

# A Roman Burial at Ardley Revisited

A visit to the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock in June 2018 served as a reminder of a small group of Roman burials discovered south of Ashgrove Farm, Ardley (north-west of Bicester) in 1966 and published in *Oxoniensia* in 1969.<sup>1</sup> The burials were found by workmen digging a water main trench. At present they remain isolated finds and no nearby settlement context is known. The burials comprised two cremations in pottery vessels, and a single inhumation. The latter, only partly preserved, included three pottery vessels all apparently placed within the nailed wooden coffin which contained the partial remains of a young adult female.<sup>2</sup> Other grave goods included two jet pins. On the basis of parallels for the vessels this burial was suggested to date to 'the end of the 2nd or first half of the 3rd century'.<sup>3</sup> Reconsideration of this material suggests that a later date may be more likely.

The most striking vessel in the inhumation group is a scale-decorated beaker, described as a 'small vase with narrow neck, flaring mouth and bung-shaped foot'.<sup>4</sup> Both from the published description and in observation the fabric, which is orange-buff with an abraded brown slip, is consistent with Oxford colour-coated ware,<sup>5</sup> as is the occurrence of barbotine scale decoration,<sup>6</sup> the latter a point potentially recognised in the original publication.<sup>7</sup> These characteristics alone suggest a date for this vessel after about the middle of the third century, since the date of c.AD 240 proposed by Young for the inception of Oxford colour-coated ware production in 1977 has been widely accepted. There is no recent evidence to contradict this date. A second-century phase of colour-coated ware production in the Oxford industry, identified at the production site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, for example, is relatively small scale and seems to have been confined largely if not entirely to beakers of a bag-shaped form very different from that of the present vessel.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence to show that this earlier tradition survived into the first half of the third century to form a direct antecedent of the main phase of Oxford colour-coated ware production.

Benson and Brown saw the typological associations of the Ardley vessel as lying with 'unguent pots' and listed a range of examples of this form as general parallels.<sup>9</sup> This association seems extremely unlikely. In general terms, beakers are typically the vessel class most commonly deposited in later Roman burials both in this region<sup>10</sup> and more widely, and while the present vessel is not of a common Oxford form, identification as a beaker seems certain. *Unguentaria* are completely unknown in Oxford colour-coated ware, but the industry did produce a wide range of beakers (Young types C20–C37 and 'miniature' types C102–C108), although these are generally less common than the principal forms of the bowl and dish repertoire; for example, in the substantial recently recorded assemblage from Gill Mill, the ratio of Oxford colour-coated beaker forms to bowls and dishes (quantified by

<sup>1</sup> D. Benson and P.D.C. Brown, 'Roman Burials from Ardley, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, 34 (1969), pp. 107–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* fig. 20, C.

<sup>5</sup> C.J. Young, *The Roman Pottery of the Oxford Region*, BAR BS, 43 (1977), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> Benson and Brown, 'Roman Burials', p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> P. Booth et al., 'A Romano-British Kiln Site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, and Other Sites on the Didcot to Oxford and Wootton to Abingdon Water Mains, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 58 (1993), pp. 140, 170–2.

<sup>9</sup> Benson and Brown, 'Roman Burials', p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the summary in P. Booth, 'Late Roman Cemeteries in Oxfordshire: A Review', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), table 2.

rim equivalents) was almost exactly 1:2.<sup>11</sup> At the production site of Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, by contrast, the ratio was approximately 1:6, while at Blackbird Leys colour-coated beakers were completely absent.<sup>12</sup> The majority of the Oxford colour-coated beaker forms are variants on a common later Roman type with a narrow pedestal base, a bulbous/globular body, and a tapering neck often with a simple beaded or slightly out-turned tip to the rim. Comparable forms are produced in a number of Romano-British industries and are widely produced in the north-western provinces, though the specific 'pentice' beaker form, such as the Oxford type C23, found also in the Nene valley kilns<sup>13</sup> and elsewhere in Britain, does not appear to have a direct parallel amongst, for example, the large corpus of continental fine ware beakers collected by Robin Symonds,<sup>14</sup> which otherwise provide close comparanda for many Romano-British fine ware beaker variants.

The specific characteristics of Ardley beaker C which distinguish it from the majority of Oxford colour-coated beakers are the slightly pyriform (rather than globular) body and in particular the quite widely splayed out (rather than tapering) rim, which is very slightly cupped at its outer point. The relatively narrow neck and out-sloping rim are particular features of the beakers of Symonds' group 50, third-century Trier products with white barbotine decoration.<sup>15</sup> None of these vessels provides a direct parallel for the Ardley vessel, and the use of barbotine scales, while seen for example at Rheinzabern in the second century,<sup>16</sup> does not form part of the Trier tradition. Nevertheless, the other similarities underline the point that a very significant part of the Oxford colour-coated ware range was derived more or less directly from the East Gaulish sigillata and associated fine ware repertoires of the early to mid third century,<sup>17</sup> and specific parallels can be drawn between some of the Oxford colour-coated beaker forms (though not C23, as mentioned above) and the range of vessels presented most extensively by Symonds.<sup>18</sup> That the Ardley vessel should be seen as a local variant of another example from within that repertoire seems highly probable. It remains unusual within the Oxford range, however, for reasons which are unclear, but an exact parallel for the rim form comes from a fourth-century context in a very recent excavation at Monks Farm, Grove, though unfortunately no more of the vessel is present.<sup>19</sup>

The Oxford attribution implies a *terminus post quem* of at least AD 240, and potentially rather later,<sup>20</sup> for Ardley vessel C and thus for the burial with which it was found. The other two vessels are not inconsistent with this chronology, although the rather roughly made small shell-tempered vessel (A) is a little unexpected as a grave good at this date. However, local shell-tempered jars were used as urns in fourth-century cremation burials at Radley, for

<sup>11</sup> P. Booth and A. Simmonds, *Gill Mill: Later Prehistoric Landscape and a Roman Nucleated Settlement in the Lower Windrush Valley near Witney, Oxfordshire*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 41 (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Booth et al., 'Lower Farm', p. 155, table 10; P. Booth and G. Edgeley-Long, 'Prehistoric Settlement and Roman Pottery Production at Blackbird Leys, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 68 (2003), p. 250, table 4.

<sup>13</sup> For example, G. Webster, 'Area 1: The Area East of the Billing Brook', in J.R. Perrin, 'Roman Pottery from Excavations at and near to the Roman Small Town of Durobrivae, Water Newton, Cambridgeshire, 1956–58', *Journal of Roman Pottery Studies*, 8 (1999), p. 17, fig. 9, nos. 117, 118, 121.

<sup>14</sup> R.P. Symonds, *Rhenish Wares: Fine Dark Coloured Pottery from Gaul and Germany*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph, 23 (1992).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. figs 38 and 39, vessels described by Symonds as 'carafes'.

<sup>16</sup> For example, E. Gose, *Gefäßstypen der Römischen Keramik im Rheinland*, Beihefte der Bonner Jahrbücher Band 1 (1976), no. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *Oxfordshire Roman Pottery*, pp. 125–6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 125 noted parallels with forms published by Gose, *Gefäßstypen der Römischen Keramik im Rheinland*.

<sup>19</sup> Site WHG17, context 532. Excavation by Oxford Archaeology, directed by G. Thacker. I am grateful to K. Brady for showing me this vessel.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Young, *Oxfordshire Roman Pottery*, p. 238.

example,<sup>21</sup> so this type of pottery can have clear late Roman funerary associations. Ardley vessel B is of a very broadly-dated form (Young type R38, with an overall first-fourth-century range), but is again directly paralleled at Radley, by the urn in cremation burial 1004, for which a date after c.AD 270 seems certain and a fourth-century date more than likely.

Further support for a late Roman date for the burial comes from the jet pins. Benson and Brown noted that such finds are common in burials,<sup>22</sup> though they are by no means exclusively found in such contexts and the impression that burial associations were particularly important is undoubtedly reinforced by their frequency in graves at York.<sup>23</sup> Indeed in a very recent review of rural burial practice in Roman Britain only 45 out of a total of some 3,773 burials with grave goods are recorded with hairpins of any material.<sup>24</sup> While jet pins with faceted heads, like one of the two Ardley pins, are known from contexts dated as early as the late second–early third century<sup>25</sup> these early examples seem again to concentrate at York. Jet pins from the eastern cemetery at London are from two graves, dated 270–400 and 300–400, and jet pins with faceted heads come from two graves at Lankhills, Winchester, both dated after AD 330.<sup>26</sup> A single example from the Bath Gate cemetery at Cirencester is also likely to have been of fourth-century date.<sup>27</sup> This summary selection of the evidence is not conclusive, but is at least consistent with the suggested later third-fourth-century date for the burial.

On balance, a fourth-century date might be preferred, but this is admittedly a subjective view. In a previous review of late Roman cemetery evidence from Oxfordshire it was suggested that the dating evidence did not indicate the practice of inhumation burial in this region on a significant scale before the fourth century.<sup>28</sup> This view is no longer sustainable. It was based in part on the fact that coin-dated graves in the region were exclusively of fourth-century date. This remains largely the case, but an important exception is an isolated trackside burial from Great Western Park, Didcot, which contained two coins, one each of Gordian III and Valerian II, indicating a date probably no later than c.AD 255–260.<sup>29</sup> The increasing use of radiocarbon dating for Roman burials has also helped to identify third-century inhumation burials in the region, as for example at Horcott, Gloucestershire, where a relatively substantial rural cemetery has a bounded radiocarbon date range of broadly mid third–mid fourth centuries.<sup>30</sup> Such evidence underlines what might have been expected, and at the same time shows that over-reliance on a single category of dating material such as coins can give misleading results.

It is increasingly clear that the view of a transition from general traditions of cremation to inhumation burial at around the turn of the second and third centuries, the interpretative framework within which Benson and Brown were working, is a grossly over-simplified

<sup>21</sup> R. Chambers and E. McAdam, *Excavations at Radley Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire, 1983-5 Volume 2: The Romano-British Cemetery and Anglo-Saxon Settlement*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 25 (2007), pp. 58–64.

<sup>22</sup> Benson and Brown, 'Roman Burials', p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> RCHME, *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of York Volume I, Eboracum Roman York* (1962), p. 142. See also L. Allason-Jones, *Roman Jet in the Yorkshire Museum* (1996), pp. 38–44.

<sup>24</sup> A. Smith et al., *Life and Death in the Countryside of Roman Britain, New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain, Volume 3*, Britannia Monograph, 31 (2018), p. 266; for the associated dataset see <http://dx.doi.org/10.5284/1030449>.

<sup>25</sup> Allason-Jones, *Roman Jet*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> B. Barber and D. Bowsher, *The Eastern Cemetery of Roman London, Excavations 1983–1990*, Museum of London Archaeology Service Monograph, 4 (2000), p. 349, table 115; G. Clarke, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills*, Winchester Studies 3: Pre Roman and Roman Winchester Part II (1979), p. 316.

<sup>27</sup> A. McWhirr et al., *Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester* (1982), Cirencester Excavations II, fiche D.03 and D.07, no. 230, though it is not clear that this pin is from a burial.

<sup>28</sup> Booth, 'Late Roman Cemeteries', p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> C. Hayden et al., 'Great Western Park, Didcot, Oxfordshire: Post-Excavation Assessment', unpublished Oxford Archaeology report (2014).

<sup>30</sup> C. Hayden et al., *Horcott Quarry, Fairford and Arkell's Land, Kempsford: Prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Burial in the Upper Thames Valley in Gloucestershire*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 40 (2017), pp. 26–8.

one. There is, for example, good evidence for well-established inhumation traditions in Gloucestershire at least as early as the second century. A similar late Iron-Age/early Roman inhumation tradition is found in Kent alongside the well known cremation burials of the Aylesford-Swarling tradition, and is also seen elsewhere in the south-east. Some aspects of the increasingly complex chronological and regional variation in burial traditions have been discussed recently.<sup>31</sup> Developing understanding of these variations has also underlined the fact that cremation burial, never a common rite in rural contexts in this region, could in places continue into the late Roman period, the fourth-century burials from Radley, mentioned above, being the best local examples of this. On this basis it is quite possible that the cremation burials from Ardley were of similar late Roman date to the adjacent inhumation, a suggestion supported by the very close similarity between cremation urn D and the auxiliary vessel B in the inhumation. This need not necessarily have been the case, but the fact that the possibility can be considered shows how far understanding of developments in burial practice at regional and national level has advanced in recent years. This has been driven by a combination of factors. First is new evidence,<sup>32</sup> the value of which has been enhanced by the more frequent use of techniques such as radiocarbon dating, and a whole range of new approaches to interpretation.<sup>33</sup> Despite these advances, however, uncertainties remain, particularly with regard to chronology and the identification of early Roman burials in rural contexts. With regard to the latter, the scarcity of such burials, discussed previously,<sup>34</sup> is still a distinct regional phenomenon suggesting a very different approach to the disposal of the dead compared to the much more widespread practices of the later third and fourth centuries, of which the Ardley burials were most probably representative.

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<sup>31</sup> For example, P. Booth, 'Some Recent Work on Romano-British Cemeteries', in J. Pearce and J. Weekes (eds.), *Death as a Process: The Archaeology of the Roman Funeral* (2017), pp. 174–207.

<sup>32</sup> For some basic figures regarding the numbers of burials excavated at Roman towns in Britain since 1990 (some 4,000): J. Pearce, 'Urban Exits: Commercial Archaeology and the Study of Death Rituals and the Dead in the Towns of Roman Britain', in M. Fulford and N. Holbrook (eds.), *The Towns of Roman Britain; The Contribution of Commercial Archaeology since 1990*, Britannia Monograph, 27 (2015), pp. 138–66, and for the overall numbers of burials now known from excavated rural settlements in England and Wales see A. Smith et al., *Life and Death in the Countryside of Roman Britain*. In both cases the majority of burials are of later Roman date.

<sup>33</sup> For example, J. Pearce, *Contextual Archaeology of Burial Practice: Case Studies from Roman Britain*, BAR BS, 588 (2013).

<sup>34</sup> Booth, 'Late Roman Cemeteries', p. 37.