

RITUALS, HOARDS AND HELMETS – THE HALLATON TREASURE

By Vicki Score



When Ken Wallace started finding Iron Age coins in a field near Hallaton eight years ago, he had little idea of exactly what was buried beneath his feet. Eight years on, extensive excavations and research by University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) and the Hallaton fieldwork group have revealed that 2000 years ago this hilltop was a sacred site where coins and artefacts were buried and ritual and animal sacrifices carried out. Although it was initially the thousands of coins and silver artefacts that captured the public imagination, the real value of the finds is that although found by metal detecting, they were recovered using controlled excavation techniques. This has uncovered a story of Iron Age people coming together around the time of the Roman Invasion in AD 43 to offer valuable items to the gods. The discovery has not only changed our understanding of Iron Age Leicestershire but could also help to reinterpret other hoards around Europe.

THE DISCOVERY

Ken is a member of a local fieldwork group – one of many set up in the last 30 years by Leicestershire County Council to encourage interested people to become involved in finding out more about Leicestershire's past. In 2000, while out field walking, the group started finding late Iron Age and Roman pottery similar. Unusually, the field also contained a quantity of animal bone leading Ken to seek the farmer's permission to return to the site with a metal detector. Over several days he recovered more than 200 coins, most of which were quickly identified as late Iron Age silver coins produced between c. 50 BC and AD 50 and attributed to a local people known as the Corieltavi.

As Ken was convinced that there were plenty more coins still in the soil, it was realised that further investigation was needed and in 2001 ULAS started work with the help of the local volunteers. Geophysical survey and trial trenching confirmed that the hilltop had been part of a complex prehistoric and Roman landscape. Unfortunately there were no geophysical features where the coins had been found so Ken's help was enlisted to pinpoint the findspot.

Fortunately as Ken had plotted every find onto a 1m grid, ULAS were able to locate a small trench over the highest concentration. Although the general consensus was that the coins were probably part of a single hoard, within the first few hours of excavation the remains of six hoards were found. As the trench was widened it became obvious that not only were there more hoards, but features and other precious metalwork hinting at a ritual shrine. With the threat of damage from 'nighthawks' (illegal metal detectors that plunder archaeological sites often under cover of darkness) once word got out, it was decided to keep the site a strict secret from anyone not directly involved. The success of this silence meant that the site was fully excavated over the next three years without any great damage.

THE SHRINE

The shrine lies on a ridge overlooking the Welland Valley. It is defined by a narrow boundary ditch with an eastern entrance. This entrance is divided in two by an angled gully that may have been used to control who was allowed in (and perhaps out). Thirteen coin hoards were buried in the entranceway, which was guarded by two dogs that had been ritually killed and buried. Further offerings were found to the south of the entrance with coins and metalwork carefully placed in the boundary ditch, and a Roman helmet buried in a pit close by. Outside the shrine to the east was a large spread of pig bones that may be the remnants of offerings and ritual feasting (Fig. 1).

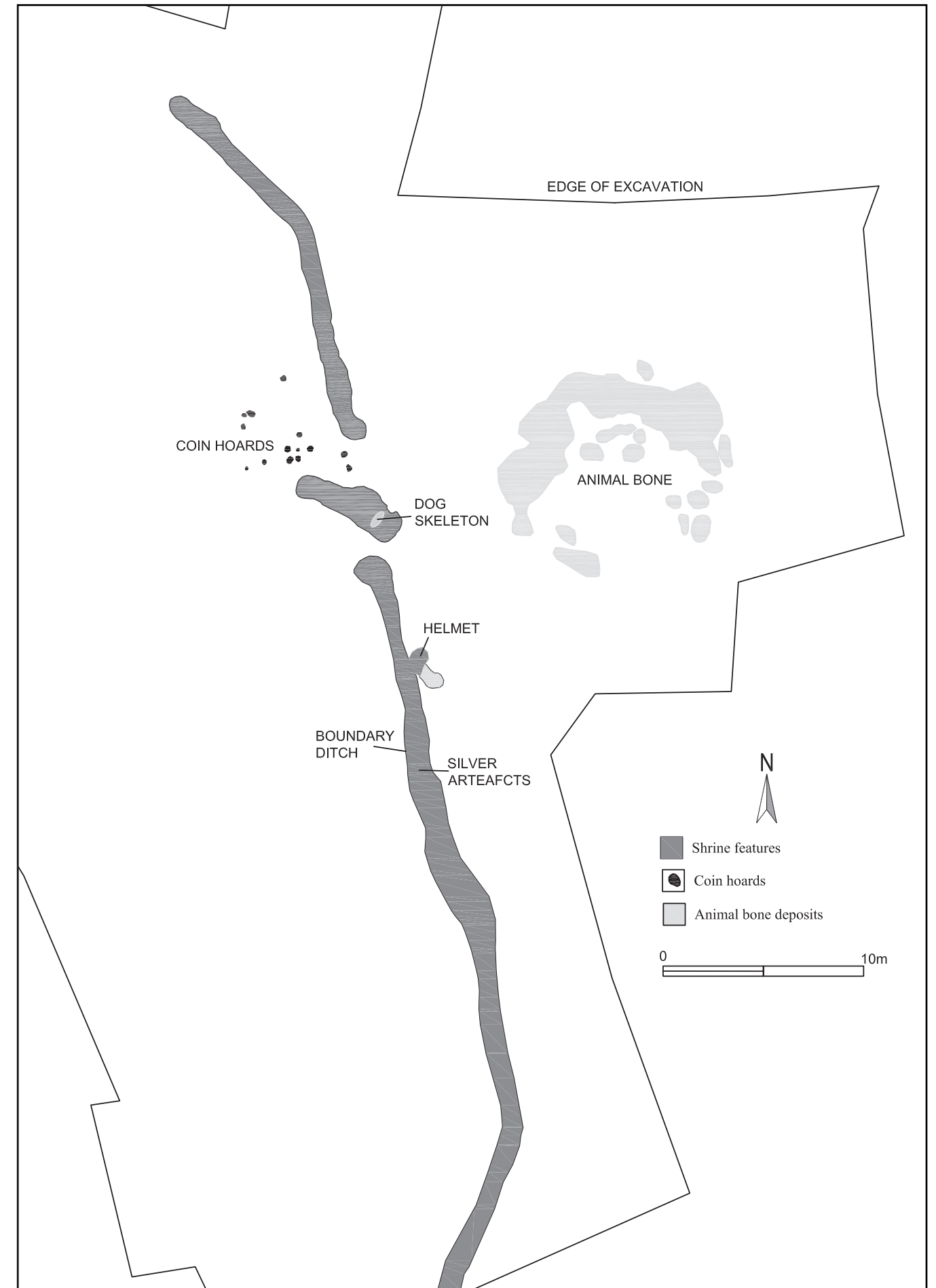


FIGURE 1: PLAN OF THE EXCAVATED SHRINE.

THE COINS

The unusual discovery of so many individual coin hoards in one area is a remarkable occurrence and one which has afforded a rare opportunity for detailed analysis. Over 5292 coins were found, mostly Iron Age coins and early Roman issues. There was an early hoard of gold coins dating to the mid 1st century BC, but most of the other offerings were probably deposited between AD 40-60. Although they were not buried in pits, the clustering of the hoards suggests that they may have originally been in small bags and many of the coins are inscribed with names such as VEP, AUN and IATISON, probably local chieftains (Fig. 2).

Although the traditional view of Iron Age society sees a linear succession of rulers over a single large tribe (in this area known as the Corieltavi), this is based largely on modern ideas of kingship. The Hallaton hoards contain all of the coins of the different rulers deposited together over a short period of time (perhaps 20 years). This suggests the presence of several smaller contemporary groups, each producing coinage inscribed with the name of their leaders rather than the traditional interpretation of a succession of rulers of a single large tribe.

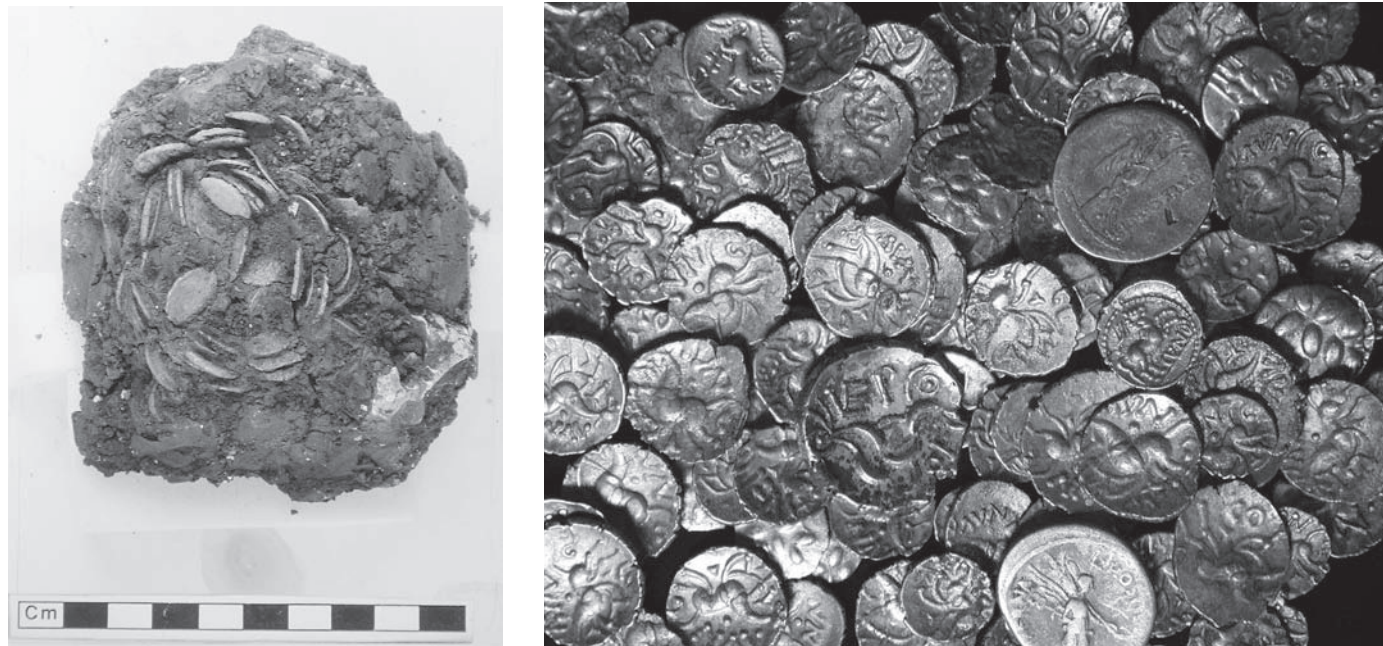


FIGURE 2: ONE OF THE HOARDS AS EXCAVATED AND CLEANED COINS FROM THE SITE - NAMES CAN BE SEEN ON SOME OF THEM.



FIGURE 3: DETAIL OF ONE OF THE CHEEKPIECES.

THE HELMET

In a pit overlying the boundary ditch, what first looked like a pile of rusty iron turned out to be the remains of a Roman cavalry helmet buried upside down in a pit. The helmet was made of iron covered with silver and gilt and looks to be an Imperial Roman cavalry helmet. Over 1000 coins in the same pit provide a mid-1st century date, suggesting that it was buried at the same time as the coins in the entranceway. One of the decorated cheek-pieces shows a figure on horseback with one hand raised in salute, being crowned by the goddess Victory. Beneath the horse a barbarian cowers with his head in his hands. The imagery (especially the use of victory crowing the horseman) leaves little doubt that this is either the emperor or a member of the Imperial family.

The offering of a Roman helmet on a British ritual site is one of the most puzzling aspects of the site. It is unlikely to be captured spoils (the helmet was a parade helmet and wouldn't have ever been worn in battle). Perhaps it belonged to Briton serving in the Roman army?

Alternatively it may have been a gift from the invading Romans to a local tribe to help soothe their passage through this area.

SILVER METALWORK

A chance discovery found several silver objects, placed carefully in the boundary ditch just south of the entranceway. This area was not originally scheduled for excavation, but a particularly rainy day necessitated the digging of a sump to drain the water from the excavation area. This section of ditch was chosen as it had already been disturbed by a land drain. Just inches below the drain silver coins started to appear followed by a silver bowl, a decorated mount, a crescent-shaped silver ingot and a triangular crucible base made from melted down coins. The digger of the land drain had only just missed finding the silver – as shown by the silver bowl which has a cut in it probably made by his spade (Fig. 5).

The reason these objects had been buried is a mystery although the decorated mount had been badly broken and new holes created suggesting that it had a personal value – perhaps a family heirloom. The coins are mostly uninscribed and were probably placed there earlier than the hoards in the entranceway and the helmet, around AD 30 (Fig. 4).



FIGURE 4: BROKEN SILVER MOUNT.

FIGURE 5: THE BOWL AND CRUCIBLE AS FOUND – THE CUT MADE BY THE SPADE OF THE LAND DRAIN DIGGER IS CLEARLY VISIBLE.

ANIMAL BONES

The animal remains from the site form two groups. Firstly there is evidence for the ritual burial of dogs in the entranceway. One was still partially articulated, although truncated by a medieval plough furrow (Fig. 6). The animal's body had been carefully positioned with its neck stretched unnaturally backwards and its legs pulled beneath suggesting it may have been tied before being ritually slaughtered. Dogs are often found in ritual contexts in Iron Age and Roman Britain and it may be that the special relationship enjoyed between dogs and humans in life was continued in death. The dogs may have been sacrificed and buried to guard the entrance to the shrine and perhaps to provide a welcome to those allowed inside.



FIGURE 6: RITUAL DOG BURIAL – NOTE HOW THE HEAD IS AT A STRANGE ANGLE AND THE LEGS HAVE BEEN PULLED BACK AS IF TIED.

Outside the shrine was a cluster of pits containing the bones of more than 80 young pigs, mostly aged between 7 and 12 months (only a quarter of the bones were excavated suggesting that around 250 pigs may have been killed and buried on the site). Radiocarbon analysis dates their death between 50 BC- AD 80 and they are likely to have been buried at the same time as the coins. It was evident that the carcasses were not buried whole but were divided into pieces, perhaps as offerings of food (Fig. 6). The presence of a copper alloy tankard handle suggests feasting and some of the pigs may have been cooked and eaten as a part of the ritual feast. Sacrifice and feasting on young animals is a particular feature of shrine sites and comparisons can be made with other temples and shrines

of the period, such as Uley, Harlow and Hayling Island. Interestingly the right lower forelimb must have held a particular significance at the Hallaton shrine, as these were mostly missing – perhaps they were collected and used in a different way or deposited elsewhere.



FIGURE 6: DETAIL OF SOME OF THE ANIMAL BONE FROM THE SITE.

INTERPRETATION

The Hallaton ritual site does not fit easily into the tradition of Late Iron Age shrines which are usually associated with a building. Instead this is a large open air communal site and may represent a type that has not been identified before – few treasure finds have ever been this extensively excavated and similar sites may have existed throughout Britain.

Although ritual activity may have begun in the 1st century BC with the burial of a hoard of gold coins, the main activity on the site occurred during the early to mid 1st century AD. The wealthy offerings and the possible use of the entranceway to restrict access into the shrine suggests its use was limited to elite individuals (e.g. chieftains or religious leaders). However the presence of over 200 pigs might suggest that the local people also participated in ritual with offerings of pigs and ritual feasting. The slaughtering of the pigs before they were fully grown would represent an economic loss to the community therefore making their offering more valuable to whichever gods they were attempting to please. The location of the pig bones mirroring the coins on the other side of the entrance is likely to be deliberate; while the chieftains were offering gold and silver to the gods inside the shrine the rest of the tribe may well have been sacrificing pigs outside.

The coins suggest that the site served as a communal meeting place drawing groups from all over the region, each with their own chieftains and coinage. An absence of domestic evidence, such as food waste and pottery, indicates that people were living elsewhere (Iron Age round houses have been identified further to the north of the area), and may have travelled to the site for a specific event – perhaps an annual festival. Of course the rituals may well have been used to legitimise other social functions such as the succession of chieftains, trade alliances and marriage and Hallaton may have performed a central role in the shared social, political and ritual interaction of these communities.

Although activity ceased after the 1st century AD, there is extensive Roman settlement nearby, until the 4th century AD. Subsequent Roman occupation avoided the main area of the shrine, despite its prime location, implying a continuing awareness of the sacred space. Finds of Roman brooches and metalwork suggest that a hitherto undiscovered Roman temple may also exist close by.

The Hallaton ritual site is important for several reasons. Not only is it unparalleled on a national level in terms of the finds and the preservation of their original context, but it also has the potential to aid in the interpretation of other hoard sites. Few other hoards have been extensively investigated, allowing for the possibility that many may also have originally been associated with similar ritual areas. The discovery and excavation of this site has important consequences for the interpretation of a number of Late Iron Age sites in this country and across other parts of north-west Europe.

The project is also a wonderful example of community archaeology. Without the assistance of the local community not only would the site never have been found, but it would also have not have been as fully excavated. The Hallaton fieldwork group provided most of the labour not only for the fieldwork but also for much of the post-excavation work (including the careful sieving and washing of hundred of bags of animal bone). Their help and enthusiasm has been crucial in interpreting the story of the site.

The project has also been supported by National societies like English Heritage, the BBC, the British Museum and the Heritage Lottery Fund as well as Leicestershire County Council, professional archaeologists and local amateur archaeologists, not to mention schoolchildren and the general public showing that these groups can work together to achieve great things.