

# A ROMANO-CELTIC TEMPLE at Bourton Grounds, Buckingham

CHARLES W. GREEN

Two miles east of Buckingham an exceptionally handsome fourteenth-century bridge carries the modern road B4034 to Bletchley over a major headstream of the River Ouse known here as the Twin and farther upstream as Claydon Brook (Plate Ia). This bridge replaced an ancient ford at a narrowing of the normally wide valley, here dominated on the east side by impressive twin tumuli known as the Thornborough Mounds (Plate Ib). Both were opened by a Duke of Buckingham during the fashionable spate of barrow-slicing in the late 1830s; one was presumed already plundered, the other yielding a deposit of grave furnishings rivalling in richness the contents from the Bartlow Hills and similar barrows in N.E. France and Belgium. The various pieces of Romano-Celtic workmanship have recently been re-examined by Miss Joan Liversidge, who dated them as late second century.<sup>1</sup>

A survey of local minor Roman roads has contributed a cogent reason for the tumuli to be raised at this precise spot,<sup>2</sup> for they mark a Roman "five-ways" where roads arrived (clockwise) from Towcester (162), Irchester (174), Magiovinium (166) and from the centre of the county via Fleet Marston and East Claydon (162). The Roman character of 166 is evident from Bletchley along B4034 as far as the Lone Tree Inn, Thornborough, where the modern road curves away, but the Roman continued ahead along a ridge to meet 174 exactly where the road from the south to Towcester crossed, a little N.E. of the mounds. Road 174 from the Nene ironstone country and with Iron Age sites alongside was clearly the older road, for 166 halted at the junction and turned down to use 174's ford, swinging back to its committed alignment on the west side where building debris might mark a *mansio*; 174 proceeded over Twyford's fords towards the Blackthorn Hill Iron Age-Roman site and presumably (not yet followed) along the higher ridge of the River Ray. These details are given at length for the bearing they have on the location of the temple, all these features—river, roads, ford, tumuli and the temple site itself—forming a related compact pattern (see Fig. 1).

The tumuli have naturally attracted a long tradition of antiquarian speculation. The Rev. H. Roundell, Vicar of Buckingham, associated them with a battle between the advancing Romans and retreating Britons under the leadership of the sons of Cunobelin, in which the latter were put to flight<sup>3</sup>; a story derived from Kennet's *Parochial Antiquities* and fondly cherished by

all local historians, but lacking sound historic evidence. Similarly the *Literary Times* of 16th December, 1839, recorded in detail the opening of the tumuli, adding that "the site is near a bridge where formerly was a ford, near to which rows of skeletons have repeatedly been dug up, indicating some battle to have been fought here". The burials would seem rather to indicate a more extensive Roman settlement than has been suspected, the site for its cemetery chosen because of its propinquity to the visible monuments of important or revered personages.

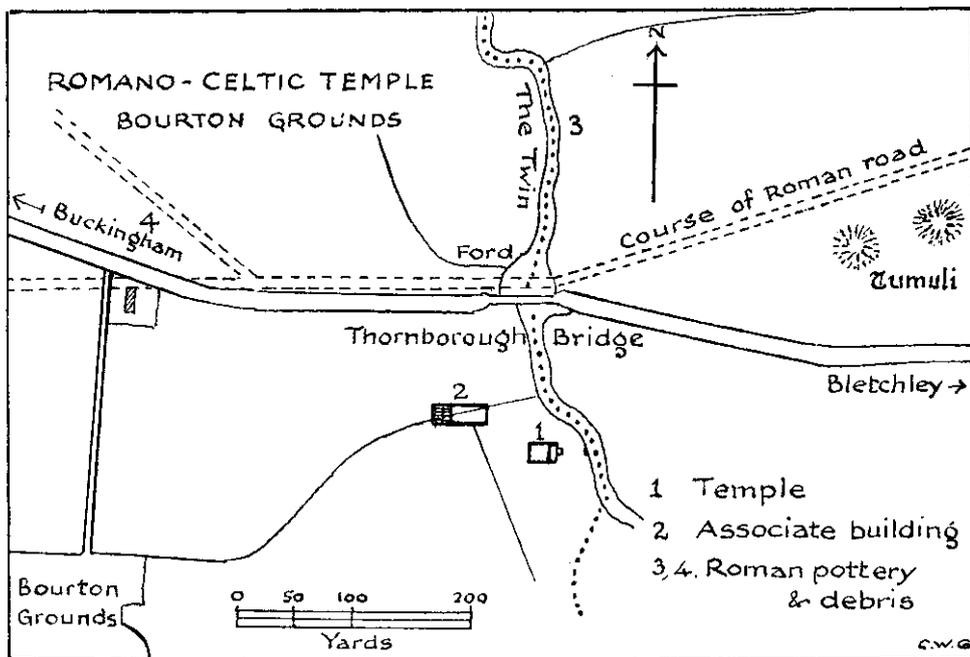


FIG. 1.

In 1961 the writer, engaged in tracing the S.W. extension of road 174, noted in a deep ditch on the Buckingham side of the bridge much protruding stone and Roman pottery, and near to it where an underground water-course had been opened many more coarse and Samian sherds. The owner of Bourton Grounds, H. R. Moore, Esq., kindly encouraged an investigation of his fields, during which attention was caught by a flattish mound seeming partly, if not wholly, artificial close to the river 140 yards upstream from the bridge. The incisions of medieval ridge and furrow peter out at the mound from which a depression reached out slightly east of south, extending to a former loop still marked by the Buckingham borough boundary straying from the river into the meadow. The depression is since filled in, for it invited and retained the river overflow, when often in winter and sometimes in summer the mound was almost submerged. On the mound itself moles had ejected scraps of red tile and Roman sherds, and stone was felt very close to the surface. An initial cutting exposed a bound layer of stone, liberally integrated with re-used *tegulae* with flanges downward, *imbrices* split down to lie flat, and upon the layer a surprising scatter of small coins.

The plan of the structure emerged as a square within a square, conforming to that of a Romano-Celtic or Romano-Gallic temple (Fig. 2). It was presumably raised on what was once a natural knoll, but the Roman contours have since been obscured by an overlay of flood silt which over the centuries had buried the floors on the east and south sides to a depth of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  to  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft., whilst a wash-down from the higher slopes, combined with plough action, gradually covered the west side. The rise of land level has thus diminished what may have been an outstanding valley landmark. The flat floor of the entrance stepped up from the contemporary ground level above which the temple platform was raised in further steps and terraces, the *cella* forming the top-most. These gradations were consolidated by varying depths of limestone-pitching, and on the higher levels, fillings of clean sand brought from elsewhere. An overall covering of stone and tile, bound with mortar, formed the visible layer on which the coins lay.

It is generally supposed that a temple of this type consisted of a high, square sanctuary lighted by windows above the surrounding portico or verandah, the sanctuary being the abode of the god, not apparently accessible to a large number of worshippers, who on occasions might assemble to be addressed from it,<sup>4</sup> or where offerings or even the god himself might occasionally be exhibited. The sanctuary floor—the *cella*—was 17 ft. square, well defined, and separated by a 4 ft. gap from the inner perambulation level of the verandah, which was even for 6 ft., then sloped sharply outwards for another 6 ft. (except at the entrance) to the wall footings, which, 2 ft. wide formed an overall square of 53 ft. Along the entire length of the east (entrance) side was an extension of 11 ft. Not common to all temples, this is usually referred to as a fore-building, its function not always clear. Here the section shows that from the porch or ante-room the platform rises in such a manner as to suggest that the centre of the fore-building provided a flight of steps, but only extending some 8 ft. each side from the centre line. There was then a drop, and at 11 ft. were gaps in the floor in which were embedded traces of timbers and a large number of nails, flanked by stone footings. These, giving place to level well-set floors of tile, indicated that the entrance stairs had on each side small compartments measuring internally 11 ft. by 9 ft.

The porch, if such it was, extended outwards from the fore-building 9 ft. on a 14 ft. front, having a base of heavy stones three layers deep, and centrally the entrance, 5 ft. by 4 ft., defined by prominent sockets. Work here was halted by a modern drain riding over it, and from beneath a rapid upsurge of water. There was much displaced heavy stone, rotted timber and yellow mortar in which was an early *sestertius* caked in cement. The stone layers of the porch had no enclosing walls, but postholes might imply that uprights supported some sort of roofing.

None of these features is unique. The dimensions of the *cella* and portico are consistent with a number of similar temple plans in the Belgic homeland across the Channel, just as the adjacent tumuli are related to the burial barrows of the Belgic aristocracy in the same localities. Plans of temples at Harlow and Springhead in England<sup>5</sup> show extensions similar to the small compartments already referred to, whilst a flight of steps in the centre of the

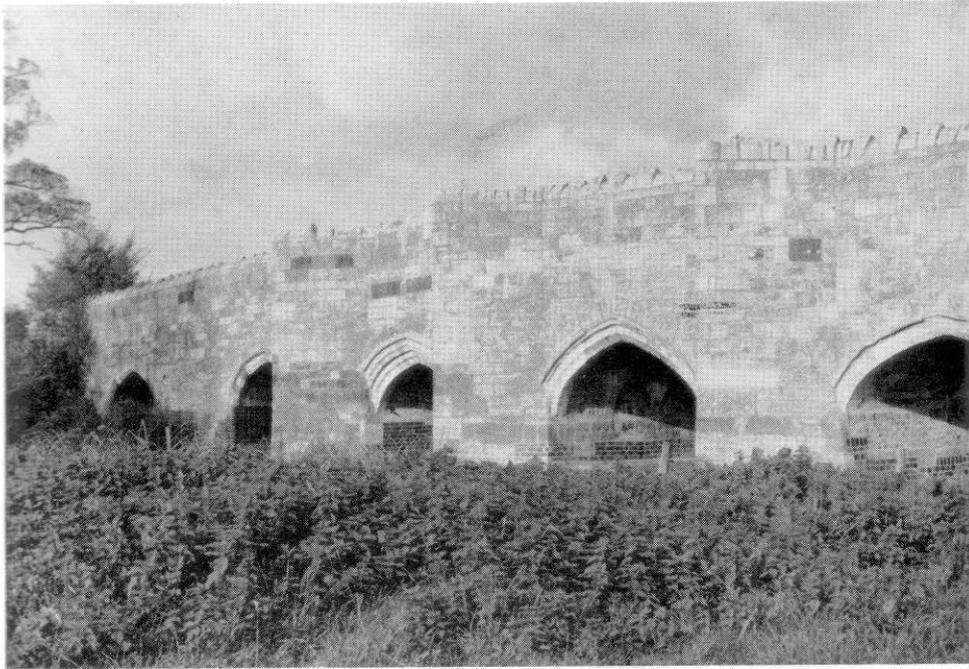


PLATE I (a). The fourteenth-century bridge at Thornborough near the temple, built beside a Roman ford.

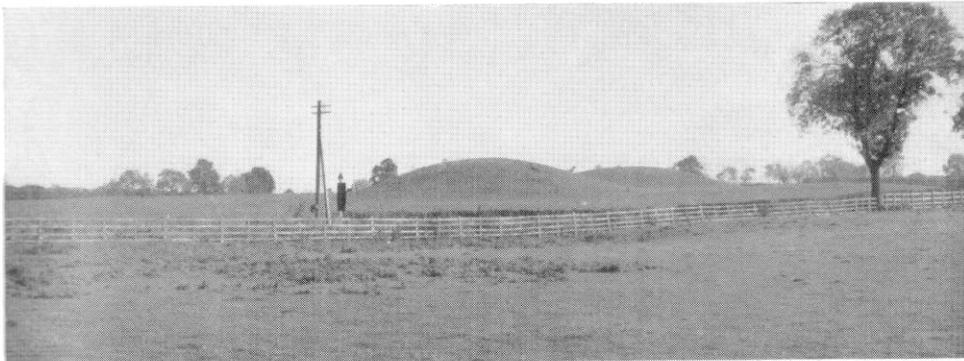


PLATE I (b). Thornborough mounds, seen from the temple.



PLATE II (a). Wall at south-east corner of cella.

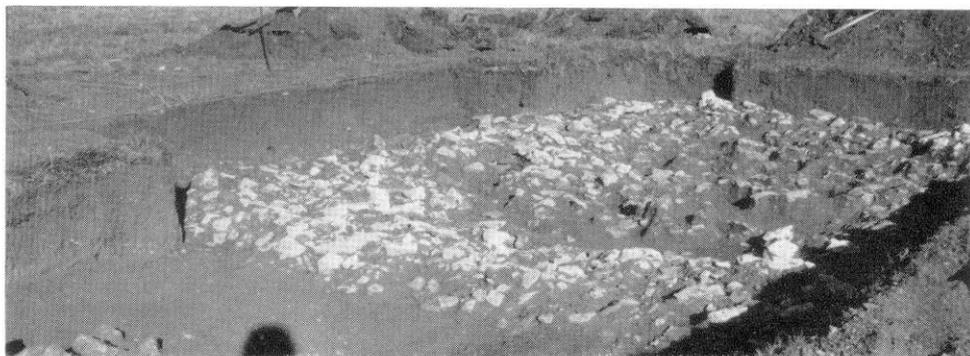


PLATE II (b). The cella, showing disturbance at west side.

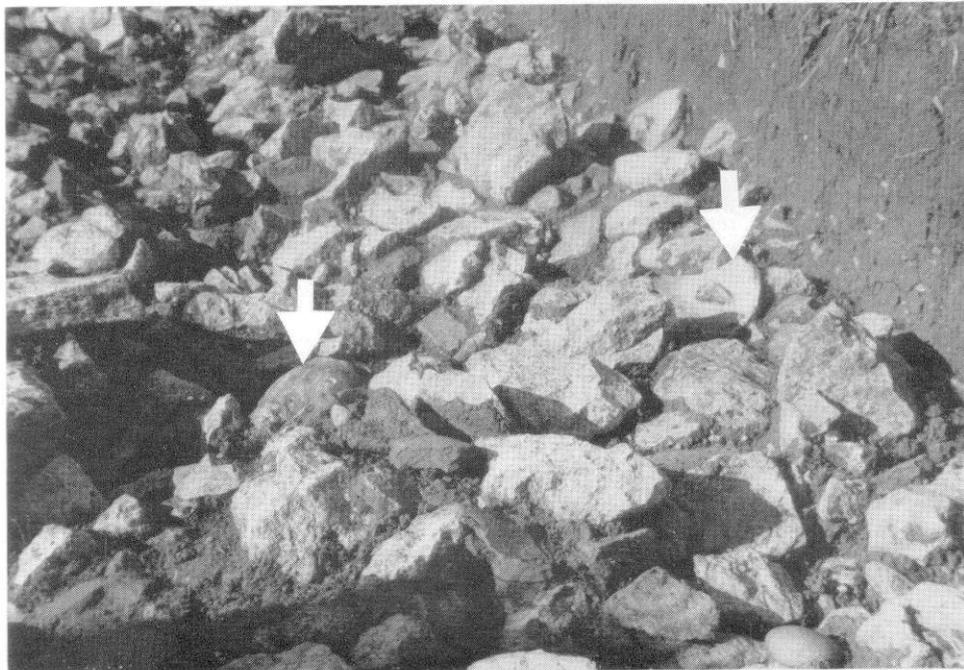


PLATE III (a). Human skull and bones embedded in platform below entrance to verandah.



PLATE III (b). The platform looking towards the cella. (Surface displaced by weather, floods, and delvers for coins.)

fore-building has been noted on the Gallic temple sites of Saint Aubin-sur-Gaillon (Seine) and of La Forêt de Beaumont-le-Roger.<sup>6</sup> A porch on the east side was a feature at La Cité-de-Limes (Dieppe), and human bones beneath the portico recorded at Glanville, near Pont-l'Évêque.<sup>7</sup>

The robbing of the walls had been extensive and systematic. They had apparently been followed round when visible, for the trenches formed by their removal were so solidly packed with broken roof-tiles and other debris that it is difficult to dissociate the operation from the temple's demolition. Such a close-packed infill would have been impossible had the walls been robbed centuries later when the site would presumably have been cleared and cultivated. Much surplus stone was hurled into the river, which dredging in our own day has deposited on the river banks. Beneath 18 in. of rubble and tile packing, the lower courses of the *cella* wall survived from the south-east corner for some 5 ft. towards the *cella* entrance, gradually diminishing to its pitched footings (see Plate II). It was of superior construction, well-dressed and slightly under 30 in. wide. The disturbed verandah footings, 2 ft. wide and semi-dressed, were similarly buried beneath mixed debris. Along the west side of the *cella* was much white and red wall plaster; the surviving wall showed no trace of plaster facing, and although the association of wall plaster with the temple cannot be ruled out its relative position was not convincing. Like the broken *pilae* bricks and lumps of *opus signinum*, it may have formed part of a load of debris used in the make-up of the platform.

The original floor had also gone. The visible surface was clearly not a used floor, for the friable tiles in its formation were clean and unmarked; had it been otherwise, a protruding skull and other human remains embedded in mortar at the verandah entrance would have smashed to splinters (Plate IIIa). The presence of upwards of 300 coins has to be considered in relation to such a floor. These had over a period of 150 years fallen on to the platform exactly where one would expect offerings to fall—in the proximity of the god's seat—during which time they were obviously invisible and irretrievable. The most satisfactory explanation is to presume raised timber flooring throughout, with boards perhaps not too closely fitted, and between which coins, particularly the tiny *minimi*, might occasionally find their way. This suggestion is strengthened by the incidence of sockets sunk across the *cella* floor, and more conspicuously around the ambulatory where foot pressure would be heavy and continuous, and where also an extra depth of pitching was provided to carry such floor supports. They also flanked the ascent of the entrance, and in many cases nails and wood fragments were taken from inside them.

In comparable temples the seat of the god was invariably raised in the centre or at the west end of the *cella*. When cutting a section across it a strong post emplacement was encountered, but its opposite fellow was bereft of casing, having apparently been dug into for removal, and the infilling of the operation done in reverse so that the floor components, coins and glass lay at the bottom beneath the disturbed stone and rubble. The god's staging, at first thought to be an oblong central feature, proved to be a square of 6½ to 7 ft. extending to the west wall of the *cella*, the posts in question having been the front supports.

The 315 bronze coins were of low denomination, many defaced and rendered semi-molten by the burning which had reddened patches of the *cella* and verandah platforms. Interesting in their dating range, they also indicate the devotees' habit of perambulation, ascending on to the verandah to pay their dues along the south side of the *cella* where an opening must have existed to convey their gifts into the chamber through the wall. Along this south side they lay thick, increasing in intensity at the corner turning towards the god's seat. Some 50 or more had slipped behind his platform and a number were shaken down by disturbance of the wall, but beyond and along the north side they were comparatively few. Odd ones had found their way through the verandah floorboards on the entrance side, and one, undecipherable except for a vaguely radiate head was embedded in the mortar which enclosed the skull; only one coin was silver-washed. The undetected survival of the coins is not difficult to account for; already coated with grime from above during the temple's use, the dismantling and ashes from attendant fires would effectively seal them, leaving them to be found today where they had fallen.

Apart from three early coins found beneath the platform surface, and evidently from the older building, the offerings should indicate the period of the temple's use. Worshippers were flocking here by the time of the Tetrici (A.D. 270), increasing in numbers and reaching their peak during the reign of Constans (A.D. 333-350). It is from this time that the semi-barbarous *minimi*, the inferior products of unauthorised mints, some supposedly British, are most in evidence. Emperors Valentinian and Valens are well represented, with Christian emblems now finding their way into the god's coffers, and it is only towards the end of the century that the offerings seem to thin out, ending with the House of Theodosius and Arcadius (A.D. 395-408). We may reasonably place the temple's erection around A.D. 265, and its end late in the first or early in the second decade of the fifth century, when Roman rule was about to crumble. Nothing was found relating to the cult or dedication; one may take into account a compulsion to set it at the nearest firm point to the river bank rather than on higher ground where temples are more usually sited, and where its erection would have given less trouble. Dr. Richmond's suggestion that it may have been associated with the local river god has much to commend it.

There is no visible enclosing *temenos* by ditch, a lack perhaps due to changed ground levels, but during recent river widening close to the temple, some 20 ft. of wall footings 4 ft. wide were taken away; 50 ft. upstream another protruding wall base is seen, but the significance of outlying remains is lessened by the evidence of a shifting river course since Roman times. The ultimate fate of the temple is marked by every sign of deliberate demolition, but of the pressures or circumstances which brought this about nothing is known.

#### ASSOCIATE BUILDING

Trenches were cut on each side of the point where pottery and debris were first seen in the ditch 70 yds. north-west of the temple. These derived from a detached barn-like structure running north to south, 45 ft. long, with two rows of posts forming a nave 18 ft. wide, with narrow aisles. A later barn

floor lay askew over it, on which was glazed pottery and a coin of Charles II. The Roman floor was of rough limestone, possibly earthed or planked over in its day. Only the south end of the building seemed to have been lived in, where was pottery, a bronze pin, part of a "rod-bow" brooch, pieces of decorated bronze clasp, one or two Constantinian coins, sandal studs and window glass, all seeming contemporary with the temple. Beneath a threshold was the skull of a horse, ringed around with oyster shells and crowned with a large smooth pebble.

A path along the south side of the building ran westward to indeterminate surfaces of rubble and gravel with post-holes, presumably outbuildings. Subsequent ploughing (for the first time in living memory) made it clear that the building partly excavated was only one of a series which ranged east to west overlooking a courtyard and facing the temple, building debris extending into the corner of the meadow in which the temple stood. These remains we may suppose, unless other floors come to light, formed part of the premises which embodied the custodian's house.

<sup>1</sup> *Bucks Records*, 16, Pt. 1, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Wolverton Arch. Soc. Newsletter 1964: *Roman Roads in the South-east Midlands* by the Viatores, Pt 6 (Gollancz).

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Sheahan, *History of Buckinghamshire*, p. 32 (1862).

<sup>4</sup> I. A. Richmond, *Roman Britain*, Pelican, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> Information kindly given by Mr M. J. Lewis, Cambridge.

<sup>6</sup> *Antiq. Journal*, Vol. VIII, 3, 318-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

#### THE COIN SEQUENCE (shortened version)

1	98-117	TRAJAN, Dupondius, very worn.
2	161-180	MARCUS AURELIUS, Sestertius, (A.D. 179).
3	do.	2nd cent. Sestertius? FAUSTINA II, wife of the above. These three coins were sealed within the flooring.
4	244-249	PHILIP I. A forged <i>as</i> in size of an <i>antoninianus</i> . A curiosity.
5-9	253-268	GALLIENUS. One coin minted in Rome.
10	do.	SALONINA (wife of Gallienus), barbarous copy.
11-14	265-270	VICTORINUS.
15-16	268-270	CLAUDIUS II (Gothicus).
17-20	270-273	TETRICUS I.
21-23		TETRICUS II.
24	287-293	CARAUSIUS.
25	293-296	ALLECTUS.
26	307-324	LICINIUS II.
27-30	306-337	CONSTANTINE I. Mints of Trier and London.
31-37		do. URBS ROMA, Wolf & Twins, various mints.
38-43		do. CONSTANTINOPOLIS, Victory, Mints Rome and Trier.
44-45		do. Memorial coinage, Quadriga, c. 337-341.
46-47		HELENA, Mother of Constantine I. Mint of Trier.

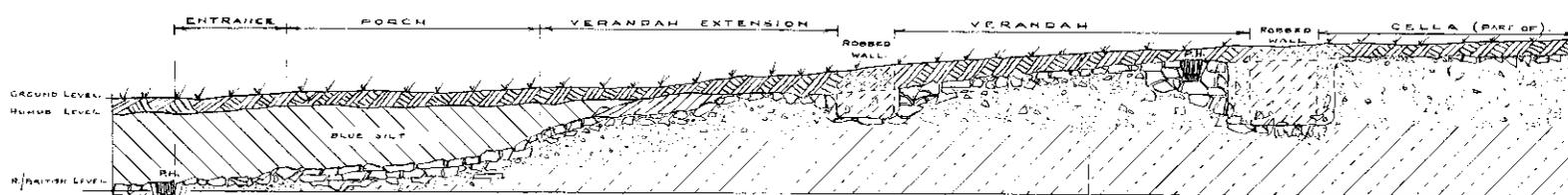
48-49		THEODORA, Mint of Trier.
50	317-326	CRISPUS, Mint of Trier.
51-56	317-337	CONSTANTINE II Caes. 4 mint of Trier.
57	337-350	CONSTANS Aug. Rv. Virtus Aug.
58-61		do. „ Gloria Exercitus. Mints Lugdunum and Trier.
62-79		do. „ Victoriae. Mints Trier and Aquileia.
80-87		do. „ Fel Temp Reparatio, Mints Trier and Lugdunum.
88	323-337	CONSTANTIUS II Caes. Rev. Gloria Exercitus.
89-91	337-361	do. Aug. do. Mint of Trier.
92		do. „ Pop. Romanus, Mint of Constantinople.
93-95		do. „ Fel Temp Reparatio, Mint of Lugdunum
96-126		do. „ do. various and barbarous.
127		do. „ do. Legend “Victoria” (unusual).
128-129		do. „ Victoria, Mints Arelate and TRP.
130-143		CONSTANTINE, House of. „ Gloria Exercitus, not closely dateable.
144-149	350-353	MAGNENTIUS, semi-barbarous, two with Christogram.
150-153		do. or DECENTIUS, semi-barbarous copies, c. A.D. 355.
154-158	364-375	VALENTINIAN I, Mints of Lugdunum and Arelate.
159-178	364-378	VALENS, Mints of Arelate, Aquileia, Rome and Trier.
179-180	367-383	GRATIAN.
181	375-392	VALENTINIAN II, minted after A.D. 378.
182-183	379-395	THEODOSIUS I, one mint of Arelate, and one eastern mint unknown.
184	383-388	MAGNUS MAXIMUS.
185		do. or FLAVIUS VICTOR, indistinct.
186	395-408	ARCADIUS.
187-244		Mid-4th century “minimi”, only partly legible.
245		A ‘minimissimus’.
246-315		A variety of coins not identifiable.

#### POTTERY AND GLASS

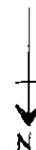
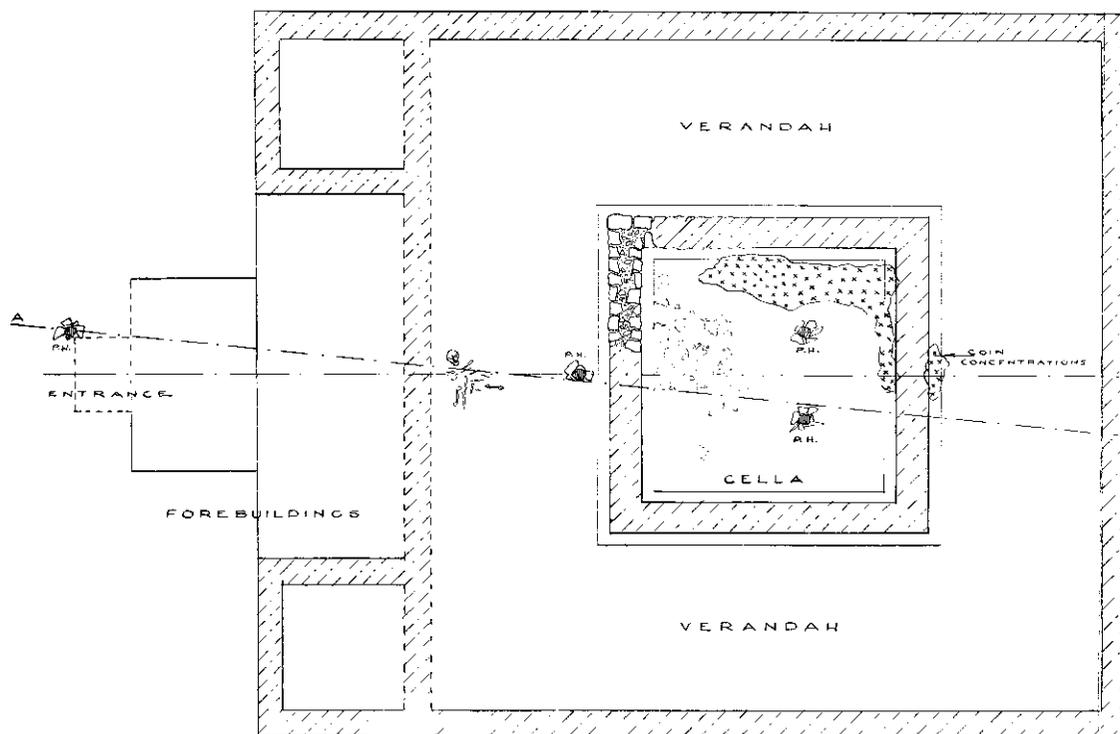
Many fragments of domestic pottery were recovered from the occupation level of the building on the north side of the temple and from its yard. Bound in with the rubble of the temple platform were others having only a survival interest, Samian pieces, and many plain and gritted sherds, traditional and difficult to date, having affinity with the produce of the numerous peasant kilns dotted near to the Nene a few miles to the north. From so much available material, a number of sherds are chosen with a general third/fourth-century dating.

#### COARSE POTTERY, illustrated (Figs. 3 and 4)

1. Pie-dish of pale buff ware.
2. Cooking pot rim in brown ware, rebated to seat a lid; a native type common from the first half of the first century continuing into the fourth century.



PART CROSS SECTION A-A.  
SCALE : 4 FEET TO INCH.



ROMANO  
- CELTIC TEMPLE -  
BOURTON GROUNDS  
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

- 1964 -  
SCALE : 8 FEET TO INCH

- 3, 4. Flanged pic-dish rims, 3 in unpolished grey ware, 4 in dark grey polished ware, late third and throughout the fourth century.  
 5, 6. Hook-rimmed jars, in smooth surfaced yellow ware with grey core, a type with a long life and common on the site.

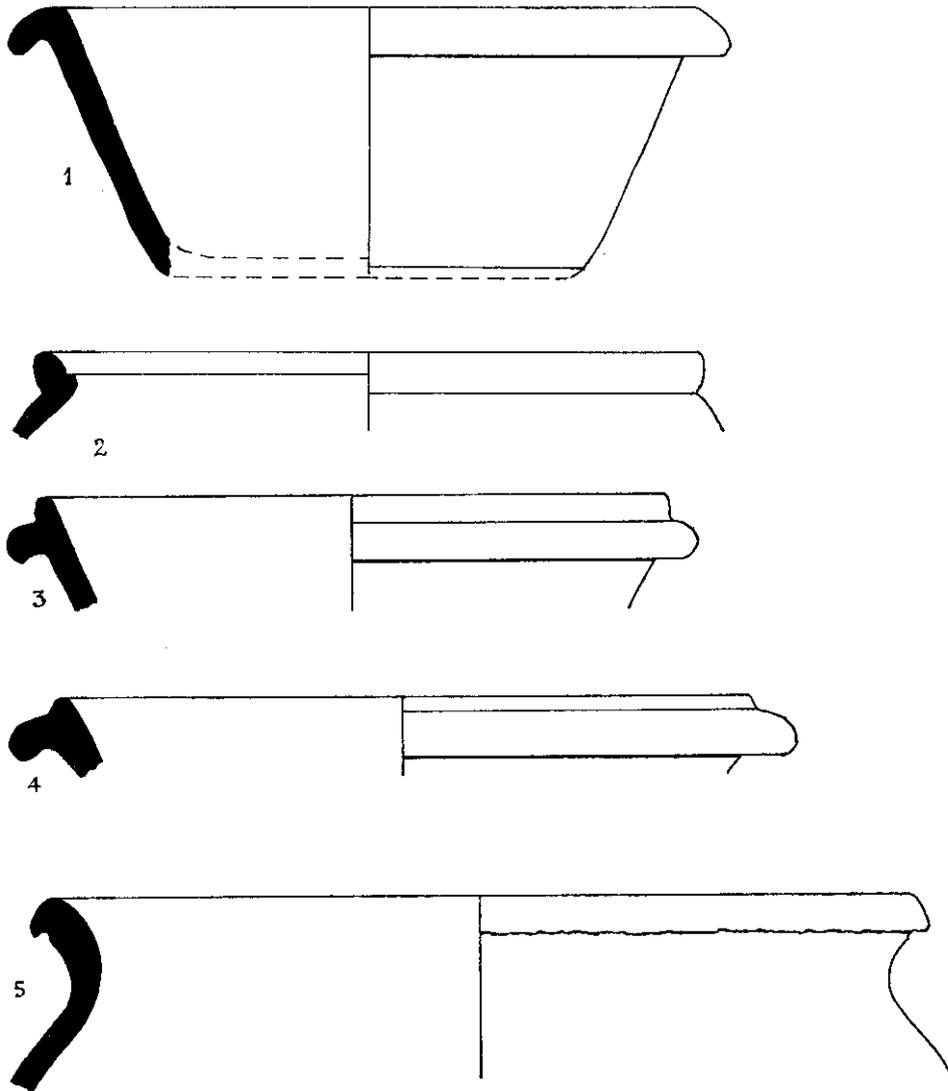


FIG. 3.

7. Part of a large vessel in rather soft pale yellow ware with raised band around the base of the neck, having a deeply incised pattern. Cf. *Throlam*, Figs. 15, 91 and 92, second half of third century.  
 8. Necked vessel, heavily calcite gritted in light brown ware with a grey core.  
 9. Imitation of a Castor ware beaker in sandy orange ware.

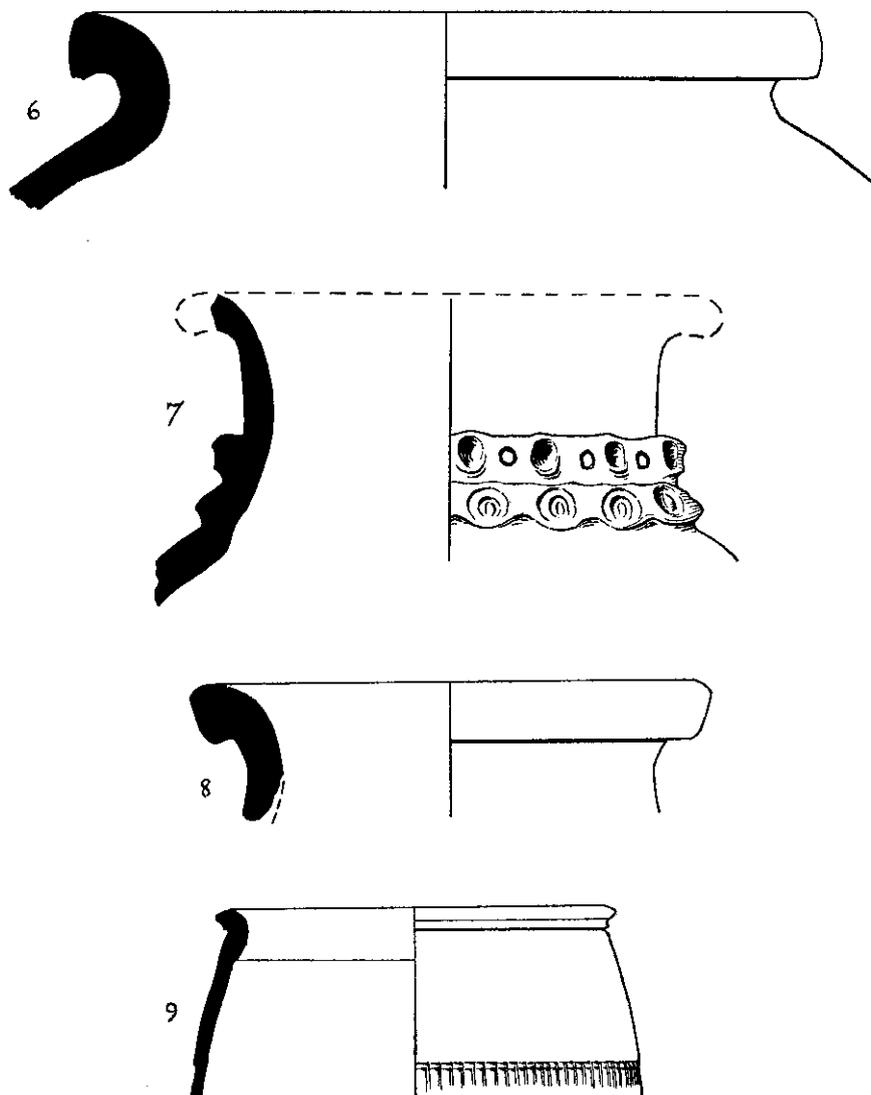


FIG. 4.

#### MORTARIA (Fig. 5)

The five mortaria examined (in slightly sandy, cream fabric, with glassy translucent grit where it survives) are typical products of the potteries in the vicinity of Oxford. Kilns have been discovered at Cowley, Dorchester, Headington, Sandford and Boar's Hill. There is scarcely any close dating evidence available for the products.

10. Probably third century (cf. *Oxon VI*, Fig. 5, 68).  
 11, 12. Both fairly certainly later than A.D. 250, possibly fourth century (cf. *Oxon XVII/XVIII*, Fig. 45, 19 and *Oxon VI*, Fig. 5, 79).

13, 14. This general type was first produced in the latter years of the second century continuing into the third.

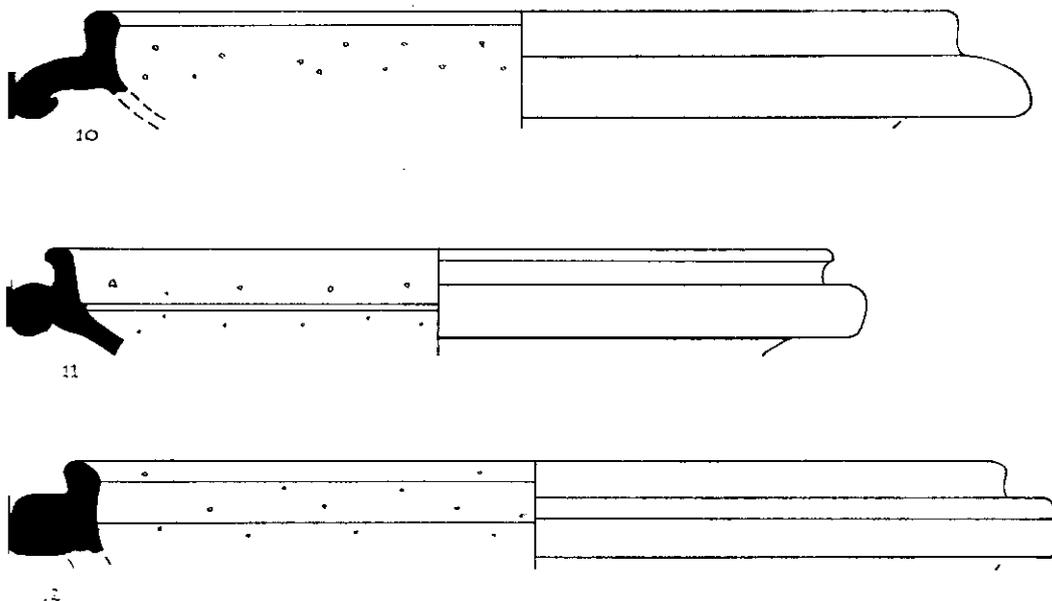


FIG. 5.

#### SAMIAN WARE

- TS 1. Form 37, Central Gaulish. The ovolo was used by a potter whose name is unknown, but who had workshops near Lezoux, where he seems to have been associated with AVSTRVS in the Hadrianic period. He regularly used wavy line borders, though no previous example of his work is known with an astragalus border, as here. c. A.D. 125-145.
- TS 3. Form 45 with poorly moulded applique lion's head flanked by two finger impressions intended to represent bats' ears. Both lion masks and bats' heads are commonly used on Form 45, but I have never seen a hybrid of this kind before. The fabric appears to be Central Gaulish and the vessel late second or early third century.
- TS 4. and various flakes from a bowl of Form 37 in the style of CINNAMVS, with his ovolo 3 (Stanford and Simpson, *Central Gaulish Potters*, Fig. 47, No. 3). The figure-types are Venus (Oswald 286—Dechelette 176) and mask (Oswald 1339—Dechelette 700).
- TS 6. Form 18R with stamp [OFN] CRI of NIGER of La Graufesenque. This stamp is commonly used on Form 29 with pre-Flavian decoration and is recorded at Richborough in pre-Flavian to early-Flavian contents (J. P. Bushe-Fox, *Third Report on the Excavation of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent*, p.151, 44 (D) ), c. A.D. 50-70.
- TS 9. Form 37 in fabric characteristic of Les Martres de Veyre, and in a style usually ascribed to a DONNAUCVS-SACER group (cf. Stanfield and Simpson, *op. cit.* Pl. 50, No. 592, for the leaf, Pl. 48, No. 567, for the dancer, rings and rosettes, and *Antiquaries Journal* Vol. XXV, p.67 ff. for several vessels in this style from the Second Fire of Roman London, c. A.D. 125) A.D. 110-130.

## GLASS

1. Fragment of rim and side of a shallow bowl, colourless with faint greenish tinge, a sharply offset rim with no overhang at edges; Diam. *c.* 5 in. The type is as D. B. Harden, *Roman Glass from Karanis*, (1936), Nos. 169 ff., p.84, Pl. XII. Examples of these colourless bowls are frequent enough on Roman sites of the second century, the best known example being the fine one from a cremation burial at Girton, Cambs., with a wheel-cut design of a duck and water-plants (*ibid.* p.66, Fig. 1, c).
  2. Fragment of rim, deep bowl, green; bubbly and full of impurities. Out-turned rim, remainder of shape uncertain. Diam. *c.* 4 in. The poor quality of the glass suggests a late, perhaps fourth-century date.
- Note: The early dating of Samian pieces—particularly the stamp of Niger (A.D. 50-70)—together with second-century glass and coins from the make-up of the temple platform again confirm that a Belgic-Roman predecessor to the examined building has yet to be located.

HUMAN REMAINS: Report by Miss R. Powers, Sub-dept of Anthropology, British Museum.

"It is almost certain that the bones were skeletonised before insertion into the temple sub-floor, very probably by a previous burial.

Details: Part back of skull of an adult male, consisting of most of the occipital bone and back corner of the left parietal.

A left innominate bone broken in three pieces, adult male. The ilium was broken off as a separate piece, pierced through the centre by a pearshaped hole, not made whilst the bone was fresh.

The head and part of the shaft of a right femur; a radius lacking the distal end, with a third of the shaft of another (right) radius.

It is possible but not certain that all the bones belong to one individual; there is no evidence of deliberate cutting or of any pathology."

During subsequent widening of the workings in the following summer the remaining bones amounting almost to a complete skeleton came to light. There was no duplication of the remains, so the possibility of the re-interment of one individual, an adult male, remains valid.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Primarily to Mr. H. R. Moore of Bourton Grounds for access to his fields, and for his sustained patience and tolerance during their disturbance.

To the late Dr. Sir Ian Richmond for his interest in the excavation, for his many suggestions and his commentary on the report.

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To Dr. C. Kraay for patient elucidation of so many coins of poor appearance; to Dr. D. B. Harden for kindly describing the glass, and Miss R. Powers for details of the human bones.

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