

Death in a Material World: The Late Iron Age and Early Romano-British Cemetery at King Harry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire

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Verulamium: the King Harry Lane site. By I.M. Stead and V. Rigby with contributions by 24 others. English Heritage Archaeological Report 12. English Heritage in association with British Museum Publications, London, 1989. Pp. viii + 407, ills 182. Price: £30. ISBN 1-85074-212-X.

This handsome volume is the report of the nearly complete excavation between 1965 and 1968 of a later Iron Age and early Romano-British cemetery containing at least 472 burials. An area of Roman extra-mural settlement, parts of three other Roman cemeteries and a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery were also excavated and are also published here. It is a report of international significance.

Small quantities of Deverel-Rimbury and earlier Iron Age pottery (with analyses of the red-coating) and useful groups of Anglo-Saxon pottery were found in the excavation of the Romano-British settlement which appears to develop alongside the newly built Silchester road and overlie the cemetery, and to decline around the mid-third century A.D. when *Verulamium* was walled. Survival of structural evidence was limited but there are valuable and well-dated groups of mid-third- and early fourth-century pottery which are quantified although the rest of the Romano-British assemblage is not. There is an informative, if unnecessarily detailed, report on the glass by Price but the iron report by Jackson is too abbreviated. As ever, the coin report by Reece is thought provoking.

The amount of weight to attach to this settlement has been judged judiciously and, although finds comprise 90 per cent of its report, it is a welcome addition to the improving knowledge of extra-mural settlement in Britain. It complements the information now available about the types of settlement in and around *Verulamium* and the area can now lay claim to being one of the most intensely excavated Roman landscapes in Britain.

In contrast the Roman cemetery reports may be too short but the seventh- to eighth-century Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery, in which skeletal preservation was poor, is well reported by Ager. There are occasional slips, for example it is not clear why a flint found with a firesteel in Burial 2 is not published, but other criticisms such as the sometimes too long discussion of objects, the consideration of the origins of the settlers and the discussion of the historical sources, seem to remain characteristic of Anglo-Saxon cemetery reports.

It is, however, the later Iron Age and earlier Romano-British cemetery which is of greatest interest here. The main characteristics of the cemetery with its 455 cremation and seventeen inhumation burials, many within enclosures, are already well known. Four overlapping phases are identified; 1. A.D. 1-40; 2. A.D. 30-55; 3. A.D. 40-60; and 4. A.D. 60 onwards. Although the cemetery is called Iron Age by the authors, as many as half of the burials may have been made in the early Romano-British period. The most common grave goods are pots, with closed forms the most frequent cremation urn. Types considered to be for cooking or storage were not selected for burials (pp. 199, 201). The next most common artefacts were the 237 brooches but the fifteen knives comprise the next largest group. As with other burials in south-east England the brooches were found approximately evenly with males and females, and with all age groups.

Description of the excavation is brief; seven pages including six photographs and two pages of figures, but a useful addition would have been a plan showing where the later Romano-British settlement has damaged the cemetery. A number of the enclosures have entrances at the north-east and, as so few graves cut each other, they must have been marked. There are some fine examples of careful excavation revealing wooden or organic covers (or perhaps lids?).

Most of the artefactual grave goods are considered by Stead and Rigby who are masters of their typology and chronology and their authoritative discussions (123 pages) and catalogue (123 pages) dominate the report, and are supported by a range of petrological, technological and metallurgical analyses.

Stead offers a careful typological division of the brooches, although the chronological results are largely inconclusive and it would have been helpful to know which programme had been used for their seriation. All other artefact analyses appear to have been sorted manually. There are a few minor quibbles. In view of the recent discussions of the studs decorated with red glass from the Hertford Heath and Lexden Tumulus burials by C.-M. Hüssen (*A Rich Late La Tène Burial at Hertford Heath, Hertfordshire*. B.M. Occas. Pap. 12 (1983)) and J. Foster (*The Lexden Tumulus* BAR Brit. Ser. 156 (1986)), more might have been made of the apparently related copper-alloy studs found on a board in Burial 241. Textile remains on the Anglo-Saxon metalwork are reported on, but their survival on Iron Age objects, which is far less frequent generally, is only noted. The consideration of Roman objects sometimes wavers. The discovery of a Roman mirror in a Phase 1 burial (325) allows some valuable remarks on British Iron Age mirrors but the assertion that the Dr. 2–4 amphorae from the Dorton burial must be later than c. 16 B.C. is unexplained. It may be that this date relates in some way to that of the Lexden Tumulus, but this does not date Dr. 2–4, and, whatever the reason, the statement is wrong. Burial 325 also contained a spoon which is not explicitly stated to be a Roman import but surely is and they form an interesting association. Surprisingly, S.J. Greep's publication of the bone *pyxis* from Burial 118 which is also likely to have been imported is not mentioned ('Early Import of Bone Objects to South-east Britain', *Britannia* xiv (1983), 259–61), nor is the argument of J.-C. Béal and M. Feugère that at least some *pyxide* contained cosmetics ('Les pyxides gallo-romaines en os de Gaule meridionale', *Doc. Archéol. Méridionale* vi (1983), 115–26).

R.'s enthusiasm for the pottery is evident and her fine work comprises the single greatest contribution to the report and contains some of the most perceptive comments on grave goods. Her policy of presenting each major collection of imported Gaulish fine-wares with a site-specific nomenclature yields the fourth example within a decade and the third from Hertfordshire. With the publication of the last of these major assemblages, each with their careful, but sometimes repetitive, inter-site comparisons, perhaps we can look forward to the synthesis on Gaulish fine-wares that she is so well equipped to write?

There are occasional minor slips in the detailed exposition, e.g. the sigillata from the Foxton burial is not a samian platter (p. 131) but an 'Arretine' crater and, whatever the contents of the Haltern 70 amphorae, they appear to be misunderstood here (p. 116). The assimilation of continental European evidence is sometimes uneven. Thus while the figures cited for Grave 44 at the Titelberg (LUX) show a range of objects, Metzler's text (there p. 64) raises the possibility that some grave groups from this site, including 44, may have been mixed and warns that they should be used cautiously as chronological indicators (*contra* pp. 117, 131, 144–5). It is also stated that no identical parallels for 'Dorton' type Central Gaulish flagons have been found outside southern Britain (pp. 119–20) but the Noyelles-Godault (F) cemetery referred to elsewhere (e.g. p. 129) appears to contain an example. The estimates of the capacities of flagons (e.g. p. 177) (which, *pace* p. 144, were not certainly used for mixing wine) and other vessels are most welcome as would have been their weights for comparative purposes when considering settlement finds.

An explanation of the methods of analysis might have made the often excellent work more accessible to the non-specialist. For R. 'the principal problem presented by the local pottery was the variety of typological details on vessels of otherwise similar appearance' (p. 112). Others lacking such command of the material may wonder why such detailed analysis is necessary. The dating of 'late Augustan' imports also varies. On p. 156 it seems to start in 10 B.C., on p. 138 both in the first decade A.D. and, later on the same page, after A.D. 10. In part this dating seems to depend on the derivation of specific calendar years from the more general date ranges implied by late Augustan, late Augusto-Tiberian, etc. and may seem unimportant, but it transpires (p. 204) to be the key date for the founding

of the cemetery which is eventually settled on as A.D. 10. The imported pots seem to be regarded as more precisely datable than the brooches (p. 99), but nowhere are the methods of dating individual graves explained, leaving it uncertain why the date of one import rather than another has been preferred, or how to reconcile occasions where very similar pots whose precise typological nuances are unexplained are given different dates (e.g. p. 125, tab. 10, s.v. 384). Accordingly the basis of the dating and phasing of the cemetery remains unstated.

The other reports are relatively short. Readers of the amphorae report may not only recognize parts of it verbatim (cf. *Britannia* xxi (1990), 425), but read parts of it earlier in the volume. Davis' contribution on the animal remains is thoughtful, Stirland's on the cremations is careful and informative on the technology of the physical transformation of the corpse. However, why cremations positively attributed to sex also appear in the lists of uncertain attributions (tab. 49) is not clear and there are other inconsistencies. The absence, for whatever reasons, of an assessment of the demography of those buried in the cemetery is striking.

Design and production of the volume, which has a useful index, is generally good and attractive but it should be possible to render ligatures correctly. Readers of the robust French and German summaries will not thank the parochial want of a location map, while an extra fold in the fold-out plan at the back would have enabled the complete plan to be visible while reading the text. Whether the order of the volume, which places the reports on the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and the provenances of the finds from the settlement between the discussions of the finds from the earlier cemetery and their presentation by grave group in a lengthy appendix, is the most helpful one is debatable. It might be wondered if these other cemeteries and the settlement might not have been better placed as separate articles? The decision to try to integrate grave inventories with illustrations where several graves are mounted on one figure also results in the texts and drawings of many burials being widely separated. A clear separation of the two might have made the volume easier to use. Perhaps understandably, the hands of different draughtpersons are sometimes visible, but some drawings appear to be potentially misleading. Many iron brooches are drawn showing corrosion products but details of the brooches are shaded, implying that they are visible. If the details have been inferred from radiographs they should have been drawn as such.

Some illustrations (figs 69–73) appear to have been designed for a different page size and this may bear on a number of seemingly extraneous comments about French Iron Age pottery and the failure to make a number of correlations which is uncharacteristic of the authors' normally meticulous work. Perhaps inevitably some references have slipped their moorings, e.g. Rigby *et al.* 1989 (p. 173; presumably with A.P. Middleton and I.C. Freestone, 'The Prunay Workshop: Technical Examination of La Tène Bichrome Painted Pottery from Champagne', *World Archaeol.* xxi (1989), 1–16) and I could not find text or figure of an *unguentarium* attributed to Burial 7 on p. 116. But the pottery reports do not indicate if a vessel has been thin-sectioned, the amphorae report is not cross-referred to the appendix on residue analysis, and Burial 472 which is described as perhaps pre-dating the enclosures (p. 177) appears to have been omitted from the plan of the cemetery.

More puzzling, particularly in view of the detailed typological and chronological discussions offered, is a lack of reference to the work of other scholars in the same field. In her metallurgical analysis of the brooches Bayley considers, but is unable to resolve (p. 268), the suggestion by D.F. Mackreth that c. 66 per cent of the brooches were imported ('The Brooches', in C.R. Partridge, *Skeleton Green Britannia Mono.* 2 (1981), 130–52 at p. 131), and she cites Stead's own work which notes this. Yet S.'s typological discussion here cites Mackreth's work for some topics but makes no mention of this important possibility. Discussion of thin-sectioning of Gallo-Belgic wares does not, for example, mention textural analyses by Timby (T.C. Darvill and J.R. Timby, 'Textural Analysis: A Review of Potential and Limitations', in I.C. Freestone, T.W. Potter and C.M. Johns (eds), *Current Research in Ceramics: Thin Section Studies* B.M. Occas. Pap. 32 (1982), 73–87). More seriously the painstaking typological analysis of the pottery mentions the detailed work of I.M. Thompson (*Grog-Tempered 'Belgic' Pottery of South-Eastern England BAR Brit. Ser.* 108 (1982)) but does not discuss why a different system was preferred, nor offer a systematic correlation between the two, nor mention the often divergent chronologies proposed.

This unevenness and lack of reference to other work is evident and most important in the interpretation of the cemetery. The association of imported pots with the earlier well-furnished burials is clear and stated many times. In carefully considering 'status' in burials, R. argues that

imports are valuable, yet they are ascribed the same analytical value as indigenous pottery. For reasons which are not immediately apparent, burials with four or more pots either imported or indigenous are considered to be 'rich' (tab. 12), resulting in many 'rich' burials (tab. 3). The non-random distribution of imports was quantified by C.C. Haselgrove in 1982 ('Wealth, Prestige and Power: The Dynamics of Late Iron Age Political Centralisation in South East England', in A.C. Renfrew and S.J. Shennan (eds), *Ranking, Resource and Exchange* (1982), 79–88) and elaborated further ('Romanization Before the Conquest: Gaulish Precedents and British Consequences', in T.F.C. Blagg and A.C. King (eds), *Military and Civilian in Roman Britain* BAR Brit. Ser. (1984), 5–63.), yet these works are not mentioned. However, as it is clear that the number of imports included in burials declined through time, as do grave goods generally, analyses such as those presented in tab. 3 of the cemetery as a whole are vitiated, as is eventually recognized (pp. 206–7).

For the authors the interpretation of the burials is clear. As suggested by Evans in 1890 for Aylesford, the irregular circular arrangements are those of families. Those arrangements of burials within enclosures are considered as discrete units and those of unenclosed burials as family groups, although whether some burials really are central to groups, e.g. 309 and 346, is questionable. The individual status of the dead can be read off in terms of the number of objects present. Actions and objects which do not readily fit into this perceived norm and are not easily interpretable in terms of 'status', such as the careful inverting of an amphora neck and the placing of its spike within it, are described as 'a very makeshift affair' (p. 116, cf. p. 204). This normatism means that not all grave goods are illustrated. If no useful profiles could be drawn or the pot from a burial with one vessel is a well represented type, it is not illustrated (p. 112). Over 90 per cent of the pots are figured but the belief that the burial rites are easily intelligible will not be shared by readers of some of the voluminous literature on mortuary practises published since the early 1970s. The only direct evidence for the assumption 'grave goods = status of deceased' at King Harry Lane is a graffito in a tazza from a female burial. It reads (apparently without ligatures) ΛNDOC : a male cognomen.

It is suggested that the burials at King Harry Lane may represent a stable population of around 200 (p. 84). But the evidence available presents unacknowledged difficulties. If the enclosures were reserved for a single family, lineage or clan, do the female burials at the centre of one (Burial 299) (and possibly two (Burial 93)) of them indicate bilateral descent? If so, how can this be reconciled with the inscribed coinages used elsewhere in the report for chronological purposes, which proclaim patrilineal descent? Further, what is the significance of the possibility that the burial at the centre of enclosure Burial 117 is not of an adult but a juvenile?

An assessment of the whole (statistical) population makes it impossible to accept the idea of families. Although it is often stated that 472 burials were found (e.g. pp. 80, 84, 112) of which 455 were cremations, it emerges on p. 240 that 62 of them, or c. 14 per cent of the sample, have been mislaid. Accordingly, the mean number of burials may be revised as follows.

Phase	Duration in Years	Number of Burials	Burials per Annum*
1	40	73	1.8
2	25	91	3.6
3	20	149	7.5
4	?	14	?
<i>Number of Burials Attributable to Phase</i>		= 327	

*Multiple Years Counted as Such.

Even allowing for the small sample size and the difficulties of interpretation, these figures suggest exponential growth in the Iron Age and, more particularly, early Romano-British community or communities burying their dead at King Harry Lane and this is clearly shown on the phase plans in fig. 47. The adult: pre-adult ratio of 6:1 is difficult to reconcile with known expectancies of death. While this could be explicable in part by the burial and/or disposal of pre-adults elsewhere, a straightforward count of the number of (adult) burials attributable to sex reveals a 3:1 ratio of males to females. If these figures do not represent sample size or systematic difficulties in identifying morphological features, and there seems no reason to suppose this, they seem irreconcilable with the interpretation

of family groups burying their dead in the one cemetery and using the same rites. The figures might be compatible with the deliberate foundation and populating of a site with what was in the first instance an atypical population structure and which saw major changes around the conquest. These figures, simple though they are, are of the utmost importance to the study of later Iron Age settlement in south-eastern England. Consequently rather more than the brief discussion of the relationship of the cemetery to the contemporary settlement(s) on pp. 9–11 might have been appropriate, particularly in view of the difficulties of the later Iron Age settlement of St Albans (cf. C.C. Haselgrove, 'The Archaeological Context of Iron Age Coin Finds on Major Settlements in Eastern England: Colchester and St Albans', in C. Bémont *et al.* (eds), *Mélanges offerts au docteur J.-B. Colbert de Beaulieu*, 483–96).

The 'commonsense' functionalism in interpretation has other consequences. As the authors say (p. 86), the homogeneity of grave goods and certain aspects of the burial rite across north-west Europe are notable, but the diversity within this apparently discontinuous distribution is barely considered.

No details of the enclosures are given, nor is there a systematic guide to the finds they contained. Dimensions of graves are given but the decision not to publish plans of all of them means that the disposition of the burial and grave goods is sometimes not given at all. The restrictions created may be illustrated. From the published plans there is a suspicion that many unurned cremations were placed centrally or to the west of the grave. It is also difficult to ascertain whether all the central graves within enclosures as well as being relatively deep (p. 81) are rectangular or square in contrast to the majority of graves which seem to be circular. There is also the impression that the graves of adult females are generally smaller than those of males but these topics cannot be pursued from the published information. The square grave pits of some, or all, of the larger graves resemble those of the earlier 'Welwyn' burials; an observation previously made by Stead ('A La Tène III Burial at Welwyn Garden City', *Archaeologia* ci (1967), 1–62). That the cremations in the largest and best-furnished graves at King Harry Lane are unurned as are many 'simple' burials also recalls 'Welwyn' burials, a point made by Haselgrove. At King Harry Lane almost twice as many unurned cremation burials contain imports as do urned ones (50 per cent: 28.5 per cent). Whereas these sites are discussed for their chronology, these subjects all pertain to the 'status' which the authors consider, but the connections appear unseen.

Nor are all the grave goods given equal due. A footnote in the faunal report (p. 250) states that the inhumed animal remains have been lost, but a list of graves in which they had been found would have been useful. Its absence precludes exploring whether there were chronological changes of the kind Davis observes in the animals chosen for cremation. Here, the presence of cremated animal remains seem to be mentioned in the grave catalogue only if teeth were identifiable on excavation, otherwise only the artefactual grave goods are mentioned. Does this imply that animals and birds were cremated with, or mixed with, the human remains? These burials comprise only 19 per cent of the cremated, of which a disproportionate number (even allowing for the skewed population) were adults? Why?

As K. Hopkins has observed (*Death and Renewal* Sociol. Stud. Roman Hist. 2 (1983), 217), death is a protracted social process. Its archaeological study demands more than the study of artefactual grave goods and the ascription of material 'status.' To say that the dead were "'Celtic" [and] "family groups"' may be accessible, comfortable, and interpretable to some contemporary viewpoints but it obscures others, for ironically, the functional empiricism deployed in the report wants for a theory to give meaning to other 'facts'.

The report on the later Iron Age and early Romano-British cemetery is one of European and wider importance. The international community will admire and draw on much of the author's meticulous and wide-ranging scholarship and the hard work of Joanna Bacon who did so much to bring the report to press. We are all indebted to them for their very considerable determination and hard work in publishing the volume which provides an enormous amount of data for the later Iron Age in south-eastern England. Some will agree with the interpretation offered, but those who do not will struggle to rework information which was present but which was not seen.

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