

TWO ROMAN CREMATION BURIALS FROM GREAT BRICKHILL

DAVID ALLEN

This paper records the discovery of two inurned cremation burials dated on pottery evidence to c. A.D. 100 – 150. The cremated remains are of two adults. The find is looked at in its local and regional setting. The County site number is CAS 4395, and the Museum accession number 578.79.

Acknowledgements

Thanks must go to Mr. and Mrs. R. Dawson for involving the County Museum at an early stage in the discovery, allowing access to the site, and donating the find (with the exception of the poppy beaker) to the Museum. Also to Mr. Michael Farley, who assisted in the recovery of the find and provided help and advice during the compilation of this report. I must also express my gratitude to Denise Allen and Grace Scrimgeour, who shared the painstaking work of removing the soil from the bone whilst it was still 'in situ', and to Dr. Juliet Rogers, who reported on the cremated material.

Circumstances of Discovery

In September 1978, when adding a porch to his house in Holts Green, Great Brickhill, Mr. R. Dawson discovered two inurned cremation burials. He removed one of the vessels, and the small poppy beaker which accompanied it (Fig. 2, B and C), but summoned the County Museum, Aylesbury to supervise the excavation of the remaining urn (Fig. 2, A).

Location of Site

Holt's Green is a relatively new development which has extended the village further south along the Woburn sands escarpment on which it lies (Fig. 1). The area would appear to have been under cultivation since mediaeval times at least, and inspection of the 1947 RAF vertical photographs CPE/UK/2008 shows clear indications of mediaeval ploughing (ridge and furrow) in the fields immediately adjacent to the site. No previous evidence for Roman settlement has come from this locality, but the Watling Street, crossing the escarpment on its north-west south-east course, passes within two kilometres of the site, whilst the road running north-south through the village and passing within 100 m. of the burials, is the route favoured by the *Viatores* as their minor Roman road 173b from Fleet Marston to Little Brickhill (1964, 278).

Nature of Burials

Vessel A (Grave I) had been buried in an upright position at a depth of 0.60 m. below the present ground surface, and it was clear from Mr. Dawson's description that vessel C (Grave II) had been interred in similar fashion some 2.0 m. distant, with the accessory beaker, which presumably contained a *viaticum*, resting against it.

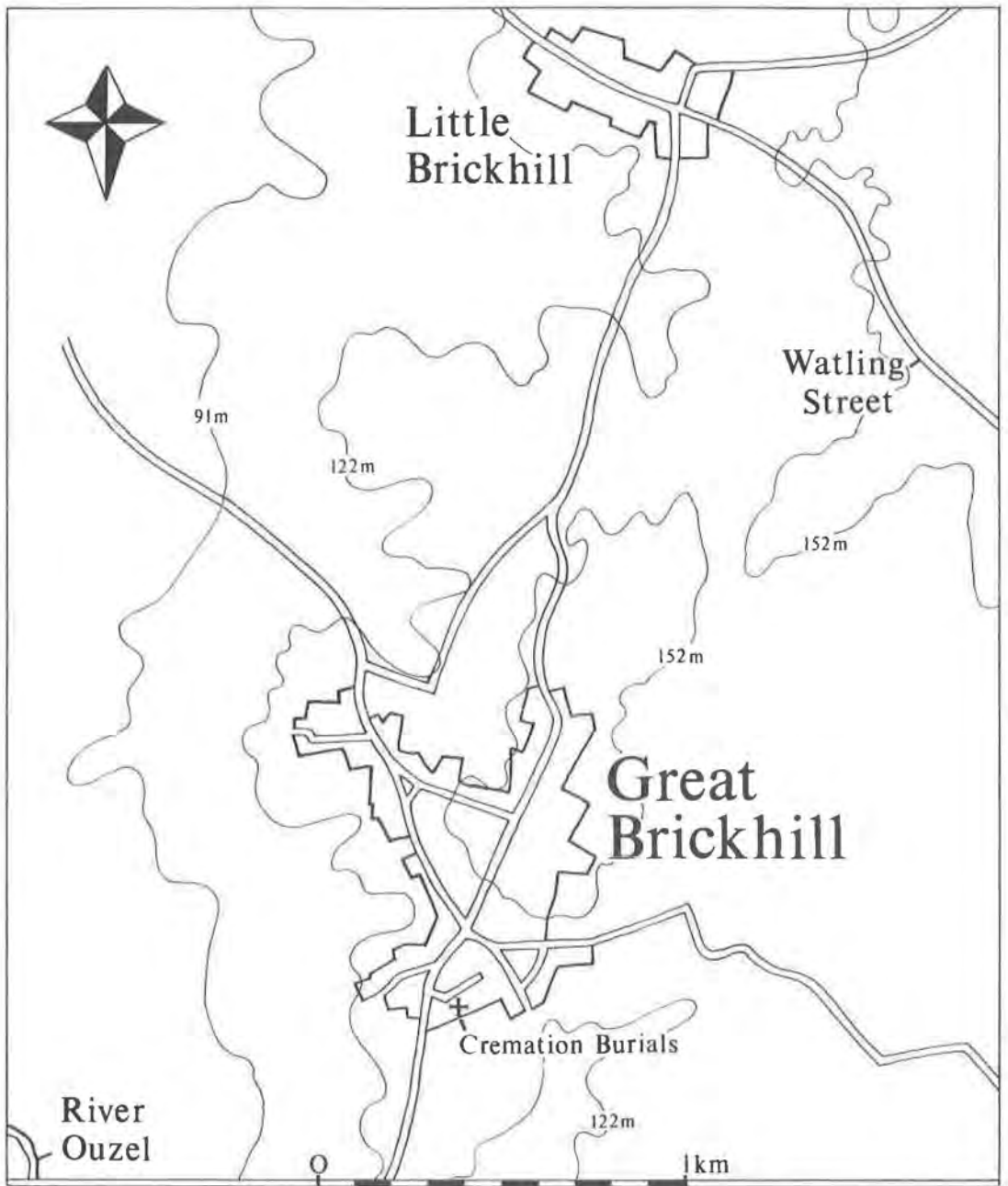


Fig. 1. Location of Cremation Burials.

In neither case did the uniform nature of the sandy subsoil, or the confines of the footing trench, allow the identification of a grave cut, nor were any distinct layers visible above the burials. However both large vessels had suffered considerable damage to their upper regions, clearly in antiquity and presumably as the result of ploughing. No evidence was forthcoming to indicate when this partial destruction took place.

The upper fill of the urns consisted of soil identical to that above and besides them, and the careful removal of this material revealed that the cremated remains occupied different areas within the two vessels (Fig. 2).

In vessel C the bone rested on the base of the pot, in a uniform layer 0.07 m. thick, but in vessel A a layer of bone 0.04 m. thick hugged the sides of the pot from base to shoulder around most of its circumference. It could be argued that some object (e.g. a stake projecting upwards to mark the burial) was inserted into this urn at the same time as the cremation, and the presence of two potsherds and an iron nail (see below) in the soil fill suggests that vessel A may have been totally infilled before its burial. In the absence of more direct evidence, however, the disposition of the bone must remain a matter for conjecture. The poppy beaker contained only soil.

The Finds

- Vessel A Pedestal urn with wide mouth and ?vertical spout or hollow handle. Base damaged before burial, rim and neck subsequently. Fabric: sandy grey paste, well fired, with traces of burnishing on the body.
- Vessel B 'Poppy head' beaker decorated with barbotine dots in four panels. Fabric: hard dark grey-blue, lightly burnished externally. ?Black slip.
- Vessel C ?Jar, height and rim form unknown due to ?plough damage. Coarse sandy fabric with inclusions burnt out in firing.

Finds from the Soil Fill of Vessel A (Not illustrated)

- Sherd 0.02 m. square. Fabric: coarse dark brown, quartz tempered.
- Sherd 0.02 m. square. Fabric: fine grained, dark grey. Exterior black, highly burnished.
- Iron nail 0.06 m. in length, square section, flat head.

The Cremated Bone

by Juliet Rogers, M.B., Ch.B.

Cremations from two cinerary vessels were examined, with the object of discovering the number of people cremated, their age, sex and any diseases they may have suffered from. Accurate assessment of these objectives is often impossible and at best tentative because the burnt bone has been crushed, and is only a small part of a complete skeleton. The material was washed in a 2 mm. sieve and then sorted into groups, identifiable and unidentifiable. The identifiable groups were then further divided into the different types of bone represented so that an assessment of the sex, age and number of individuals could be made.

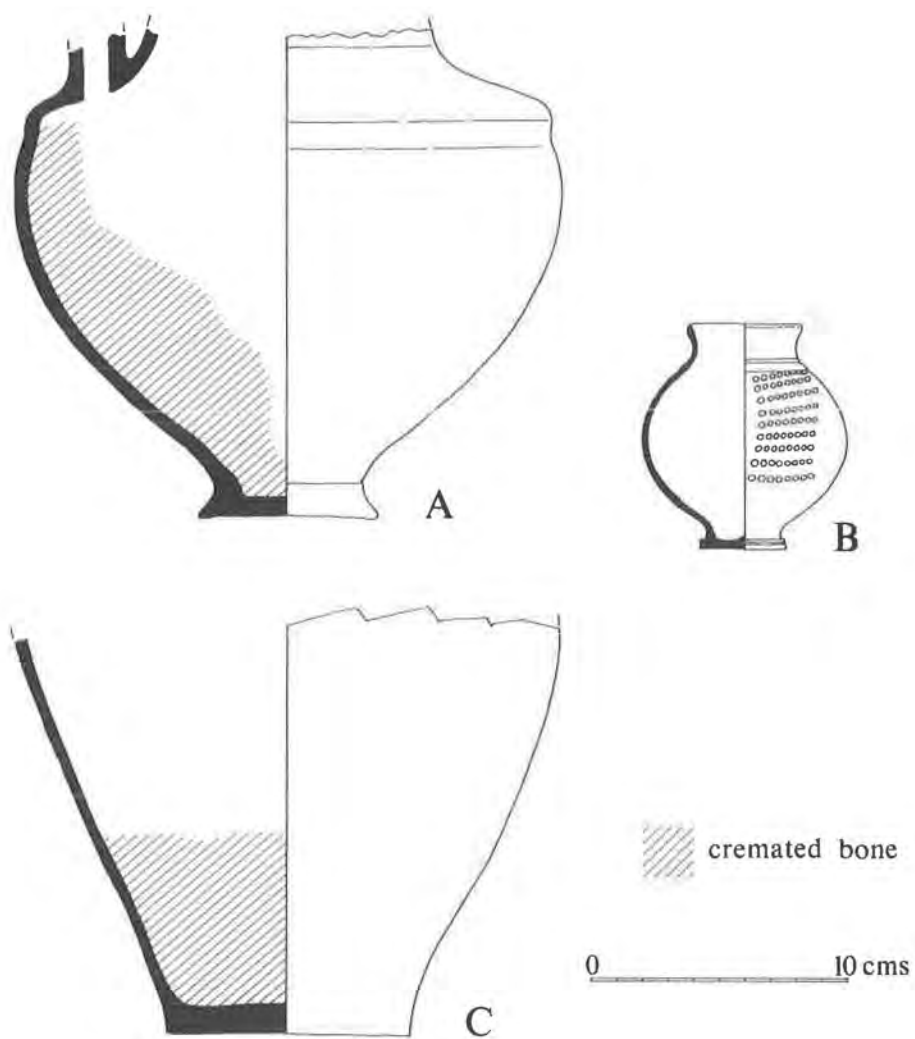


Fig. 2. Vessels found at Great Brickhill. (1/3 scale).

Grave I; Cremation Vessel A – Only one individual identified, an adult, probably under middle age, possibly female. No pathological condition. No animal bones.

Skeletal material	Gm.	% Identified	% Total	Size range mm.
Skull	110	28.0	18.6	14–50
Humerus	28	7.1	4.7	8–28
Femur	35	9.0	6.0	15–40
Tibia	25	6.4	4.2	48
Mandible and teeth	3	0.77	0.5	10–44
Hand	3	0.77	0.5	8
Pelvis	20	5.1	3.4	14–20
Vertebrae	10	2.1	1.7	10–30

Size range, weight and percentage distribution of some identified remains:
 Total weight 590 Weight identified 390

Grave II; Cremation Vessel C – Only one individual identified, adult, sex unknown. No pathology and no animal bones.

Skeletal material	Gm.	% Identified	% Total	Size range mm.
Skull	20	5.9	3.5	8–31
Humerus	10	3.0	1.7	59
Forearm	20	5.9	3.5	33–59
Hand	5	1.4	0.9	5–20
Femur	55	16.2	9.7	17–59
Vertebrae	5	1.4	0.9	5–15
Pelvis	25	7.4	4.4	15–52
Mandible	1	0.3	0.1	20

Size range, weight and percentage distribution of identified remains:
 Total weight 563 Weight identified 338

Dating Evidence

Of the three vessels found, the most distinctive, and the one which provides the most reliable dating evidence, is the poppy beaker. This class of pottery has recently been studied by Tyers (1978) who confirms, by examining vessels from Southwark and Verulamium, that the earlier theories of a development in form which has chronological significance, are substantially correct. The process involves the equation of the 'flare' of the rim with its size, and when the Great Brickhill vessel is compared with the stratified examples from Verulamium and Southwark, a date of A.D. 100 – 150 seems likely.

This date applies only to Grave II, and no such well-defined parallels are available for the pedestal urn from Grave I. However, this vessel represents the continued manufacture, in the Roman period, of a type common in south-eastern England in the late Iron Age, and it could certainly be of late first or early second-century date.

Discussion

The two cremations discovered at Great Brickhill are probably part of a small cemetery – perhaps a family group – which extends well beyond the limits of the footings trench. Burials of this nature are a familiar feature of the Roman period, and continue a tradition founded in the late Iron Age La Tene III cremations (Whimster, 1976). Recently excavated examples in Buckinghamshire include Wards Coombe – bridging the Iron Age and Roman periods (Dunnett, 1972) and Thornborough – late first century (Johnson, 1975). Second-century cremations have also been discovered at Magiovinium (Fenny Stratford) although here the burials appear to be related to individual building plots and not grouped in a cemetery (D. S. Neal, personal comment).

At Wards Coombe and Thornborough the burials were surrounded by ditched enclosures. Any such delimiting feature at Great Brickhill has long since been erased by intensive agricultural activity. Nor does any trace exist of the settlement relating to the cemetery, and its discovery must await a systematic programme of fieldwalking or aerial survey.

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