



'Shining a Light on the disposal of the dead in Roman SE England'

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Talk abstracts and speaker biographies



The Mausoleum of Augustus

Abstract

Using evidence from Rome and Campania, especially from recently displayed and excavated tombs, this paper explores the funerary practices of central Italy in the decades contemporary with Rome's contact with and conquest of Britain. The paper samples the tomb of Augustus, the sprawling cemeteries of Rome's *suburbium* and the monuments of Pompeii, to investigate how a dynamic funerary tradition was adapted to the diverse circumstances of the dead, from emperors to the enslaved via urban elites. This characterisation is set within the context of the mosaic of burial practices of the contemporary empire. The impact of recent interpretive and methodological developments on archaeological investigation of Roman deathways is reviewed.

John Pearce is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at Kings College London. After a first degree in Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge) and MA in Roman archaeology (Durham) his doctoral thesis Roman examined provincial burial practice (Durham). He worked at Oxford as research assistant on the Vindolanda writing tablets project and online editions of ancient documents before joining King's in 2003. His research interests lie in Roman archaeology, especially the provinces of north-western Europe and Italy. He is especially interested in funerary evidence as a source for understanding Roman society, including commemorative memorials, burial rituals and the remains of the dead themselves.



Dr. John Pearce standing near one of the Roman Bartlow Hills barrows (Cambridgeshire)



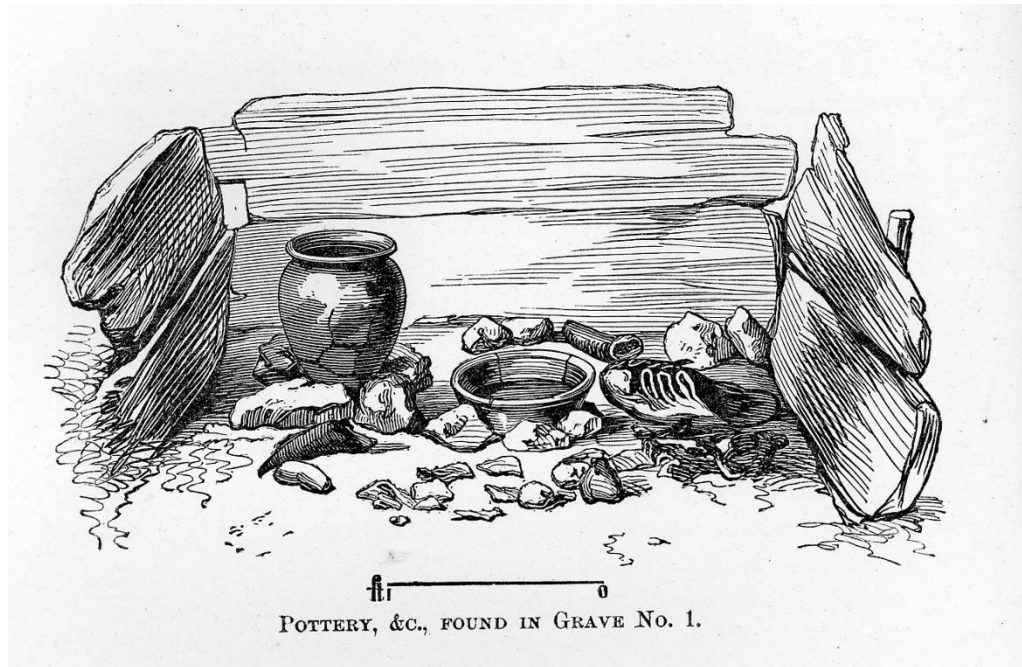
The recent North Bersted Warrior Burial

Abstract

Recent research has shed important new light on the treatment of the dead in the Iron Age of the South-east and wider areas of southern Britain. New discoveries have expanded our knowledge of formal burial practices, including a tradition of unurned cremation burials, more evidence of unaccompanied inhumations and a regional tradition of extended inhumations in Kent. We also have more knowledge of more complex practices that leave partial human remains in various states. Formal burial, whether inhumation or after cremation, is at one end of a spectrum of practices, that extends through those that leave fragmentary human remains but no structural evidence, possibly to others that leave no archaeologically visible evidence at all. C-14 dating has also shown that many of the visible practices are very short-lived. Disposal practice was highly varied and selection of an appropriate rite was volatile.

Tim Champion is an Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the University of Southampton. He is a specialist in the later prehistory of Western Europe, with a particular interest in the Iron Age of south-eastern England. He is a past President of the Prehistoric Society and of the Royal Archaeological Institute.





Hardham Grave No. 1

Abstract

In 1986 Ernest Black published an article in *The Archaeological Journal* (143, 201-39) on ‘Romano-British Burial Customs and Religious Beliefs in South-East England’. This lecture will revisit aspects of Black’s paper and look too at other discoveries, both old and new, from the South-East, but especially from Sussex. However, the apparent paucity of burials from the countryside in the South-East, and elsewhere in Roman Britain, remains a major gap in our knowledge of this period and consideration will be given to help explain the ‘missing millions’.

David Rudling is the Academic Director of the Sussex School of Archaeology and History. Previously, he was Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Sussex, and prior to this Director of Archaeology South-East which is part of University College London. His main research interests include Roman rural settlements and land-use, religion and ritual in Roman Britain, and ancient and medieval numismatics. He is a Member of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists, a Trustee of CBA South-East, and Chairman of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society.



Dr. Sadie Watson - 'Roman burial in London: a review of the evidence from the City and Southwark'

Abstract

The Roman cemeteries of London have been extensively excavated and published over decades. We still await a synthetic update of Jenny Hall's 1996 paper to draw together the myriad reports, and to provide a thematic understanding of the cemeteries' significance and their populations. Sadie Watson will provide a brief high-level paper on burial practice as observed in the City and Southwark, using several recently published (and unpublished) examples to illustrate how the complex picture of burial in an urban context is ever-changing with every new discovery.



Left - Crossrail decapitation
©MOLA

Below – Roman eagle funerary sculpture ©MOLA



Sadie Watson has been a leading practitioner in field archaeology for two decades and as a MOLA Project Officer she was responsible for leading excavations at Bloomberg London. As a UKRI Future Leaders Fellow, Dr. Sadie Watson is undertaking a four-year Fellowship 'Measuring, maximising and transforming public benefit from UK Government infrastructure investments in archaeology' focusing on ensuring that public spending on archaeology for infrastructure projects leads to meaningful and relevant research and genuine community participation.



Ellen Green MSc – ‘Fragmented stories: The potential of Disarticulated Remains for Investigating Roman Mortuary Practices’.



Human remains from Ewell shafts

Abstract

Mortuary practices represent both a great wealth of archaeological information as well as a difficult tangle of meaning and actions, often elusive within the material record. While much work has been done focusing on the actions and processes behind cremation and inhumation, disarticulated remains within Romano- British contexts have largely been overlooked and seen either as evidence of disturbance or dismissed as artifacts of earlier Iron Age excarnation practices without any further analysis.



Disarticulated remains, however, offer an excellent opportunity, both because of their ubiquity throughout the Roman period in Britain and because of the potential of taphonomic and histological analysis in identifying the exact processes the bodies were subject to. This paper seeks to use a case study of a large, disarticulated assemblage from Ewell, Surrey to show how formerly unrecognised mortuary practices can be recognised from in-depth analysis of disarticulated material, and how such an approach may help expand our understanding of minority mortuary rituals.

Ellen Green is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Reading. Her work focuses on an integrated investigation of human and animal remains from a first century ritual shaft in Surrey, England.



Dr. Claire Hodson – ‘From Roundhouse to Villa: Exploring revised perspectives of infant death and burial’



Dr Hodson in action

Abstract

The discovery of infant skeletal remains within a domestic Iron Age and Roman contexts is not unfamiliar. Many such individuals have been excavated from settlement sites, particularly those of rural estates and villas. However, many archaeological reports have characteristically focused on the funerary context of such burials. Consequently, the narrative attached to such discoveries, has in the recent past, been associated with sensationalised interpretations of infanticide; concepts of deliberate disposal and careless burial have circulated in both popular and archaeological media. The multi-disciplinary study of infancy and childhood has progressed far from its origins in the margins of discussion and research, becoming central to our understanding of past populations. Yet archaeological discoveries of infants still cannot evade the lingering association of gendered infanticide. This paper aims to explore the bipartite socio-cultural and biological approach needed to understand infant burials in Iron Age and Roman contexts.

Claire Hodson is a bioarchaeologist and biological anthropologist who has worked in academic and commercial osteology roles in both archaeological and forensic contexts. In 2020, Claire was awarded a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship for her project 'Bringing up Baby' which she is conducting at the University of Reading. Claire's research has long been focused on the foetal, perinatal and infant life course, investigating ways in which growth and health of these individuals was disrupted in past archaeological societies.



Prof. Tony King – ‘Human remains found at temple sites in Britain and Gaul’



Human skull and jar at Gallo-Roman temple of Forêt d'Halatte (photo Marc Durand)

Abstract

This talk tackles the interpretation of human remains at Romano-Celtic temple sites in the light of the historical references to human sacrifice and its banning by the emperors. There are methodological issues in the simple interpretation of human bones as sacrificial debris, and several other lines of thought are discussed, including foundation burials, redeposit of earlier burials, reuse of parts of the body, especially skulls, etc. Sites from

Roman Britain, such as Hayling Island, Springhead, Folly Lane and Dorchester, plus selected sites in Gaul, such as Fesques and Halatte, are used to exemplify the diverse usage of human remains in Romano-Celtic orthopraxy.

Tony King is Professor Emeritus of Roman Archaeology at the University of Winchester, UK. After a BA from the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, London, in 1975, specialising in Roman archaeology, he went on to PhD research on Roman samian ware (*terra sigillata*), also at the Institute of Archaeology, completed in 1985. Meanwhile, he developed teaching at the universities of London, Winchester, Maryland (European Division) and elsewhere, and research interests in Romano-British religion, villa economies, Italy in the 1st millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD, and vertebrate zooarchaeology. Tony was Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2001-02, and is currently President of the Association for Roman Archaeology. Recent publications include: *Coins and Samian Ware* (Archaeopress, Oxford, 2013), *A Sacred Island; Iron Age, Roman and Saxon Temples and Ritual on Hayling Island* (with G. Soffe, Hayling Island Excavation Project Publication, Winchester, 2013), *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period. Personal, local, and global* (ed. with R. Haeussler, Celtic Studies Publications, Aberystwyth, 2017), *Villas, Sanctuaries and Settlement in the Romano-British Countryside* (ed. with M. Henig *et al.*, Archaeopress, Oxford, 2022), *Religious Individualisation. Archaeological, iconographic and epigraphic case studies from the Roman world* (ed. with R. Haeussler, Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2023).



Tony King at Hayling Island excavations in 1979

David Calow MA – ‘Looking for the dead in Roman South-East England – with help from Northern Gaul’



Abstract

We probably have human remains from less than 1% of the Romano-British population. What happened to the missing millions?

Most archaeological finds are a very small proportion of what there was. Do we need to worry more about missing people? Carefully buried human remains can survive but what we find seems sparse and diverse and it is hard to understand if it is representative. Life for some may have been brutal but lack of finds leads to speculation about archaeologically invisible ways of disposing of the dead.

Can we look? Could we identify even another one percent of the missing especially in the countryside where most people lived? Pyre sites are enigmatic and cremations easily missed. Burials might be more secure but some soils are aggressive. Can relatively complete rural cemeteries in SE England and Northern Gaul help look for more evidence?

Should we look? Current ethical guidance is that human remains should not be disturbed without good reason. Development can provide the reason and limited research projects might gain approval but excavating unthreatened cemeteries is not an option.

Non-intrusive methods such as LiDAR, geophysics and metal detecting might help, but perhaps the best place to look is in the archives using existing surveys including the Roman Rural Settlement Project to build a funerary list at a county level to get a better sample size.

David Calow started archaeology in 1964 with five summers of rescue archaeology in Roman Leicester. Business life took over but retirement brought another chance with post-graduate degrees at Winchester and Reading and all the opportunities that Surrey Archaeological Society can offer.

