The Roman Rural Settlement Project

Romano-British rural burial practices in the South-East

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All late Iron Age and Roman burials in the South-East

- 3895 burials from 312 records
- 25% of all records contained burials
- Most records contain individuals or small groups of burials with some larger cemeteries
Analysis of burials

- Burial context
- Burial rites (cremation/inhumation)
- Discrepant/flexed burials
- Grave goods
- Grave containers
- Alternative funerary traditions
- Population (age and gender)
Problems with burial chronology

- Separate dating sequence to main site
- Further broken down into chronological subsets
- Very loosely dated ‘Roman’ burials ignored
- Problems with lack of chronologically diagnostic grave goods/containers
- Only c 5% of sites with burials had any form of radiocarbon dating
Three cemeteries along Watling Street contained c 30% of all Romano-British burial records in the South-East:

- East Hill, Dartford (>240 inhumation burials)
- Pepper Hill, Springhead (517 mixed rite burials)
- Ospringe (387 mixed rite burials)
Context of burial

- 21% of burials (763) from 152 farms (higher % from linear)
- 34% of burials (1233) from 25 nucleated settlements
- 8% of burials (282) from 35 villas (mostly neonatal burials)
- 37% of burials (1364) from 95 ‘isolated’ rural sites (communal cemeteries?)
Context of burial: Cemeteries

- Cemetery = groups of 10+ burials
- 69 cemeteries (20% of sites) contained 3110 burials (80% of all burials in the South-East)
- c 40% of these from nucleated settlements & less than 20% from farms/villas
Context of burial: ‘backland’ graves

- 785 burials (c 20%) spread across 267 sites – less than 3 burials/site
- Usually located on outer settlement boundaries, trackways and field systems
Cremation burial in the South-East

- 1400 cremation burials (38%)
- Particular concentrations in north Kent and Sussex coast
Inhumation burial in the South-East

- 2288 inhumation burials (62%)
- Particular concentrations further west, especially in Oxfordshire
Cremation burial

Inhumation burial
Relative proportion of cremation and inhumation burial over time (%)
1st century AD cremation burial

1st century AD inhumation burial
2nd century AD cremation burial

2nd century AD inhumation burial
3rd century AD cremation burial

3rd century AD inhumation burial
4th century AD cremation burial

4th century AD inhumation burial
Decapitation burial

- 48 decapitation burials (from 21 sites)
- Very rare except in Oxfordshire where form at least 6% of inhumation burials
Prone burial

- 41 prone burials (from 27 sites)
- Largely restricted to same areas as decapitation burials
Flexed burial

- 57 flexed burials (from 39 sites)
- More dispersed, though very much concentrated in the west of the region
Numbers of discrepant/flexed burials over time

Discrepant/flexed burials over time (as % of inhumations)
• Exact same pattern as East of England and East Midlands
• Rural farmstead phenomenon
• Association of linear farms with prone burials and enclosed farms with flexed burials
Grave goods

1006 burials (25%) from 158 sites have explicitly recorded and detailed grave goods.
**Grave good types**

Pottery vessels occur in at least 756 graves (c 75% of all graves with recorded grave goods)

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**Grave good types except pottery (occurrence in graves)**

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Early Roman cremation grave at Avisford, West Sussex
Grave good types as % of all burials with grave goods

% pottery

% brooches

% animal remains

% hobnails/shoes

% bracelets

% coins
• 278 inhumations (12%) with evidence for coffins
• 555 cremations (40%) contained within urns
Urned cremation burial

Un-urned cremation burial
Disarticulated bone

- 70 sites recorded with quantities of disarticulated human bone
Population: gender

891 adults identified to gender: 52% male and 48% female
Population: gender

Gender proportion by site type

- unwalled small towns (n=84)
- villages (n=173)
- farms (n=214)
- linear farms (n=88)
- enclosed farms (n=45)
- villas (n=27)
- Other rural burial sites (n=360)

% male | % female
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unwalled small towns | 50.00 | 50.00
villages | 55.00 | 45.00
farms | 60.00 | 40.00
linear farms | 70.00 | 30.00
enclosed farms | 65.00 | 35.00
villas | 60.00 | 40.00
Other rural burial sites | 60.00 | 40.00

Site type (n= no. of sexed individuals)
Population: Chronology of ageing structure

2115 individuals (54%) could be placed in neonate/infant, child/adolescent and adult categories.

1st Century AD
- % adult: 71%
- % child: 19%
- % neonate: 10%

2nd Century AD
- % adult: 68%
- % child: 9%
- % neonate: 23%

3rd Century AD
- % adult: 65%
- % child: 8%
- % neonate: 27%

4th Century AD
- % adult: 72%
- % child: 8%
- % neonate: 20%
Neonatal burials and villas

• 210 neonate burials found on 36 villas
• c 60% within three infant cemeteries at Keston, Barton Court Farm and Yewden
• Most occur in small numbers scattered in & around villa & outbuildings
• Blurred boundary between funerary practices and ritual deposition

Neonate skeleton from Bignor villa, Sussex
Yewden villa, Bucks
Conclusions

• Huge amount of evidence for rural burial practice in the South-East though far from evenly distributed
• Vast majority of burials within relatively few larger cemeteries
• Remaining rural burials dispersed widely in small groups – a tiny fraction of the population
• Distinctive regional and chronological patterns with cremation and inhumation burial along with alternative burial traditions
• A ‘discrepant’ burial zone emerging to the north-west
• Chronological and cultural patterns of grave goods and containers observed
• Emerging patterns of burial selectivity concerned with gender and ageing