

NOTE

A THIRD CENTURY ROMAN BURIAL FROM MANOR FARM, HURSTBOURNE PRIORS

by David Allen with contributions by Sue Anderson and Brenda Dickinson

Abstract

A chance discovery led to the excavation of a third century inhumation at Hurstbourne Priors. The encoffined burial was of an adult male, accompanied by two pottery vessels, one of samian, the other from the Farnham/Alice Holt Kilns. The excavation archive is housed with the County Museum Service as A 1988.37.

Introduction

In July 1988 Mr David Porter, of Manor Farm, Hurstbourne Priors, dug a latrine pit for a Guide camp in the field to the north of St Andrews Church, Hurstbourne Priors (SU 439 467). He noticed what he took to be a small pipe in the corner of the excavation, but it turned out, on closer examination, to be a human femur. Further investigation, by Mrs Eleanor Porter and her son Graham, revealed more human bone, a number of iron nails, and two complete pottery vessels of Roman date. Mrs Porter contacted Andover Museum, and the author obtained permission to examine the disturbed burial – for such it clearly was – in late August.

Excavation

The site of the discovery is located some 20 m west of the Bourne Rivulet on an irregular raised terrace, at least 40 m in width (Fig 1). This feature may indeed have an archaeological explanation, for at a depth of 0.20 m a layer of flint and tile rubble existed above a flint cobbled surface (Fig 2). Sherds of brown and yellow-glazed pottery date this feature to the 18th century, and it presumably relates to The Grange which once stood somewhere in the locality, probably just to the east of the river. The Grange was an Episcopal Manor house of medieval origin, re-built in the Classical style in the 16th and 17th centuries. The true nature

of the post-medieval activity in the excavated area could not, however, be determined given the limitations of this particular investigation.

The Burial

As the burial had been cut by the machine pit, there was a fair indication of how it lay. Initially an area of 2 m x 3 m was opened, and this was adjusted slightly to accommodate the full extent of the grave, resulting in the examination of some 7.5 sq metres (Fig 2).

Beneath the post-medieval layers a fine-grained stone-free colluvial soil was encountered in which the grave cut could be seen. It consisted of a rectangle 2.50 m by c 1.00 m, with rounded corners and vertical sides. The large number of nails within this area confirmed that the grave contained a coffin, and the nails were plotted individually (Fig 2). No other indications of the coffin were found. The skeleton lay in a west–east direction, in an extended supine position, with head turned to the right, and hands to the right side of the body. The quality of the bone was not good, being soft and fragile, in the damp conditions that prevailed. The grave-goods were limited to the two vessels already noted. These, when *in situ*, were placed on the right upper arm and shoulder.

The Skeleton

by Sue Anderson

Most of the skeleton had been preserved and the bones were in fair condition, although most were broken and showed signs of post-mortem erosion and animal gnawing. Height was estimated at 167 cm (5ft 6in) calculated from the length of the left femur.

As the pelvic evidence was not definitive the

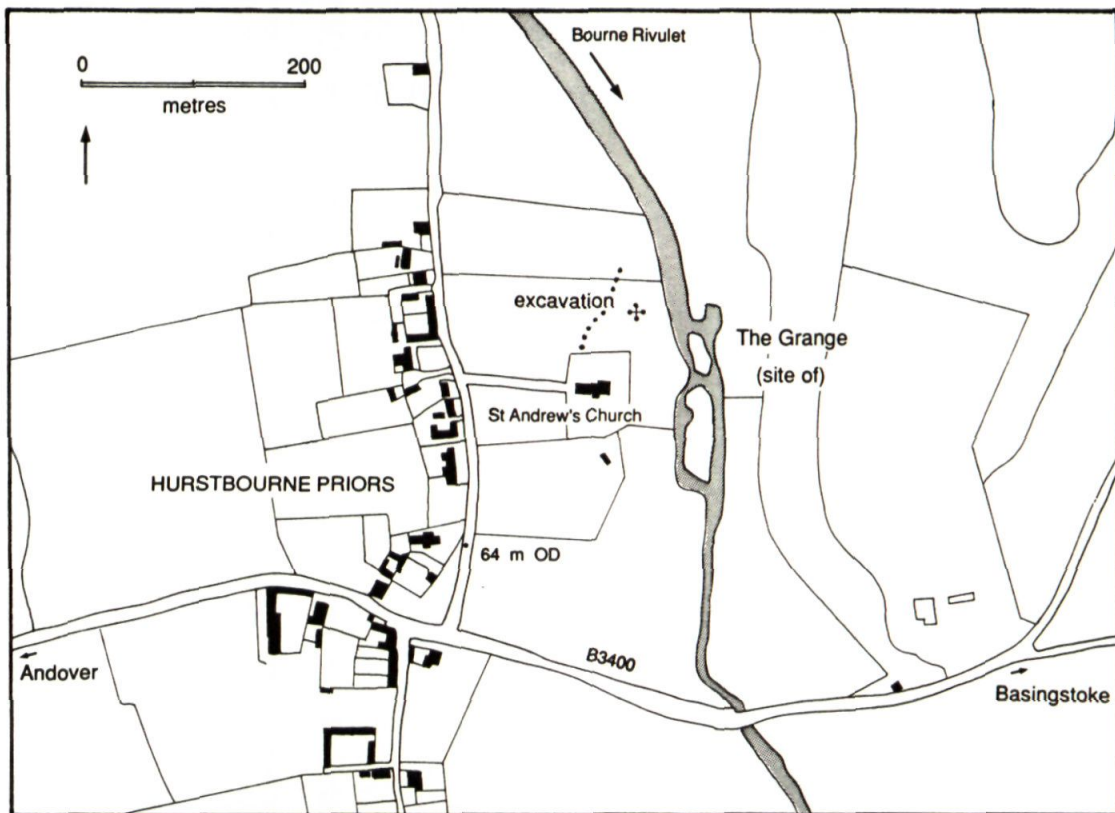


Fig 1. Location map.

sex of the individual was determined from the general appearance of the skull, pelvis and long bones. These suggest that the skeleton is probably of a man.

Dental evidence suggested an age at death of 25–35 years, but this seemed too low when other evidence was taken into account. An age range of 35–50 years is more likely.

The individual appeared to have suffered three fairly minor bone diseases during the course of his life: periostitis of the tibiae and fibulae, an infection to the left ulna, and osteochondritis dissecans affecting the left femur. There was no evidence for the cause of death.

A detailed report is housed with the excavation archive.

The Grave Goods (Fig 4)

Samian dish, form Dragendorff 31. In good condition, but with worn rim and footring.

A rubbing of the Stamp was submitted to Brenda Dickinson, who identified it as:

CELSIANI.M (Die 3a in the Leeds index of Stamps).

Celsianus worked at Lezoux, and the stamp has been found there. It was used on form 31R, which was first made in *c* AD 160.

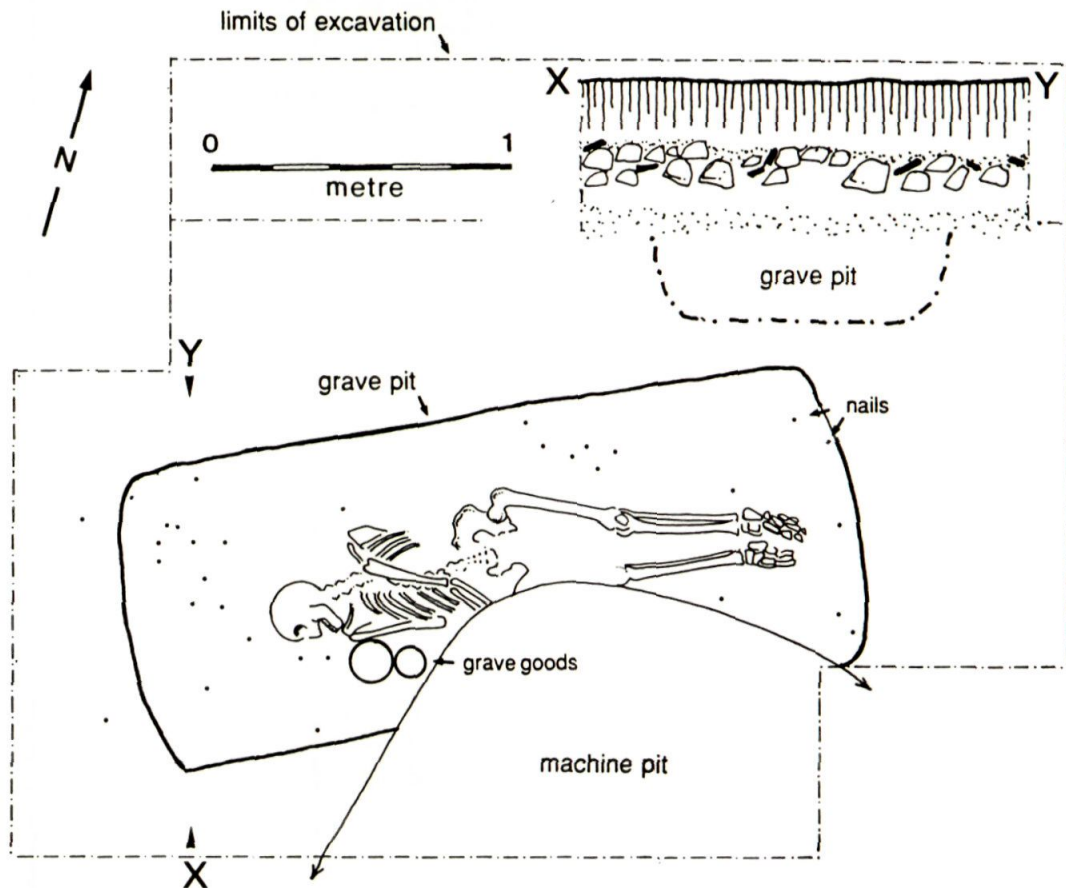


Fig 2. Plan of excavated area, showing position of skeleton, grave goods and iron nails. Section X-Y is shown as an inset.

Stamps from other dies are known from South Shields and Chester-le-Street, and on vessels contemporary with form 31R, such as Walters 79 and 80, *c* AD 160–190.

Flagon; greyware; with burnished rim and upper half of body. Vertical burnished lines on neck. The vessel has a swastika graffiti. Probably a product of the Alice Holt kilns. *cf* Lyne & Jefferies, 1979, p 50, where the type is given a date range of AD 200–280. For a stratified example from Silchester dated *c* AD 270 see Fulford, 1983, 194, no 530.

Other Finds

Approximately fifty iron nails were recovered from the grave area. They range in length from 120 mm to 240 mm and all are extremely corroded. There were no other finds from the Roman feature, but many sherds of post-medieval date came from the cobbled surface.

Discussion

The burial is typical of Romano-British third century practice (Black, 1986). Clearly the

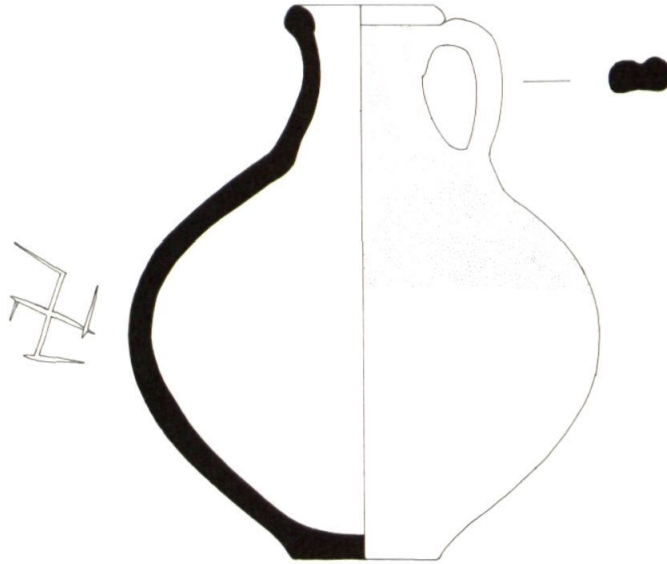


Fig 3. Grave goods: Greyware flagon with swastika graffiti. Scale 1:2.



Fig 4. Excavations in progress; August 31st, 1988.

samian vessel was of some antiquity before being included in the grave, but this is a well-known phenomenon.

The area east of Andover is generally rich in Roman remains, particularly in the vicinity of the Portway (the Roman road from Silchester to Old Sarum) and St Mary Bourne. (Stevens 1888, County SMR). Discoveries in the immediate vicinity of the village of Hurstbourne Priors, however, have been few. A range of late Iron Age and Roman material was collected from occupation layers at the old chalk pit 0.5 km east of this present find (Hughes (ed) 1980). This is too far distant to have a direct bearing on this burial, and its

significance must await further discoveries in the area.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Mr & Mrs. Porter for alerting the Museum to the discovery, and granting permission to dig. The work was carried out by the author, with the assistance of Graham Porter, Terry Green, Max Dacre and Sioni Davies. Kay Ainsworth and Bob Holmes cleaned the finds.

My thanks are also extended to Sue Anderson and Brenda Dickinson for their contributions, and to Trevor Percy-Lancaster, who drew the pottery vessels.

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