

CHARTERHOUSE ON MENDIP: INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS IN 1994

MALCOLM TODD

INTRODUCTION

The second season of work at Charterhouse on Mendip was carried out in July 1994 with financial support from the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries, the Haverfield Bequest, the Maltwood Fund and the University of Exeter. Work was directed at the further elucidation of a complex of earthworks east of the Charterhouse valley (Site 1) and the Roman fortlet (Site 2), both of which were examined in 1993, and at the examination of a mining complex (Site 3) lying east of the fortlet (Fig. 1).

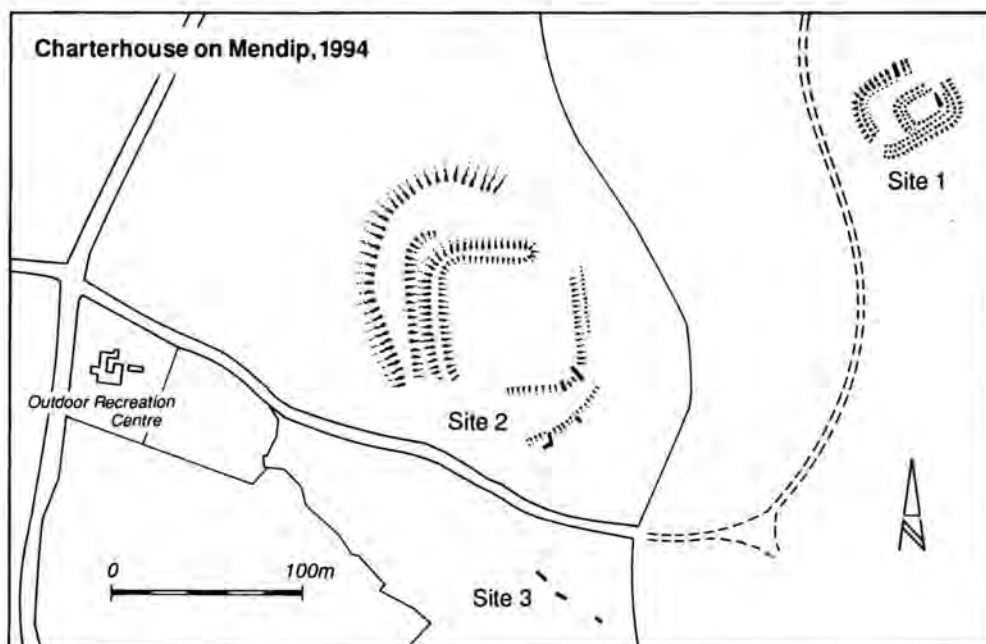


Fig. 1 Sites examined in 1994.

SITE 1. THE EARTHWORK COMPLEX

Essentially, this site consists of a two-phase earthwork. The earlier phase is represented by a rectilinear enclosure some 40 m by 20 m, with rounded angles, surrounded by a bank and an *internal* ditch. The bank is constructed of stone and clay and now stands up to 1.5 m high. The ditch is 1.1 m deep and 1.4 m wide. Pottery from the bank places this earthwork in the medieval period, probably after about 1300. In the interior lay a mass of loose stones, possibly the remains of dry-stone shelters. Among and beneath this stone layer lay abundant evidence of metalworking, mainly in lead, in the form of slag, clinker, ore fragments and pieces of finished lead strip and other objects. Among the last-named the most interesting is part of a lead container decorated with stamps over bosses. Later, but still within the medieval centuries, a smaller earthwork was constructed within the earlier work at its north-east end. This was enclosed by a low bank of sand and turf, and by a slight external ditch.

Beneath the medieval levels, slight evidence of Roman activity was obtained in the form of fine black burnished pottery. The earliest land surface on the site, immediately over the natural clay, produced an interesting assemblage of Mesolithic flint implements and cores. Such material has been noted at many points on the Mendips, but has not often been reported from controlled excavations.

SITE 2. THE ROMAN FORTLET

The two phases detected in this work in 1993 were confirmed by further excavation. The east ditch of the first phase was traced in a well-preserved (but hitherto unrecorded) earthwork and a length of it excavated. An immense amount of early Roman pottery was recovered from its filling, including Claudian *terra sigillata*, Gallo-Belgic ware, other imported fine wares, flagons, amphorae and a strikingly small proportion of coarse wares. This sector of the ditch, probably close to a gate-causeway, had obviously been used as a rubbish-dump and possibly as a latrine. From the same deposits there also came four Claudian *asses*, belt-fittings, fine glass sherds, several iron objects and a late La Tène bronze fibula.

The ditch of the fortlet in its second phase was examined at two points on its east side, along with the front of the accompanying bank. Cut into natural rock, a sharp profile could not be obtained by the original diggers in the friable limestone lying over unyielding rock, though skilful use had been made of the natural bedding planes. 1st century Roman pottery and a few Iron Age sherds were found in the lower and middle filling of the ditch. Silting occurred without interruption over later centuries before the site was partly levelled in the post-medieval period. The fortlet bank had been constructed largely from clay and stone derived from the ditch. No turf or other revetment had been provided at its front.

The dating evidence retrieved this season puts it beyond any doubt, if any still remained, that the Roman military occupation of the Mendips began in the Claudian period and that exploitation of the mineral deposits had begun by that date. The evidence of the well-known inscription of AD 49 on a lead panel (*RIB* 2404.1), called into question by some, is now supported by a substantial body of pottery and, less definitely, by coinage. The implications for Roman conquest and consolidation in the further South West in the late forties and early fifties are considerable.

As in 1993, quantities of typically Bronze Age flintwork were recovered from in and beneath the Roman levels. No features could be certainly associated with this material, but it clearly indicates use of this sector of the Charterhouse valley in the 2nd millennium

BC and probably before. The main diagnostic implements were barbed and tanged arrowheads and a fine knife blade. Surprisingly little material of this period has so far been published from the Mendips, though the richness of local collections clearly demonstrates the intensity of settlement on the plateau from the Neolithic onward.

SITE 3. ROMAN MINING SITE

The area immediately south-east of the fortlet is seamed and pitted with the remains of mining of several periods. The roughly circular pits, about twenty in number, probably mark the sites of medieval shafts, while larger and less regular intrusions may belong to the Tudor period and later. Also in evidence on this site are a number of grooves or 'rakes', which are similar in character to the remains of Roman mining activities in several parts of western Europe and which seem likely to represent extraction from ore-bodies lying close to the surface. The longest of the rakes on the site also seemed likely to be among the earliest of the visible mining features and it was therefore decided to examine lengths of this to determine its date (Fig. 2). Almost immediately below the modern surface, a well defined groove was determined, cut into the natural rock to a great depth. Its width varied markedly, from only 0.45–0.5 m in Trench 1 to 1.5 m in Trench 3. At no point could the bottom of the rake be reached, the deepest excavation being achieved in Trench 1, where the groove was followed to a depth of 2.4 m. In Trench 2, the ancient miners had cut into a substantial natural cave system of fissures and a cavern. One fissure remained open but was too narrow to enter. A halogen beam revealed its visible depth to be over 7 m from the modern surface; it is almost certainly much deeper. The size and depth of the cavern is unknown. A cave system has long been suspected on this site. First indications are that it is sizeable. It is at least likely that these natural fissures first revealed the presence of galena to the original miners.

The date at which this mineral lode was extracted could be firmly placed in the 1st century AD. Below the modern topsoil, no material later than the first fifty years of Roman occupation was recovered. Throughout the depth of the rake, Roman pottery was recorded, most of it south Gaulish *terra sigillata*, flagons and fine wares. As in the fortlet ditches, coarse wares were present in unusually small quantities. Fragments of three Iron Age vessels were also recovered from the rake, all of types represented at Glastonbury and Meare, especially the latter site. These could easily have remained in use into the Roman period and thus cannot be used to support late Iron Age mining in this rake. But

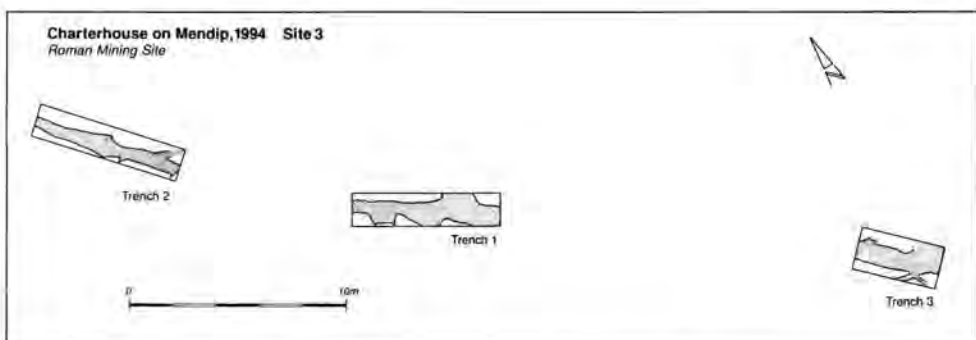


Fig. 2 Excavations on the line of a mining rake.

pre-Roman location and extraction of galena at this point would have been an easy matter and cannot be reasonably excluded from consideration. This is the first Roman mining site to have been excavated on the Mendips and it adds an important element to the current programme of work. Extraction of the lead ore (discarded pieces of which were found in the rake) appears to have been achieved by pecking out the ore body along the strike of the lode, for no pick-marks were in evidence on the sides of the groove and there were no traces of fire-setting on the rock-faces. Small quantities of charcoal were found in the filling of the groove, but these did not result from intense burning and they did not occur in marked concentrations. The rake had been deliberately back-filled within the 1st century AD, or very shortly afterwards, with a mixture of boulders and clay, possibly derived from the excavation of other rakes nearby, four of which are still visible.

RESULTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results from the season of fieldwork in 1994 represent a considerable advance in understanding of the Roman exploitation of the mineral deposits at Charterhouse. The early date of the fortlets is confirmed beyond doubt. Occupation of the successive works can confidently be placed between the late forties and the earlier Flavian period, with a bias towards the Claudio-Neronian decades. The precise location of Roman mineral workings was an unexpected bonus and it offers the hope that other rakes will provide further evidence of early mining. Several of the rakes on the eastern side of the Charterhouse valley must now come under serious consideration as ancient workings. The presence of quantities of Iron Age material in the rake and in the early fortlet ditch is highly suggestive and tends to support the notion that extraction of galena had already begun before the Roman arrival. This pottery and the La Tène fibula appear to be the first Iron Age material to be securely reported from Charterhouse, though an Iron Age silver coin was found here in the 19th century and another was seen, in private hands, in August 1994. The examination of other rakes is an obvious desideratum in the future. Several major gaps remain in the archaeological record. In particular, evidence for medieval exploitation of the deposits at Charterhouse remains surprisingly slight. It must be assumed that the main focus lay in the valley and has thus been destroyed or obscured by later working.

Wider considerations are now open and must be addressed. One of the most important of these is the social and economic relationship between the Mendips and the adjacent lowland, most notably the Somerset Levels and Sedgemoor. That upland and lowland formed separate ecosystems is inherently unlikely, but little, if any, work has yet been directed at reconstructing what links may have existed and how they functioned. This field of research is wide open and invites attention in the immediate future.

APPENDIX

ZINC MANUFACTURE IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

Among the finds of metallic objects from Roman levels at Charterhouse, one piece stands out above the rest in its potential significance. In the first phase fortlet ditch, a small lump of what was taken to be lead was found stratified with pottery of the period AD 65–80. Examination of this object by X-ray diffraction reveals that it is actually a piece of metallic zinc. Such a find is extremely rare in a Roman context and it raises important issues. Orthodoxy has it that metallic zinc could not be produced before the early modern

period as the relevant techniques of production had not been developed. Zinc was, of course, added to alloys from the Bronze Age onward, but its presence was viewed as a by-product of the smelting process (Tylecote, R.F., 1962, 51). Recently this view has been seriously challenged. Examination of an inscribed metal tablet found on the Engehalsinsel at Berne, Switzerland, has indicated that this object is made of crude zinc. Although not recovered by orthodox archaeological methods, there seems to be no reason to doubt the authenticity of the piece. It bears a punched inscription which appears to be in Celtic – not the most obvious product of a forger (Rehren, forthcoming; Fellmann, R., 1991).

Zinc objects in certain ancient contexts have thus far proved extremely elusive. A metallic zinc cup is reported from a Roman building at Laktasi, near Banja Luka in Bosnia, though the basis of identification is not clear (Kellner, J., 1893, 254). Until recently, the most convincing case has been a piece from Athens, reported from an unimpeachable context (Farnsworth, M., Smith, C., and Rhodda, J., 1949, 126–9). Aside from the Berne-Engehalsinsel tablet, the only other reliably reported find seems to be a piece of late Roman date on a site in southern Poland (Stos-Gale, Z., 1993, 109). The zinc fragment from Charterhouse is thus of particular importance, coming as it does from a known source of zinc and from a stratified deposit of 1st century date. The production of metallic zinc in the Roman world must be taken seriously and further research activated on objects in museum collections which may well be labelled as lead or lead alloys.

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