# The Roman Rural Settlement Project

Evidence for burial and other ritual practice in the Romano-British countryside of the West Midlands

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## The ‘ritual’ dataset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of evidence</th>
<th>Problems with the data</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Burial practice</td>
<td>• Poor bone preservation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sacred space</td>
<td>• Poor dating (although 26% of burial sites had some radiocarbon dating)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Religious objects</td>
<td>• Inadequate recording/publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structured/special deposits</td>
<td>• Lack of data!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence for Late Iron Age-Romano-British rural burial in the West Midlands

- Burials from 45 sites (c 20% of total)
- Compares to 20-45% of sites in other regions
- Distribution = reflection of a lack of bone preservation?
Density of rural burial

- 501 burials (81 cremations, 380 inhumations)
- Mostly associated with nucleated settlement (Tiddington = 60% all burials)

Context of burial

- Most sites (77%) with evidence for funerary activity contained 5 or less burials
- A smaller number (8) of larger groups, termed cemeteries (10+ burials)
- Nearly all associated with nucleated sites or linear/complex farms

Evesham Road, Upper Moor, Pershore, Worcs
Evidence for cremation burial

- 81 cremation burials
- Most occur singly or in very small groups or else as a distinct minority in larger cemeteries (e.g. Tiddington)
- The clear majority rite in just one cemetery: Ryknield Street, Wall

Evidence for inhumation burial

- 380 inhumation burials (250 from Tiddington)
- Distinct southern distribution
- Substantial increase in numbers during 4th century AD
Chronology of main burial rites

- Just 193 burials (39%) are adequately dated: 138 inhumations & 54 cremations
- The 2nd century AD ‘spike’ in cremation burial mainly due to Ryknield Street, Wall
Late Iron Age burial
• 10 late Iron Age inhumations in four sites
  • Old Yew Hill Wood, Church Lench
  • Bredon Hill
  • Beckford
  • Wellington Quarry, Moreton-on-Lugg

Early Roman burial
• 62 burials from 18 sites
  • 51 cremation & 11 inhumation
  • 39 burials from Ryknield Street, Wall
  • All other sites with 1-3 burials
Late Roman burial

- 125 burials from 22 sites
- 5 cremation & 122 inhumation
- Six sites with 10+ burials
- Concentration in south of the region

Continuity into the post-Roman period?

- Five sites contain burials with radiocarbon dates indicating continuity of burial into the 5th to 7th centuries AD
- All with funerary origins in the late Roman period
- Only at Wasperton were any graves associated with Anglo-Saxon material culture
Discrepant burial 1: decapitation

- 14 decapitation burials in the West Midlands dataset
- Where dated, all 3rd to 5th century AD

Discrepant burial 2: prone

- 5 prone burials in the West Midlands dataset
- Similar date and distribution to decapitations
Grave containers

- Coffins explicitly noted in 30 graves (8% of all inhumation)
- 45 urned cremations noted (56% of all cremation)

Grave goods

- Grave goods explicitly noted in 86 graves (under-representation)
- Decrease from occurrence in 60% of datable graves during early Roman period to 30% of datable graves in later Roman period
Other burial data

Age Structure

- Just 28% of all burials (139) had evidence for age
- Higher percentages of non-adults within nucleated settlement

Sex

- Just 10% of burials (53) had explicitly noted data on the sex of the individual
- Approximately equal ratio of male:female

Presence of disarticulated bone

- Disarticulated bone found on 24 sites in the West Midlands dataset
- 8 of these had no evidence for formal burial
- Distinct southern distribution
2. Sacred space & religious expression

Reconstruction of Coleshill Romano-Celtic temple, Warwickshire
(© Warwickshire County Council)

Evidence for rural shrines and temples

- One excavated Romano-Celtic temple (Coleshill)
- Six other sites recorded as potential shrines
- All located in south of the region
- Interpretation is largely equivocal
- Contrast with urban evidence (e.g. Wroxeter, Kenchester)
Roman rural ‘religious’ sites in the West Midlands

Grimstock Hill, Coleshill, Warks

Coton Park, Rugby, Warks

Croft Ambrey, Aymestrey, Herefs

The Prospect, Ross-on-Wye, Herefs

Roman rural ‘religious’ sites in the West Midlands

[Map of Roman rural sites in the West Midlands]
Evidence for religious objects

- 43 ‘specialized’ religious objects from 13 excavated sites
- Sites mainly comprised small towns, then religious sites, villas and linear farms
- 42 Roman religious objects from PAS database
- Similar geographic spread across region

Types of religious objects

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Evidence for structured deposits

- 25 sites with evidence noted for structured/special deposits

Examples of structured deposits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site name</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Site type</th>
<th>Type of special deposit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Prospect, Ross-on-Wye</td>
<td>Herefordshire</td>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Several horse burials thought to have been deposited at the end of the first phase of occupation, prior to the shrine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharpstones Hill Site E/Meole Brace</td>
<td>Shropshire</td>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>Deposits of an Iron Age dagger and sword scabbard found in the outer ditch entrance terminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasperton</td>
<td>Warwickshire</td>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>Two sets of deer antlers with parts of the skull still attached were set to form a square, with an area of burning below them, and underlying this a square slab of sandstone with the inscription FELICITER ('by chance' or 'luckily')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bays Meadow Villa, Droitwich</td>
<td>Worcestershire</td>
<td>villa</td>
<td>A decapitated chicken underlying the aisled building and almost complete red deer skeleton in the well associated with later villa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triponium</td>
<td>Warwickshire</td>
<td>Nucleated</td>
<td>A deep well containing a figurine of a horseman, a coin, a base of samian ware and the skull of an adult female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wider evidence for structured deposits

- Occurrence on 11% of West Midlands sites compared with 11-15% in other regions

Summary

- Despite a relative lack of data for matters of ritual expression in the Romano-British countryside of the West Midlands, important patterns are still emerging, especially when seen as part of wider regional patterns of ritual behaviour

- Burial evidence concentrated around nucleated settlement and more complex farms

- A ‘spike’ in cremation burial during later 1\textsuperscript{st}-2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD partially linked to establishment of nucleated settlement

- Most evidence for inhumation burial and formal shrines lies in south of the region

- Structured deposits more ubiquitous across region – probably the most common form of archaeologically traceable ritual expression