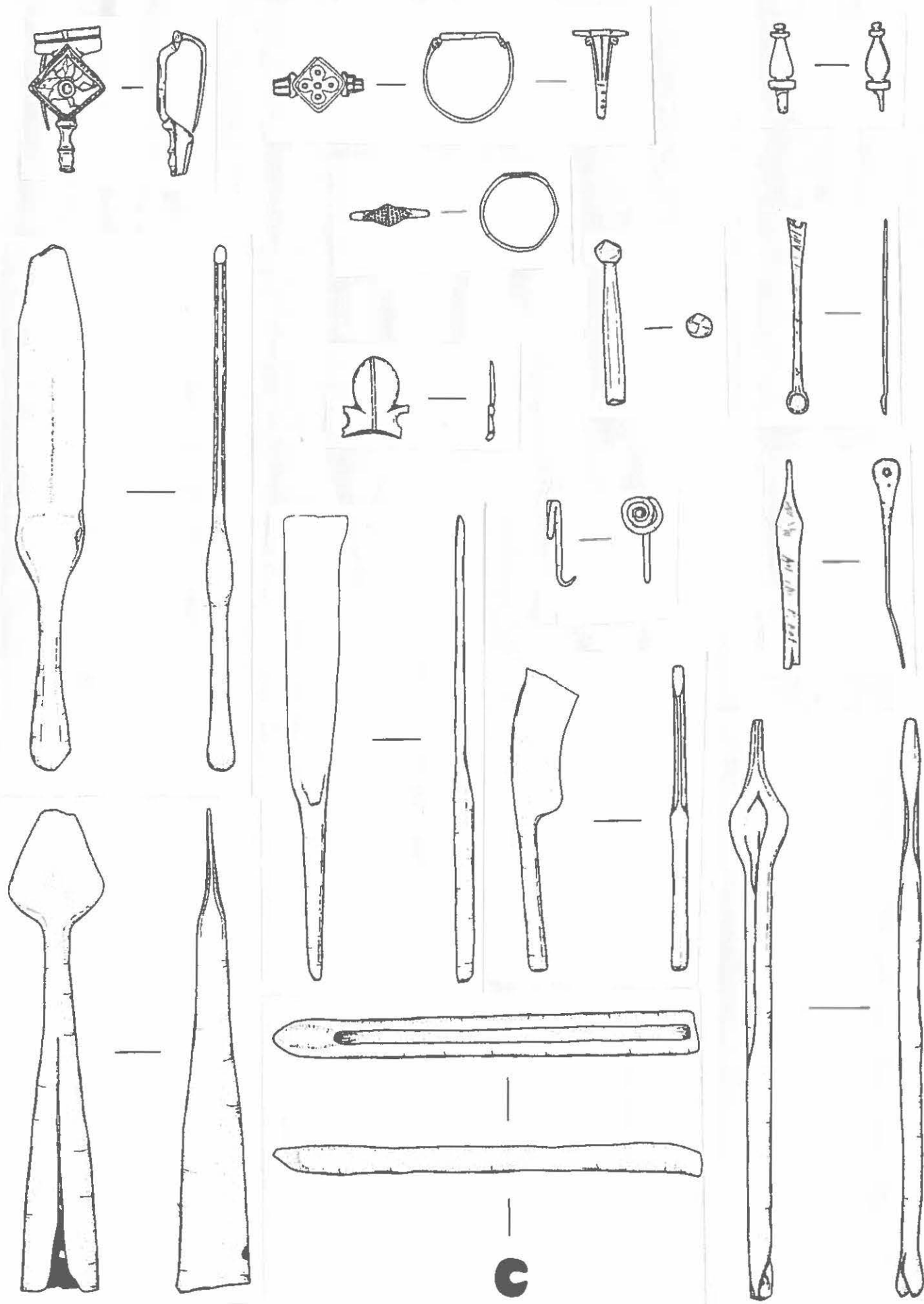


Fig.6(a) Votive objects (Belgic)



C

Fig.6(b) Votive objects (Roman)

0 5cm

### The Minerva head (Cover and Fig.7 )

The head was carved from shelly limestone, believed to have come from Northamptonshire and depicts a female wearing a helmet. Remnants of fittings to support a crest are visible at the top of the helmet. The head had been defaced in antiquity and has lost its nose and the right hand side of the face. However, enough detail survived for an identification and it is believed to be a representation of Minerva. It has been argued that the head is too large to be anything other than a major cult image and if this is so, then it may be that the temple at Harlow was dedicated to Minerva. (Dr. M.Green, pers comm). A detailed description of the head will be published as soon as the stone has been positively identified.

### The Warrior god relief (Fig.8 )

This depicts a standing figure, believed to be a warrior god standing face on, holding in his left hand a shield. (Dr. M.Green pers comm). It is carved in a hard limestone and is both poorly executed and heavily worn. This may represent a smaller dedication within the Temple and is similar to the carved chalk figurine from Witham Temple (Turner 1982).

The bone deposits were again similar to those found during previous excavations and consisted largely of lamb jaw bones. A large antler fragment which has been sawn off at the base, found in the lower levels may also have had religious significance and may indeed be votive.

Comparitively little pottery was found during the excavation but it included fragments of Tazza, (incense cups). The majority of the pottery was similar to that found in previous excavations and ranged from mid-late AD C1st-late AD C4th. (figs. 9 and 10).

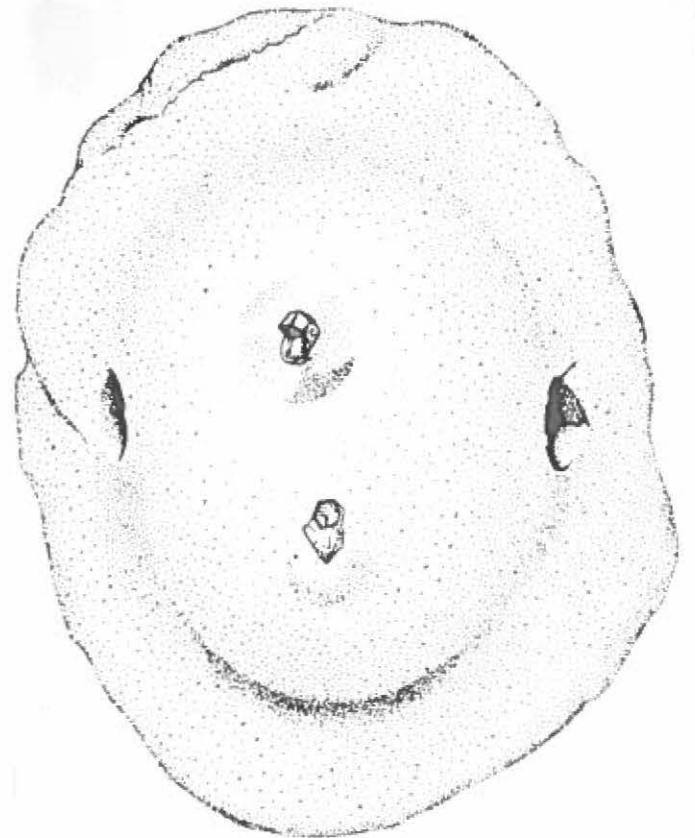
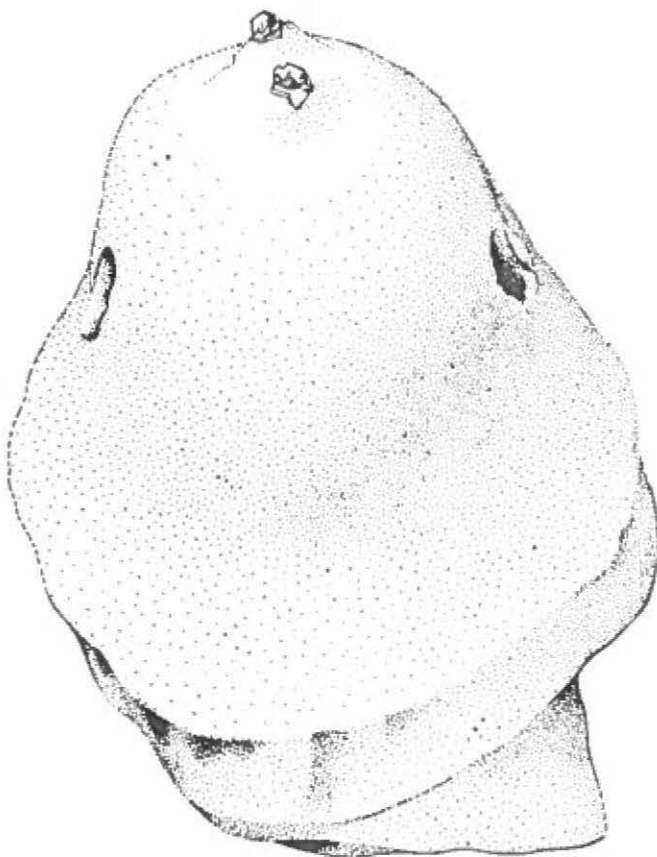
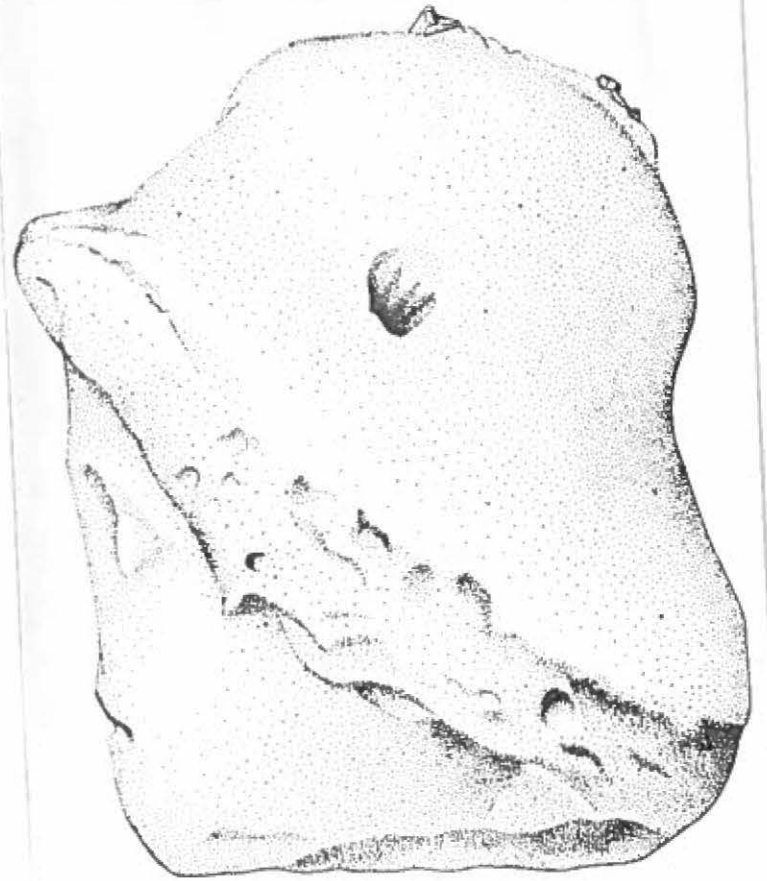
### DISCUSSION.

The construction of a formalised Romano-British Temple on a site of religious significance to the native population represents the Romanisation of a pre-existing cult and the hybridisation of native and Roman traditions. The Temple mound had a long history of religious use and was almost certainly the site of a Belgic shrine in the pre and early post conquest period.

The full extent of the native religious settlement is something that the present series of excavations cannot be expected to define. However, it is hoped that a further season of excavations may elucidate the nature of pre Roman structure uncovered during 1985/86.

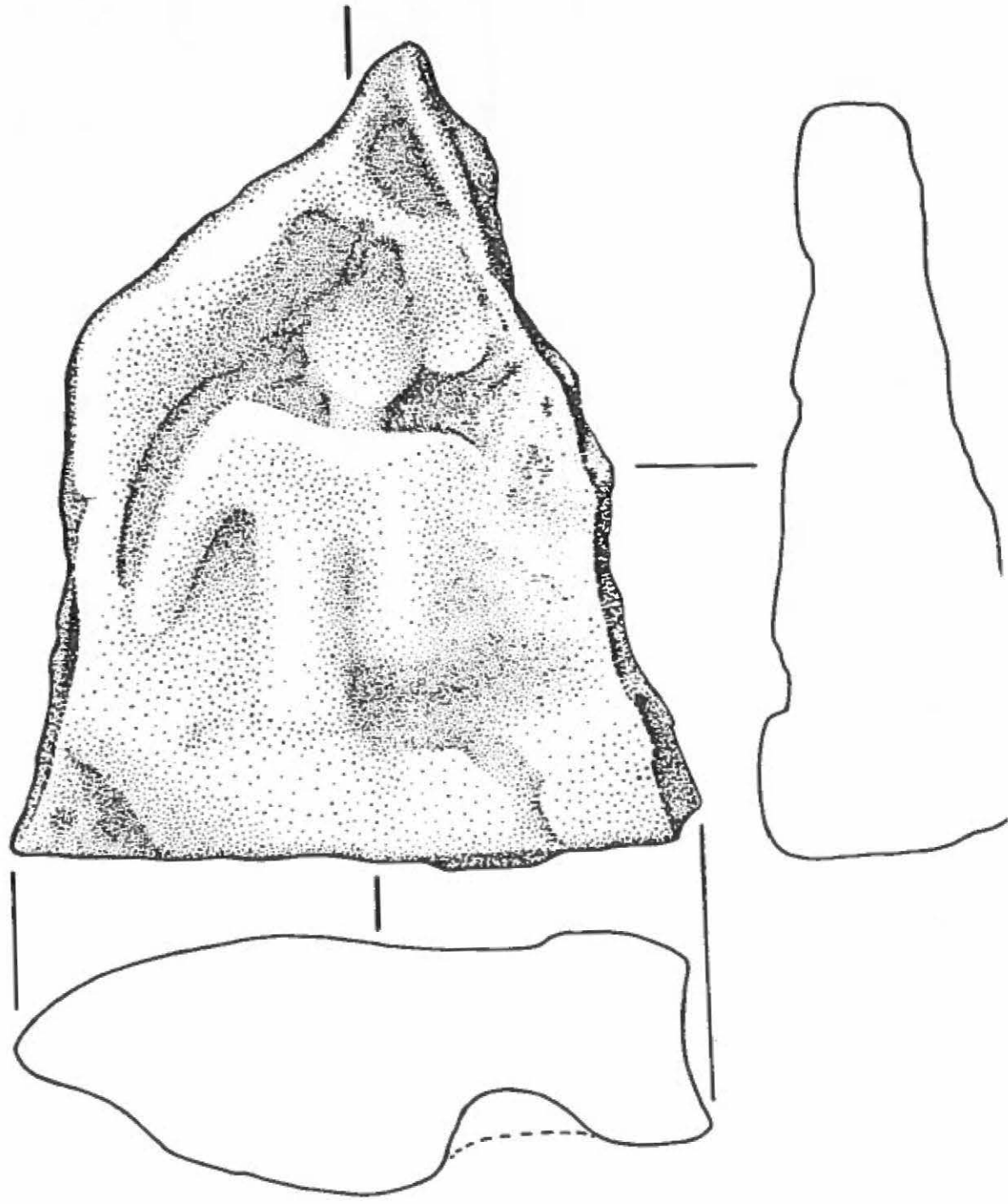
### CONCLUSIONS.

The possibility that a pre Roman/Belgic religious structure existed before the construction of the Roman Temple has long been suspected. It has been argued that sufficient evidence for a 'Belgic' shrine existed (Rodwell 1980) and the results of the 1962-71 excavations helped to support this hypothesis.



Scale  
0 5 10 cms

Fig.7 Limestone head of Minerva



0 5cm

Fig.8 Warrior God figurine . Scale 1:1

Previous work on the site concentrated on the examination of the nature and extent of the Roman religious use of the hill. During this work, the large number of Belgic votive finds, in addition to the discovery of pre Roman features suggested that the focus for the Belgic activity lay beneath the western area of the later courtyard. The latest series of excavations have shown that a substantial round house of middle Iron Age date existed in this area. Although it cannot be conclusively proved that the round house was a shrine, the concentration of Belgic votive material, both within the upper fill of the gully, and within the interior of the structure does point to the possibility that it may have had a religious importance in the later middle Iron Age and the Belgic periods.(fig.11)

Circular late Iron Age shrines have been excavated at Hayling Island, Frilford and Maiden Castle. These have demonstrated that some religious and secular structures shared similar construction techniques. The discovery of a circular building, later superceeded by a Romano Celtic Temple at Harlow, adds further weight to the possibility that a 'Celtic shrine' was in existence on the Temple mound at the time of the Roman conquest, and that the site continued to function as such until the later AD C1st when the policy of Romanising native religious sites was carried out.

The discovery of the head of the goddess Minerva, in the destruction levels of the courtyard, together with many smaller limestone fragments which may have originally come from a major cult statue gives an important clue as to the principal diety worshipped at the Temple in Harlow during the Roman period. The deliberate defacing of this statue in the later Roman period, together with the discovery during the 1972 landscaping of a small belt plate with early Christian symbols (A peacock and tree of life motif; R.W.Bartlett forthcoming) invites the possibility that the Temple at Harlow may have deliberately been destroyed by the Christian population of the area. A growing corpus of material demonstrating the spread of Christianity within this part of Eastern England exists and the destruction of the (pagan) Temples at Harlow, Great Chesterford and Colchester, all in Essex, may point to the vigorous adoption of this religion in the area in the later Roman era.

HARLOW TEMPLE PRE-ROMAN FEATURES



fig.11 Pre Roman features on Temple mound 1962-71 and 1985/86.

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