

# HS2 archaeologists uncover incredibly detailed Roman relic

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HS2 archaeologists have made an exciting find in the form of a rare early Roman carved figure.

The team, from Infra Archaeology, working for HS2's contractor, Fusion JV, found and removed the well-preserved figure from a water-logged Roman ditch in a field in Twyford, Buckinghamshire.

Lesser-trained eyes might have missed this important relic. Found while investigating Three Bridge Mill, it initially looked like a piece of wood. As archaeologists excavated it, an anthropomorphic figure was revealed.

Cut from a single piece of wood, the figure stands at 67cm tall and 18cm wide.

The style of the carving and the tunic-like clothing date the figure back to the early Roman period. Nearby, shards of pottery stretching back to 43-79AD were also found in the same ditch.

There's no definitive way to confirm what role the figure played, but, in the past, archaeologists have found similar figures used as gifts to the gods. Rather than being thrown in the ditch, it might have been

deliberately placed there.

Given its predicted age and being carved from wood, what surprised the archaeologists is the incredible preservation of the artefact. The lack of oxygen in the water-logged clay fill of the ditch has helped prevent the wood from rotting, thus preserving it for centuries.

Speaking about the incredible discovery, Iain Williamson, archaeologist for Fusion JV said: “The amazing discovery of this wooden figure was totally unexpected, and the team did a great job of recovering it intact. The preservation of details carved into the wood, such as the hair and tunic, really start to bring the individual depicted to life. Not only is the survival of a wooden figure like this extremely rare for the Roman period in Britain, but it also raises new questions about this site: who does the wooden figure represent, what was it used for and why was it significant to the people living in this part of Buckinghamshire during the 1st century AD?”

Whilst the figure is in good condition given its age, the arms below the elbows and feet have degraded. A surprising amount of detail remains visible in the carving, with the figure’s hat or hairstyle clearly noticeable. The head is slightly rotated to the left, the tunic at the front seems to be gathered at the waist going down to above knee level, and the legs and shape of the calf muscles are well defined.

The figure is currently being preserved by York Archaeology’s conservation team at their specialist laboratory where it will undergo examination and conservation. A small fragment from the figure, found broken off in the ditch, is being sent for radiocarbon dating to provide an accurate date for the wood, and stable isotope analysis is being undertaken, which may indicate where the wood originally came from.

Helen Wass, head of heritage at HS2 Ltd, said: “Our unprecedented archaeology programme on Phase One of the HS2 project between London and Birmingham has provided us with a great wealth of new information about our past. In Buckinghamshire, our careful work has enabled us to build a much greater understanding of how the landscape was used by our ancestors, especially during the Roman period, and is brought to life further through incredible artefacts like this figure. We are committed to sharing our findings with communities and the public to deepen our understanding of Britain’s history.”

The occurrence of carved wooden figures in British prehistory and the Romano-British period is extremely rare. In 2019, a wooden limb, thought to be a Roman offering to fulfil a vow, was found at the bottom of a well in Northampton. Examples of full Roman carved figures have been recovered in Dijon and Chamalières in France. A wooden carving, the ‘Dagenham Idol’, was recovered from the north bank of the Thames in 1922 and has been dated back to the Neolithic period, and an early Iron Age carved figure was recovered from the banks of the River Teign, Kingsteignton in 1866.

Jim Williams, senior science advisor for Historic England, said: “This is a truly remarkable find which brings us face to face with our past. The quality of the carving is exquisite, and the figure is all the more exciting because organic objects from this period rarely survive. This discovery helps us to imagine what other wooden, plant or animal-based art and sculpture may have been created at this time. Further analysis has the potential to reveal more detail, perhaps even providing clues about where it was made.”

This rare find features in the new BBC Digging for Britain series, hosted by Professor Alice Roberts on BBC

Two on Thursday 13 January at 8pm.