The Roman Rural Settlement Project

Burials, shrines and ritual practices in the countryside: initial observations from Yorkshire

Dr Alex Smith
The ‘ritual’ dataset

Types of evidence
- Burial practice
- Sacred space
- Structured/placed deposits

Cow skull from an enclosure revetment wall at Wattle Syke © WYAS

Possible shrines at Topham Farm, Sykehouse © WYAS
The burial data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial Data</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>16038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial start date</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial end date</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of burials</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cremation (no.)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhumation (no.)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (no.)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (no.)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neonate/Infants 1-3 (no.)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/Adolescent 4-17 (no.)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult 18+ (no.)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial rite - prone</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial rite - decapitated</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial rite - flexed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of burials with grave goods</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of burials with coffin fittings</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of cremations within urn/box</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarticulated human bone?</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal bone within grave?</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with settlement?</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with enclosure?</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grave goods?</td>
<td>☑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence for Late Iron Age-Romano-British rural burial in Yorkshire

- Burials from 64 sites (c 29% of total)
- Compares to 20-45% of sites in other regions
- Distribution = reflection of patterns of modern development and a lack of bone preservation?
Middle Iron Age burial

Square barrows in East Yorkshire (after Halkon 2013, fig. 15)

- Well known concentrations in East Yorkshire of square ditched enclosures surrounding burials, and chariot/cart burials
- Largest cemeteries (e.g. Wetwang Slack) contain over 400 graves
- Major floruit of cemeteries in 3rd - 2nd century BC (Jay et al. 2012)
Density of late Iron Age-Roman rural burial

- 583 burials
- Dominated by neonate/infant burials

Half of all burials associated with nucleated settlements, e.g. roadside settlement at Rudstone Dale, Newbald and vicus at Healam Bridge.

Percentages of all burials (n=583) from different site types:

- 38% roadside & vicus
- 33% village
- 11% farms (all)
- 12% villas
- 6% other rural burial sites
Most sites with evidence for funerary activity contained 5 or less burials (65%) or comprised larger groups of dispersed burials (26%).

A smaller number (7 sites; 9%) of cemeteries (defined as 10+ burials grouped together), e.g. Hayton.

Most associated with nucleated sites.

Burnby Lane, Hayton

Billingley Drive, Thurnscoe
Main burial rites

- 73 cremations
- 510 inhumations

- Significant difference in numbers and distribution
- Most (66%) cremation burials on sites with approximately contemporary inhumation burials
All burials recorded to date...
Chronology of main burial rites

- 486 burials (83%) are adequately dated: 419 inhumations & 67 cremations
- General rise in number of burials over time
- From the later 1\textsuperscript{st} century to early 4\textsuperscript{th} century AD the ratio of cremation (c 15%) to inhumation (c 85%) burial stays fairly constant
Flexed burials

- Relatively high % of flexed burials (16%; 84 burials)
- Decrease over time from over 35% in LIA to 12% in LR period
- Flexed burials proportionately higher in farms & villages than roadside settlements/vici.

Romano-British crouched inhumation of an adult woman at Parlington Hollins, W. Yorks © WYAS
• 14 prone burials from a range of site types (<3% of inhumations)
• Very few rural decapitation burials noted
Grave containers

- Coffins explicitly noted in 18 graves (3.65% of all inhumation)
- 20+ graves with stone lining (cist graves)
- 16 urned cremations noted (22% of all cremation)
Grave goods

- Grave goods explicitly noted in 80 graves (14% of graves)
- Increase from occurrence in 12-14% of datable graves during LIA-early Roman period to 16-18% of datable graves in mid-later Roman period, unlike situation further south

Burial of an adult Romano-British woman at Lunnfield's Lane, A1(M), Site XX15, with placed BB1 vessel & copper alloy necklet © OA North
Grave good types

Relative occurrence of grave goods over time (%)

- Pottery
- Animal bone
- Personal objects
- Hobnails/shoes

Occurrence in no. of graves

% of all grave with grave goods
Burial population data: Age

- 88% of all burials (512) had evidence for age
- Very high percentages of neonate/infant burials compared to other regions
- Highest ratios on nucleated sites (50%) and villas (70%)
Infant burials: context

• 232 neonate/infant burials found on 23 sites, 63% from nucleated settlements

• Mostly in small numbers dispersed within and around settlements, very rarely in formal cemeteries

• At five sites they are explicitly stated as being associated with buildings (structured deposits?)

• Over 20 infant burials had associated grave goods and 75% of these comprised animal remains (chickens, lambs, calves & piglets)

☆ = infant burial

Late Roman building at Rudstone Dale, Newbald, East Riding
• 23% of all burials (136) had evidence for sex of the individual
• Male = 54%
• Female = 46%
2. Sacred space & religious expression in the countryside

Incomplete cast terracotta figurine, probably of Venus from North Yorkshire (© Portable Antiquities Scheme; ID YORYM-EC9B84)
Evidence for rural shrines and temples

- No rural excavated Romano-Celtic temples
- Two potential rural religious complexes at West Heslerton and Millington
- Other seven ‘shrines’ comprise two enclosures, a cave, three structures and a finds concentration
- Interpretation is largely equivocal
The wider picture...

Romano-Celtic temple ground plan

Potential ritual enclosure at Rothwell, Haigh, Leeds (Cool & Richardson 2013)
Evidence for structured/placed deposits

- 35 sites with evidence noted for structured/placed deposits

Pottery vessel from well at Heslington East © S Roskams et al.
Chronological characteristics of structured/placed deposits

- Increase in variety of objects incorporated in structured deposits over time
- Increase in importance of sheep/goat over time

No of sites with structured deposits

Relative proportions of associated features over time (%)

- structure
- well/shaft
- ditch
- pit
## Examples of structured/placed deposits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site name</th>
<th>Site type</th>
<th>Type of special deposit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shiptonthorpe</td>
<td>roadside settlement</td>
<td>A large late Roman pond/waterhole with evidence for deposition of pig, cattle &amp; sheep skulls, writing tablets &amp; plant remains (holly &amp; mistletoe).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnby Lane, Hayton</td>
<td>villa/farm</td>
<td>Many possible structured deposits including a group of nine coins found close together in the flue of the corn-drying oven, four of them in association with a multiple animal burial of three partial skeletons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudstone Dale, Newbald</td>
<td>roadside settlement</td>
<td>Burials of human neonates and animals under the walls or floors in buildings suggested as foundation deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalton Parlours</td>
<td>farm</td>
<td>A LIA pit with two articulated dog skeletons; the sides of the pit were deliberately lined with bones from pigs and sheep/goats.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wider evidence for structured/placed deposits

- Occurrence on c 14% of Yorkshire sites compared with 11-16% in other regions
Summary

• A paucity of evidence for later Iron Age and Romano-British rural burial compared to the middle Iron Age – most remain the ‘invisible dead’

• Very few rural cemeteries – perhaps greater differentiation between rural sites & major urban centres than further south

• Many rural burial rites not really subject to the same chronological trends as seen further south

• Sparse but increasing evidence for sacred space

• Much greater degree of evidence for structured/placed deposits