The Roman Rural Settlement Project

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

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The ‘ritual’ dataset

Types of evidence

- Burial practice
- Sacred space
- Structured/placed deposits

© York Osteoarchaeology Ltd

Possible shrines at Topham Farm, Sykehouse © WYAS

Cow skull from an enclosure revetment wall at Wattle Syke © WYAS
### The burial data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>16038</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Burials Summary</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A Romano-British cemetery comprising 69 burials dating to the 3rd and 4th C AD. 12 cremations (9 adult, 2 adolescent), 6 of which were in a square ditched enclosure, and 57 inhumations (42 adults, 5 children, 10 infants). 49 inhumations and 11 cremations within main group, within which 3 distinct plots could be identified. Most inhumations supine north-south, with some west-east or a variation. Four decapitation burials, two recumbent and five prone. Grave goods.</td>
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</table>

| **Burial start date** | 250 |
| **Burial end date** | 400 |

| No. of burials | 69 |
| Cremation (no.) | 12 |
| Inhumation (no.) | 57 |
| Males (no.) | 24 |
| Females (no.) | 18 |
| Neonate/Infants 1-3 (no.) | 10 |
| Child/Adolescent 4-17 (no.) | 7 |
| Adult 18+ (no.) | 51 |
| Burial rite - prone | 5 |
| Burial rite - decapitated | 4 |
| Burial rite - flexed | 2 |
| No. of burials with grave goods | 14 |
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?

Sites with human remains

Sites with animal remains
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)

Square barrow surrounding chariot burial at Ferrybridge, West Yorkshire © OA North
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
Context of burial

- 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
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 1st century to early 4th 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

LIA (n=16)    ER (n=33)    MR (n=58)    LR (n=53)
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
Burial population data: Sex

- 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...

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

- 35 sites with evidence noted for structured/placed deposits

Composition of structured 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 important of sheep/goat over time
# Examples of structured/placed deposits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site name</th>
<th>Site type</th>
<th>Type of special deposit</th>
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<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>
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<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>
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<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>
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<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>
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</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