THE THORNBOROUGH ROMANO-BRITISH TEMPLE: A REAPPRAISAL

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The Topography of the Roman Ritual Site at Thornborough

The medieval bridge at Thornborough is located at the narrowest crossing point for some miles over both the Padbury Brook and the river Great Ouse. Here high ground on both banks would have in ancient times kept the traveller well above the flood plain in all weathers. Before this bridge was erected in the early fourteenth century there was a ford at this location whose origins lie in distant antiquity. This crossing point has had a significant influence on the historical development of roads in the region.

Some fifty years ago the remains of a Romano-British temple were discovered situated on a site in Bourton Grounds c.140 yards (126 metres, upstream from the medieval bridge at Thornborough along the Padbury Brook[1]. The original excavation refers to a river Twin. This is

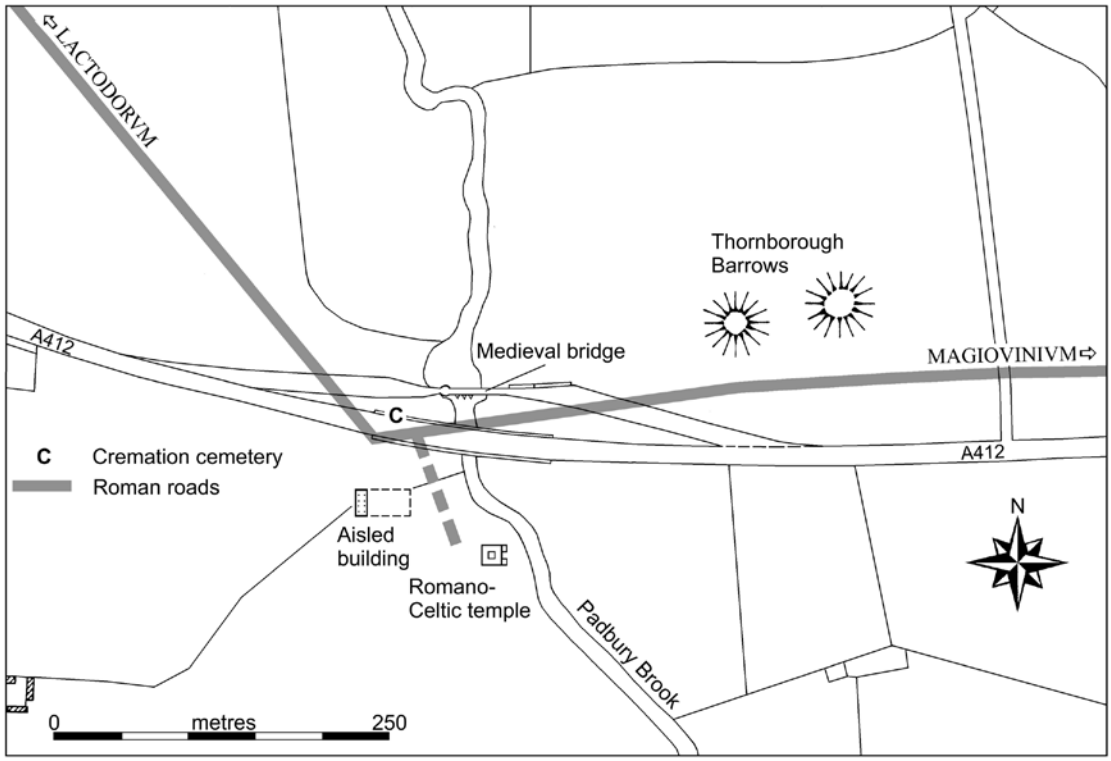

FIGURE 1 Map of the Thornborough ritual complex

a misunderstanding, as just a kilometre and a half down-stream the Padbury Brook feeds into the Great Ouse. Where these two identical streams merge is called The Twins.

This excavation identified a standard stone and tile *cella*-type temple building along with an associated barn-style building close by. Later excavations found other connected structures that suggested that a locally significant ritual complex had once existed on this site.

A short distance away on the opposite, eastern bank on the side of a hill to the north, overlooking the same bridge, two large ancient burial mounds are situated. These had been opened in 1839 and Romano-British burial deposits, dated as being no later than the end of the second century, were recovered[2]. It is now recognised that these two mounds originally provided the name 'Thornborough' or 'Torneberge', meaning 'thorny hills' in Old English, to the local area[3]. This suggests that this crossing point over the Padbury Brook continued to be significant during the Anglo-Saxon place-naming period.

The precise location where the temple stood is on the west bank of the Padbury Brook just upstream from the point where the river valley narrows. On the eastern bank of the river there is a broad slope which, over a distance of eight hundred metres, gradually climbs uphill from a point just about seventy metres above sea level to a height of one hundred and three metres. On the western bank a similar slope is more gradual but

FIGURE 2 Aerial photo of the Thornborough barrows by Michael Farley. © Buckinghamshire County Council: reproduced by permission of the County Archaeological Service.

eventually rises uphill to the height of eighty-nine metres above sea level over a shorter distance of five hundred metres. As mentioned previously, this is the narrowest crossing point over the Padbury Brook for some miles. Downstream, the confluence with the Great Ouse, coupled to this narrow valley, often causes extensive flooding on the water-meadows along the Padbury Brook to the south in the early spring.

The Temple

The first excavation of the temple site was conducted by Charles Green. He was an enthusiast for Roman roads and was one of the group who called themselves The Viatores. He was drawn to Thornborough whilst conducting a survey into the presumed convergence of five Roman roads in the parish. The original data of the excavation other than what has been published is missing, and any artefacts have been subsequently lost.

Green noted a deep ditch on the Buckingham side of the medieval Thornborough Bridge which contained Roman pottery[4]. Nearby was an underground water-course that was found to contain sherds of Samian ware dated to the early or mid-second century. Sir Harry Moore, the then owner of Bourton Grounds, invited an archaeological survey of his fields. During this exercise attention was drawn to a flattish mound, seemingly artificial, that was about 140 yards (126 metres) upstream from the medieval bridge. Earlier ploughing had induced a hollow on the river bank which had retained flood waters from the river, almost inundating the mound. Mole activity in the mound had ejected Roman tile and other Roman sherds. Closer inspection revealed stone close to the surface. Initial excavations confirmed a stone base to the mound and a layer of small coins of the Roman period.

The structure of the temple was of a standard 'cella' type of a ritual or sanctuary square contained within a larger perambulatory square. The staging for the deity or idol was deemed to be 36 square feet (3.46 square metres) extending to the western wall. The sanctuary floor was 52 square feet (5 square metres) and was separated from the perambulatory veranda by a 4 foot (1.2 metre) gap. This perambulatory veranda extended for a further 12 feet (3.64 metres) to the wall footings.

Green surmised that originally the temple rested on a natural knoll above the river flood level, but later deposits of silt plus soil wash from the slope above had buried the original floor. He suggested that the temple had further steps and terraces leading up to the main entrance. On the eastern side of the temple, at the entrance way facing the river was a fore-building or large porch suggesting a flight of steps, probably covered, leading up to the temple itself. This entrance way had small compartments on either side, being around 11 feet (3.33 metres) by 9 feet (2.7 metres).

The walls of the temple had been systematically and extensively robbed out. There was also evidence of burning on parts of the sanctuary and veranda platforms, suggesting a destruction stage at the end of the pagan Roman period. Green took the view that the burning was an immediate precursor to the removal of the masonry, suggesting deliberate destruction. The original floor had also been removed, exposing a skull and other human remains embedded under the veranda on the entrance side.

These skeletal remains of an adult male had been mortared into the foundations at the veranda entrance just below the Roman floor level. Since the Romans did not practise foundation sacrifices – human sacrifice being banned within the Empire – it is likely that the presence of this skeleton indicates that this later stone Romano-British temple replaced an earlier, Iron Age Celtic shrine. This skeleton showed signs of having been reinterred so, whilst eventually being found largely complete, not all the parts of the skeleton were in the correct order, reinforcing ideas of reburial. It may have been a foundation sacrifice for an earlier Iron Age temple on or next to this site.

There were also 315 coins, mainly bronze of low denomination, found under the cella or sanctuary floor, suggesting that these had fallen through the gaps of a raised wooden floor. Some of this coin hoard found in the sanctuary also showed signs of burning. There were a few old coins and all of those showed considerable wear. The bulk of the coin hoard commenced around AD270 with Victorinus, continuing to AD395–407, in the reigns of Theodosius and Arcadius.

Green estimated that this latter temple was erected circa AD265. The inhumation represented an earlier building of which there was little or nothing to be found. He took the view that at times the river level would rise close to the temple

FIGURE 3 Reconstruction of the Thornborough temple, produced for Buckinghamshire County Council by Oxford Archaeology. © Buckinghamshire County Council: reproduced by permission of the County Archaeological Service.

and therefore suggested that a river deity was the subject of the temple's dedication.

An associated building was found some 70 yards (64 metres) north-west of the temple. This was a barn-type structure some 45 feet (13.5 metres) long, running north to south, with two rows of aisle posts forming a nave some 18 feet (5.51 metres) wide with narrow side aisles. There was evidence to suggest that another barn had been built on this site at another time. The southern end of the Roman barn showed signs of human habitation. There was also evidence of further buildings, possibly connected to habitation. Green ponders if this was the site of the custodian of the shrine. The pottery and glass finds associated with this habitation were largely 3rd and 4th century.

THE MOUNDS

The Thornborough mounds were opened at the direction of the Duke of Buckingham in 1839. This was an antiquarian exercise much favoured at the time, but may also have been a vain attempt to put some sort of flesh to the theories of Bishop Kennet, who had in Parochial Antiquities, London 1695, asserted that the sons of Cymbeline, namely Togodumnos and Caractacus, had fought a major battle with the Roman general Aulus Plautius on the banks of the 'river Ous' at the time of the Roman invasion. This drollery was taught in local schools right up until the last war. In modern times this reported battle is believed to have taken place somewhere close to the river Medway in Kent.

It was found that one mound had already been robbed out in antiquity but the other, being 156' (46.85 metres) in diameter and 25' (7.51 metres) high, was opened by cutting a trench through the centre[5] displaying bands of stratification of alternate layers of clay and mould. This barrow contained a limestone platform at ground level which had a calcined surface suggesting that it

had acted as the base for a funeral pyre.

There were ashes and bone fragments presumably from the cremation inside a glass vessel. This and other grave goods had been protected by a wooden covering before the mound was built above it. Some oak planks from this covering were found intact.

There were other vessels in the mound of both ceramic and bronze fabrication, plus a gold lozenge marked with the head of a Cupid[6]. Joan Liversidge[7] inspected the grave goods, noting that the glass jug and bronze items were 1st and 2nd-century types whilst the Samian bowl of Dragendorff Form 37 was made by Tittius of Lezoux, a potter working during the Domitian to Antonine period sometime between AD96–192.

Liversidge dated the building of the mounds to the latter part of the 2nd century, on the basis that most of the grave goods were by and large commonplace articles of the time. She took the view that the Samian bowl may have been an exceptional purchase for the funeral. This places the latest date for the erection of the mounds towards the end of the 2nd century. It is possible that the mounds may have been raised earlier, around the middle of the 2nd century, but there is no evidence to support that view.

The Cremation Cemetery

The cremation cemetery was discovered at the Thornborough excavations in 1972–3 for the erection of a new road bridge over the Padbury Brook[8]. As with all the Roman deposits found at this excavation the cemetery was sealed under a copious amount of river silt.

Seven individual cremations were found, but a scatter of bone and pottery sherds within the cemetery perimeter suggest that other cremations had been ploughed out over the centuries. In the enclosing ditch of the cemetery an inhumation had been placed in a disorderly manner suggesting haste. This inhumation was of a woman with her head cut off. Such a funeral practice is open to debate but it implies punishment, either in this world or the next[9].

A variety of burial techniques evident within the cremation cemetery implies that it was in use over a period of time, possibly representing a burial place for an extended family. The period seems to be of the Flavian emperors, namely between the middle and the end of the 1st century. This means the cemetery predates the mounds.

The Nature of the Roman Cult at Thornborough

Why a Roman or even an Iron Age ritual site is located in this place is unclear. There may well have originally been an acknowledgement to what the Romans chose to call the *genius loci or* 'spirit of place'[10] which later became reinforced by other factors, not the least being the apparent foundation sacrifice. The narrowing of the valley immediately downstream of the broad water meadows, the ability to cross the stream by way of the ford, and the relatively short nature of that crossing may have reinforced or even created the ritual value of the site.

During 1972–1973 archaeological excavations were made at Bourton Grounds in advance of the erection of a new road bridge for what is now the A421 Bletchley to Buckingham road[11]. These excavations revealed additional evidence of Iron Age and Roman activity around the temple site.

It was noted during the course of these excavations that the Roman remains, which included roads, ditches and a cremation cemetery, had been sealed below a natural deposit of fluvial silts. This had been noted previously by Green when excavating the temple site. It became readily apparent that in the 1st century the river bed had still been downgrading as there were no fluvial deposits beneath the layers of Roman material[12]. This suggests that the phenomenon of seasonal flooding, even now still observable in the vicinity of Thornborough Bridge, commenced only after the 1st century. It is not clear as to the reason why the flooding started during the Roman period, but this could well be due to variations in the speed of river flow, alterations in river use, changes in sea-level and topography further downstream.[13]

The 1972–1973 excavations also identified two principal periods of cult activity at the temple site[14]. The first was in the 1st to 2nd centuries following the Roman conquest, when the cremation cemetery was in use and the two burial mounds erected. The second was in the 3rd and 4th centuries when a more sophisticated cult predominated at the temple site. This temple was destroyed by fire after AD408 and much of its stone was robbed out.

Green had postulated that the original temple

FIGURE 4 The Thornborough Isis, scale as shown. Reproduced from *Records* **25** (see note 16 for reference)

dedication would have been to a river god. However, during the course of his excavations he discovered, in addition to the temple building, an associated aisled barn-style structure, described above. Green noted that in this building 'beneath a threshold was the skull of a horse, ringed with oyster shells and crowned with a large, smooth pebble'[15]. Miranda Green (no relation) has proposed that the presence of these equine remains suggests that the temple may have been dedicated to the Celtic goddess Epona, or to a deity embodying the character of this bountiful female divinity[16].

Epona was a Celtic goddess of fertility who was usually represented in the company of horses. Her name has come down to us via Roman commentators from the tribes in Gaul. She has distinct similarities with the Celtic British goddess, Riannon or 'Great Queen', who also possessed associations with fertility[17]. Riannon, in her turn, has a distinct

parallel in the Irish Gaelic goddess, Mor-Rioghain or the Morrigan, whose name also means 'Great Queen'. Her aspect has a particular association with death in battle[18].

It is difficult at this distance in time and with no direct written records to understand the full nature of the ancient divinities of Iron Age and Roman Britain. All that we possess are a mixture of stories told by interested Romans, traditions filtered through early Christian writers and images recovered, identified and interpreted by modern archaeologists. However, it is perfectly legitimate to postulate the existence of a cult of a Great Goddess in ancient Britain. This important divinity not only controlled human and agricultural fertility, but also the reverse, namely the gateway to life after death. It is significant that the horse skull found at Thornborough had been buried under a doorway, suggesting that by crossing the threshold the pilgrim is either entering or leaving the realm of the divine.

In 1981 a metal detectorist uncovered a bronze figurine, complete with casting flanges, on a footpath close to Thornborough Bridge. This statuette was examined by Miranda Green, who describes a female figure identical to images that illustrate the Roman goddess, Fortuna[19]. Fortuna was the Roman goddess of chance or good luck. She had specific associations with human fertility and was known as 'Women's Luck'. She had also acquired a strong association with the development of Rome's official luck, being known since the 3rd century BC as *Fortuna Publica Populi Romani*, meaning the 'Official Good Luck of the Roman People'[20]. In the later Roman period the image of Fortuna also became conflated with characteristics of the cult of the Egyptian Great Goddess, Isis.

There is no evidence to suggest Isis worship was common in Roman Britain. Her cult was extensive within the Roman Empire at large and there are signs that a temple dedicated to Isis existed in Roman London[21]. The available evidence suggests that the divine imagery of Isis, conjoined with the politically respectable associations of the Roman Fortuna, were used to promote a local provincial divinity with similar ritual characteristics and an established cult base close to Bourton Grounds during the 3rd century. Whilst it is tenuous to construct a theory on the back of just a few artefacts discovered over a forty-year period, the evidence supports a cult associated with a powerful divine female figure. The political and economic instability of the province in the mid-to-late 3rd century may have found the promotion of a native divinity closely associated with the luck of Rome particularly helpful to both the secular authorities and the owners of the temple.

Isis originated in ancient Egypt where she was the goddess of fecundity and crop growth. These are characteristics common to both Epona and Riannon. Her divine powers are derived from her role in the myth of Osiris, in which she recovers the mutilated remains of this murdered god, reconstitutes the parts and so brings her divine husband back to life[22]. She is also associated with the annual inundation of the Nile that was so essential to the continued prosperity of ancient Egypt[23].

Therefore, on the basis of this evidence it is suggested that in the later period of the Roman temple at Thornborough during the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, a cult existed based around a female divinity associated with fertility and rebirth. This cult was practised in a temple whose immediate environs were subject to regular inundations, mainly in the early spring. The cult enjoyed public acceptability as it contrived to be associated also with the good luck of the Roman state.

The parallels with Isis are significant, even though in all probability the name of this goddess was not used. Such a cult of certain rebirth, either back into this world or into the next, would have been very attractive to people enduring the uncertainties of the 3rd century of the Roman period. The great age of imperial expansion was over with the Roman Empire now on the defensive, riven by political turbulence and subject to periodic military and economic crises[24]. It would be reassuring in such turbulent times that the comfort of a next life was ensured through the good offices of a native goddess, endorsed by the secular authorities, and possessing universally recognised qualities.

The destruction of the temple is significant as it provides evidence of a deliberate rejection of Romano-British paganism. There are hints that the belligerent monastic movement of St Martin of Tours that sought the conversion of rural populations had crossed over to Britain in the early 5th century[25]. This militant Christianity may have converted a substantial part of the population of Roman Britain. It had a political dimension at the time in that the Britons assumed a strategy of

looking after their own affairs, no doubt encouraged by a Christian ethos, a course later legitimised by the Rescript of Honorius.

Notes

1. Charles Green, A Romano-Celtic Temple at Bourton Grounds, Buckingham, *Recs Bucks* **17.5** (1965), 356–66
2. Joan Liversedge, The Thornborough Barrow, *Recs Bucks* **16.1** (1953–1954), 29–32
3. Margaret Gelling & Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (2000)
4. C Green, *op. cit.*
5. George Lipscomb, *History & Antiquities of the County of Buckingham* (1847)
6. Lipscomb, *op. cit.*
7. Liversidge, *op. cit.*
8. A.E. Johnson, 'Excavations at Bourton Grounds Thornborough 1972–3', *Recs Bucks* **22.1** (1975), 3–56
9. Katie Tucker, *An Archaeological Study of Human Decapitation Burials* (2016) Pen & Sword
10. E.V. Walter, *Placeways* (1988) University of Carolina Press
11. Johnson, *op. cit.*
12. Johnson, *op. cit.*
13. Johnson, *op. cit.,* 30
14. Johnson, *op. cit.*
15. C Green, *op. cit.*
16. Miranda Green, Isis at Thornborough, *Recs Bucks* **25** (1983), 139–141
17. Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1967) Routledge & Kegan Paul
18. Daithi O'Hogain, *Encyclopaedia of Irish Folk Tradition* (1974) Ryan
19. M Green, *op. cit.*
20. Simon Price & Emily Kearns (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth & Religion* (2003) OUP
21. Guy de la Bedoyere, *Gods with Thunderbolts, Religion in Roman Britain* (2002) Tempus, 172
22. E.A. Wallis-Budge, *The Book of the Dead – Introduction,* 2nd edition (1923) Routledge & Kegan Paul
23. J Viau, Egyptian Mythology; *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (1959)
24. Peter Salway, *Roman Britain: Part 3, Imperial Crisis & Recovery* (1981) OUP
25. Ken Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (2000) Tempus Publishing