

AN IRON AGE AND ROMANO-BRITISH SETTLEMENT AT ASLOCKTON, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE: INTERIM REPORT

by

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A trench was excavated between December 1991 and March 1992 across part of an extensive cropmark complex threatened by the construction of a new water main between the villages of Scarrington and Aslockton (SK 740409). Excavations were carried out alongside a watching brief of the remainder of the pipeline route, which extended beyond these villages to Car Colston, Flawborough, Orston and Bottesford. Funding was provided by Severn Trent Water, to whom thanks are expressed. A full report on this project, which was directed in the field by Colin Palmer-Brown and co-ordinated by David Knight, is due for inclusion at a later date.

The site lies in the Vale of Belvoir on the crest of a low interfluvium separating the River Smithe from the Car Dyke, c. 4km. east of the Romano-British small town of *Margidunum*. Excavations revealed an intermittent cover of gravelly drift, overlying Mercia Mudstone. The cropmarks were first recognised in the 1960s, following an aerial survey by Jim Pickering, and on present evidence may extend over at least 25 hectares.

The cropmark site is at present unique in the Trent Basin. Although the cropmarks are unclear on one side, they could encompass a massive sub-oval ditched enclosure with an internal area of almost 20 hectares. This appears to have been divided into two units of roughly equal size, each with a series of sub-rectangular ditched enclosures around their edge and a central open space. A trench was excavated along the pipeline route where it intersected the enclosure boundary and a narrow zone of cropmarks around the edge of the enclosure, with the aim of clarifying their character and date. This trench was extended beyond the recorded cropmarks into the interior of the enclosure for c. 75m., in order to establish whether struc-

tural remains might continue beyond the periphery of the enclosure into areas which have yielded no cropmark data. The trench provided a cross-section of the enclosure boundary and revealed a remarkable density of later prehistoric and Romano-British features immediately inside the enclosure. No structural traces were encountered away from a c. 50m. zone around the edge of the enclosure, suggesting that occupation may have been concentrated around the periphery.

Structural Remains

Phase 1: Pre-Enclosure.

Removal of two partially levelled banks, associated with the Iron Age boundary ditches of Phase 2, showed these to seal a scatter of small pits or post-holes and a steep-sided gully (possibly a palisade trench) indicative of pre-enclosure activity. A significant depth of buried soil (up to 0.25m. deep) was recorded beneath the bank flanking the outermost boundary ditch, but unfortunately the relationship of this deposit to the Phase 1 features remains unclear. A pre-Iron Age date may be implied by the stratigraphy, but the only dating evidence comprised a single flint blade, possibly of Neolithic or Bronze Age origin, from the fill of the gully.

Phase 2: Iron Age Enclosure.

A section across the enclosure boundary showed this to comprise two substantial ditches with flanking banks clearly visible in section. It remains unclear whether these ditches were in contemporary use or whether they should be regarded as successive. The outermost ditch measured 4-6m. wide by up to 2m. deep and yielded substantial quantities of Iron Age

pottery and animal bone, much of which was apparently deliberately deposited. The ditch appears not to have continued in use into the Romano-British period. The inner ditch also produced significant quantities of Iron Age pottery, and seems to have infilled largely as a result of natural silting before it was recut on a slightly more southerly alignment in the Romano-British period. The remains of levelled banks were revealed between the two ditch alignments and along the outer edge of the external ditch, but any internal bank associated with the innermost Iron Age ditch had been removed by later recutting. One of the baulk sections through the inner of the two banks revealed a substantial post-hole cut through bank material, possibly indicating some kind of timber superstructure.

Phase 3: Romano-British.

The outermost boundary ditch may have been substantially infilled before the end of the Iron Age, and as noted above only the alignment of the inner enclosure ditch may have been perpetuated in the Romano-British period. This preserved evidence of one major recut, and produced a substantial quantity of pottery and animal bone, much deliberately dumped.

Discussion

A remarkable density of Iron Age and Romano-British features was recorded within a c.50m. zone adjacent to the enclosure boundary, including pits, post-holes and curving gullies which could represent the foundations of circular buildings or associated drainage gullies. Few of these may be related stratigraphically to the main boundary ditches, but they suggest dense occupation inside at least one part of the enclosure during these periods.

Artefacts and Environmental Remains

The excavations uncovered a substantial quantity of later Iron Age and Romano-British pottery, suggesting activity over a long time period. The presence of wheelmade Iron Age pottery provides persuasive evidence for activity in the later 1st century BC or earlier 1st century AD, while the presence of substantial quantities of scored ware could imply a considerably earlier ancestry (on present evidence from as early perhaps as the 5th/4th centuries BC). The site also produced a small collection of triangular fired clay loomweights and bone weaving combs, suggesting textile production, together with an unusually large assemblage of animal bones and charred plant remains. Full analysis of these finds, which could imply dense occupation, should contribute significantly to an understanding of the economic and structural development of the site during the Iron Age and Romano-British periods.

Conclusions

The cropmarks contrast strongly with those of known Iron Age and Romano-British sites elsewhere in the East Midlands, such as the subrectangular ditched enclosures which have been recorded in the Trent Valley at Fisherwick, Willington and Gamston or the large 'nucleated settlements' of Late Iron Age Lincolnshire, such as Dragonby or Old Sleaford. The material culture suggests a low status settlement, comparable in this respect to Trent Valley sites such as Willington or Gamston, but the plan is entirely novel. Further excavation is required to investigate the internal spatial organisation of the site and the size of the social grouping. Excavation may establish whether occupation concentrated around the periphery, together with fields and paddocks, and whether the central area may have been reserved for other purposes such as stock grazing.