

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXIII

for 1984

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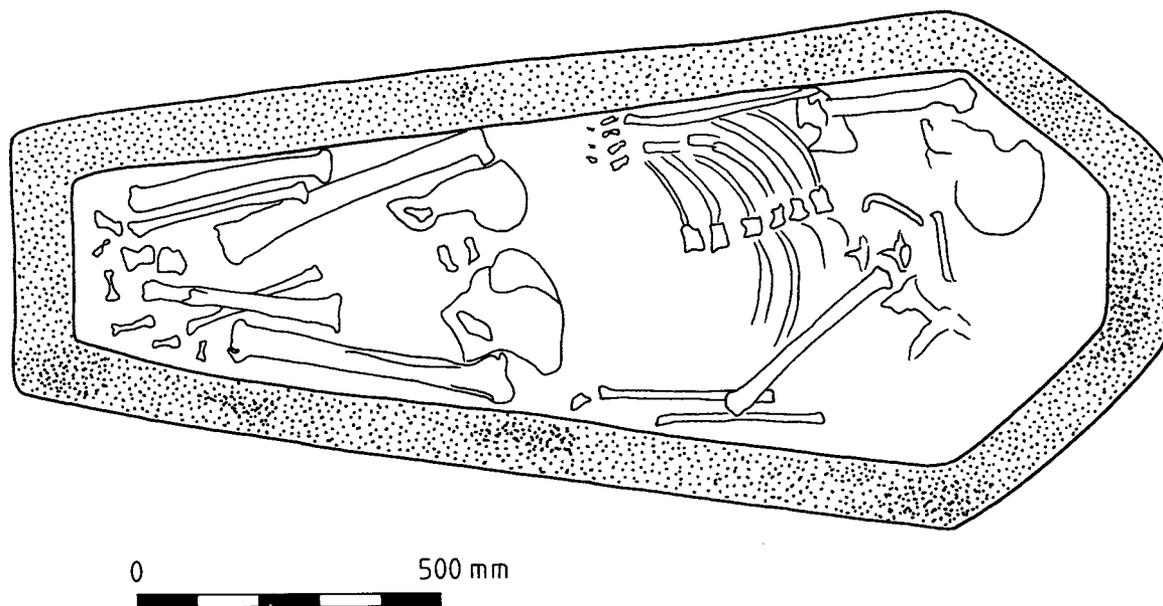
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A ROMAN STONE COFFIN FROM STUNTNEY AND GAZETTEER OF SIMILAR COFFINS IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

ALISON TAYLOR

In February 1981 a farm machine subsoiling on Thorney Hill, Stuntney, near Ely, struck and broke the lid of a stone coffin. The owner of the land, David Morbey, notified the author immediately and arranged for men and machinery to lift the coffin. It was necessary to remove the coffin the following day and so only the contents and sufficient soil to loosen the coffin were excavated.

The site lay on a small fen-island of Kimmeridge Clay at about 8 m O.D., just east of Ely. The coffin was buried on a local high point, with the land sloping down to Rolls Lode, an ancient tributary of the River Ouse, about 200 m to the west.



The coffin (Figure 1), which was aligned approximately east-west, was made of Barnack-type stone. It was 210 cm long, 35 cm deep and 85 cm at the widest point, narrowing to 30 cm at the head and 50 cm at the feet (outside measurements). The walls were 10 cm thick. The coffin lid was flat on top and dished inside. There was an irregular hole that had been covered by small pebbles at the base of the head-end. The top of the coffin was about 50 cm below present ground level. The skeleton within represented an adult male, probably in his late twenties, approximately 5 ft 9 in tall (see below). The body had not been moved significantly after flesh had decayed. The legs had been bent up as if to fit the body into a confined space, although its estimated height should have allowed it to lie fully stretched. There were no grave-goods apart from two *Bos* tarsal bones. It was not possible to examine the site for features outside the coffin.

The shape of the coffin, which somewhat resembles conventional modern ones, is unusual for the Roman period, when most such coffins were simple rectangles. However, comparisons of all coffins of this type recorded in Cambridgeshire reveal some limited variety in their dimensions and outlines (Figures 2-5). Of the 20 further examples whose shape is known, 8 are rectangular, 8 taper slightly,



1

BARTON (after Walker)



2



BOURN



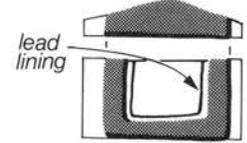
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BROUGHTON



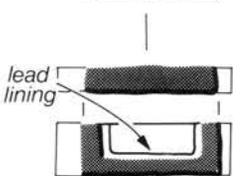
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CAMBRIDGE (Arbury Rd.)



5



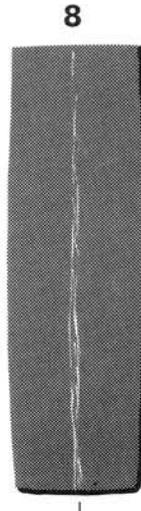
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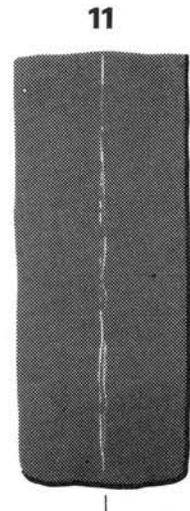
CAMBRIDGE



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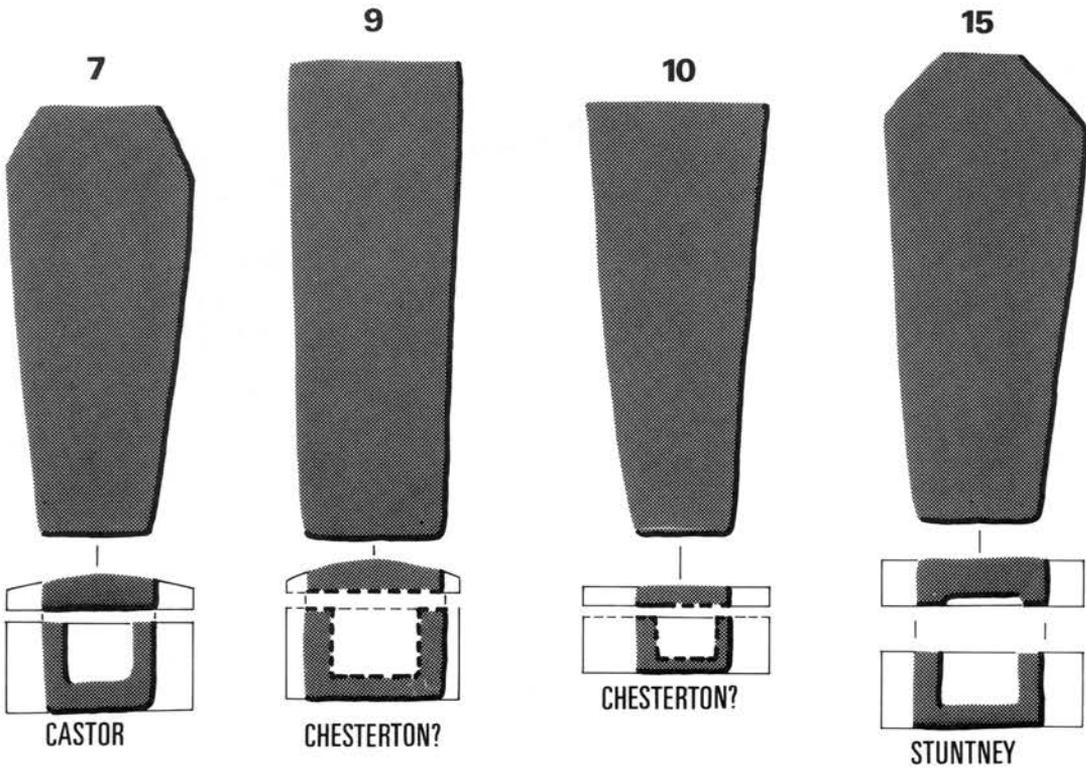
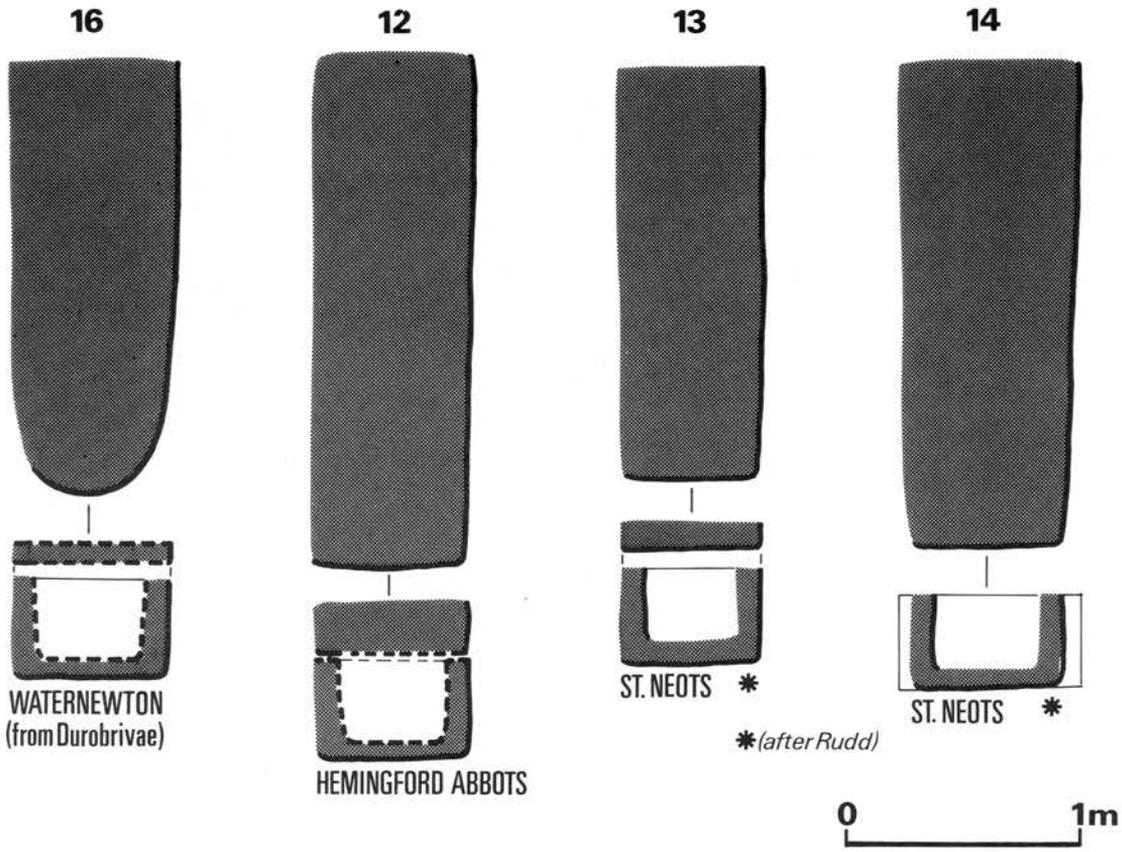
CHESTERTON



11



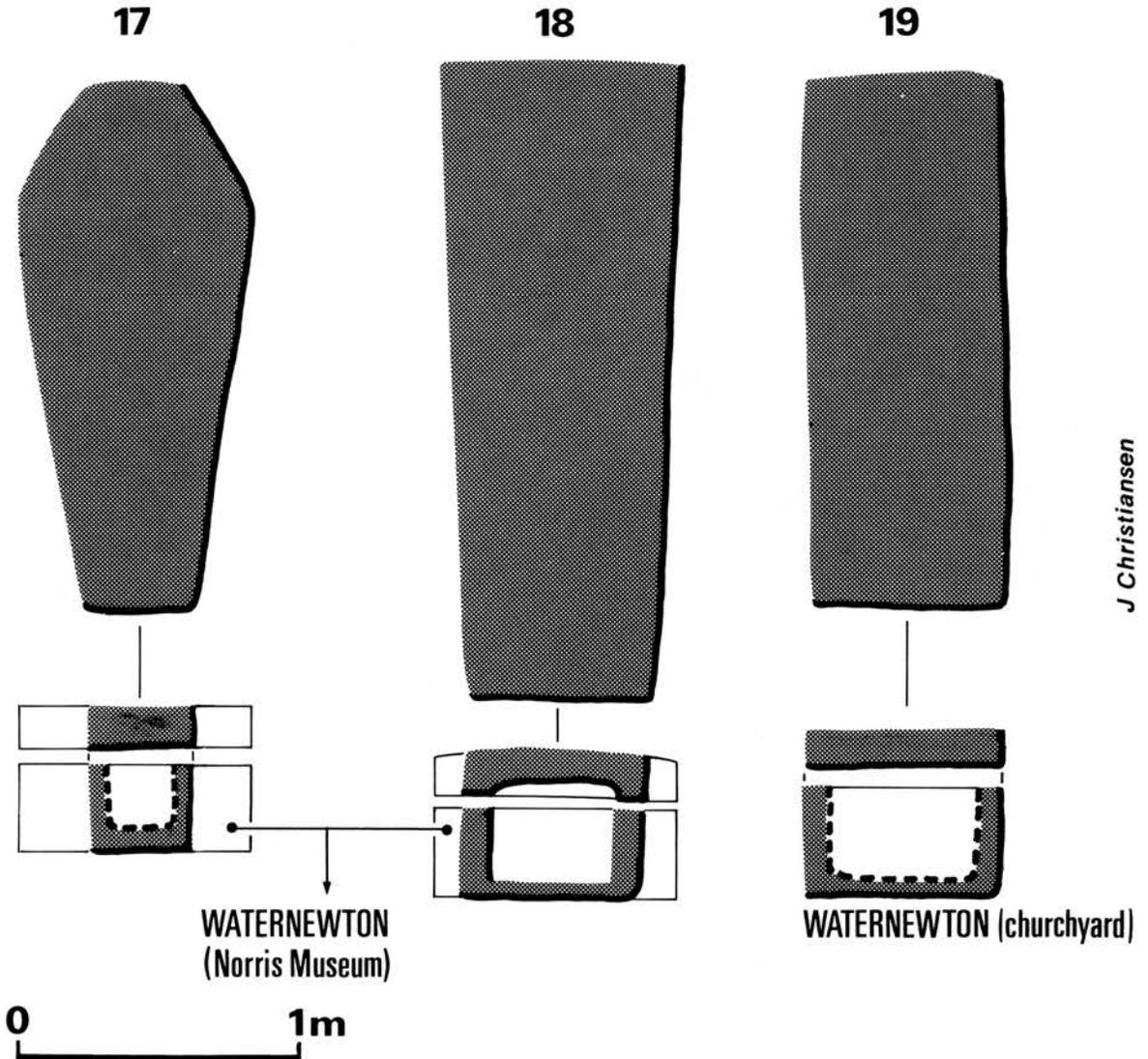
EYE



2 have rounded ends and 2, from Water Newton and Castor, have shaped ends and tapering forms similar to the Stuntney example.

Because they are such unmistakable, large and imperishable objects, stone coffins are often found where no lesser feature would be noted, although our information about their contexts is generally very poor. Clearly they were used in different burial rites and with no especial significance attached to the use of stone, presumably excepting the added status it gave. One example, Barton, was in a barrow and two, Litlington and Arbury Road, Cambridge, were in chambers of stone or chalk. At St Neots the post-holes that held structures to help position the coffins were excavated. At least five sites have produced two or more coffins together, and there have been 17 reported from Chesterton, Peterborough, most of them from the same area. At Castor and Litlington burials not in stone coffins shared the cemeteries, and this was probably the case on other sites. Burials at Alwalton, Cambridge and Castor included rich grave-goods, but others, such as St Neots and Stuntney, definitely contained no artefact at all. Three coffins had lead linings. Male and female burials occur about equally and are sometimes found as a pair. The burial at Upton was a child, sex unknown, of about 9 years old. Where dating evidence is found it lies within the third or fourth centuries A.D.

The majority of the coffins occur, naturally enough, in the wealthy and well-populated Peterborough area, near the Barnack quarries where they originated. It is more surprising that six have been reported from roads leading out of Cambridge, which was a small town with no known stone buildings. Roman finds are reported near most sites but, except where they are found near towns such as Cambridge and Durobrivae, their relationship to settlements is uncertain.



Human skeletal remains from a stone coffin at Stuntney

F. V. H. Powell

The surviving skeletal remains represent a male aged between 25 and 35 years, probably in his late twenties. The condition of the bone is very good, with only minor damage. All of the skeleton is represented except for both patellae; several small bones of the hands and feet are also missing.

The skull is complete with no wormian bones, metopic suture, or parietal foramina. The orbits both display supra-orbital notches and the left orbit shows very slight osteoporosis. The dental formula is:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc|cccccccc} \times & 7 & 6 & 5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 1 & & \times & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 \\ \hline & 7 & 6 & 5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & \times & & \times & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & \end{array}$$

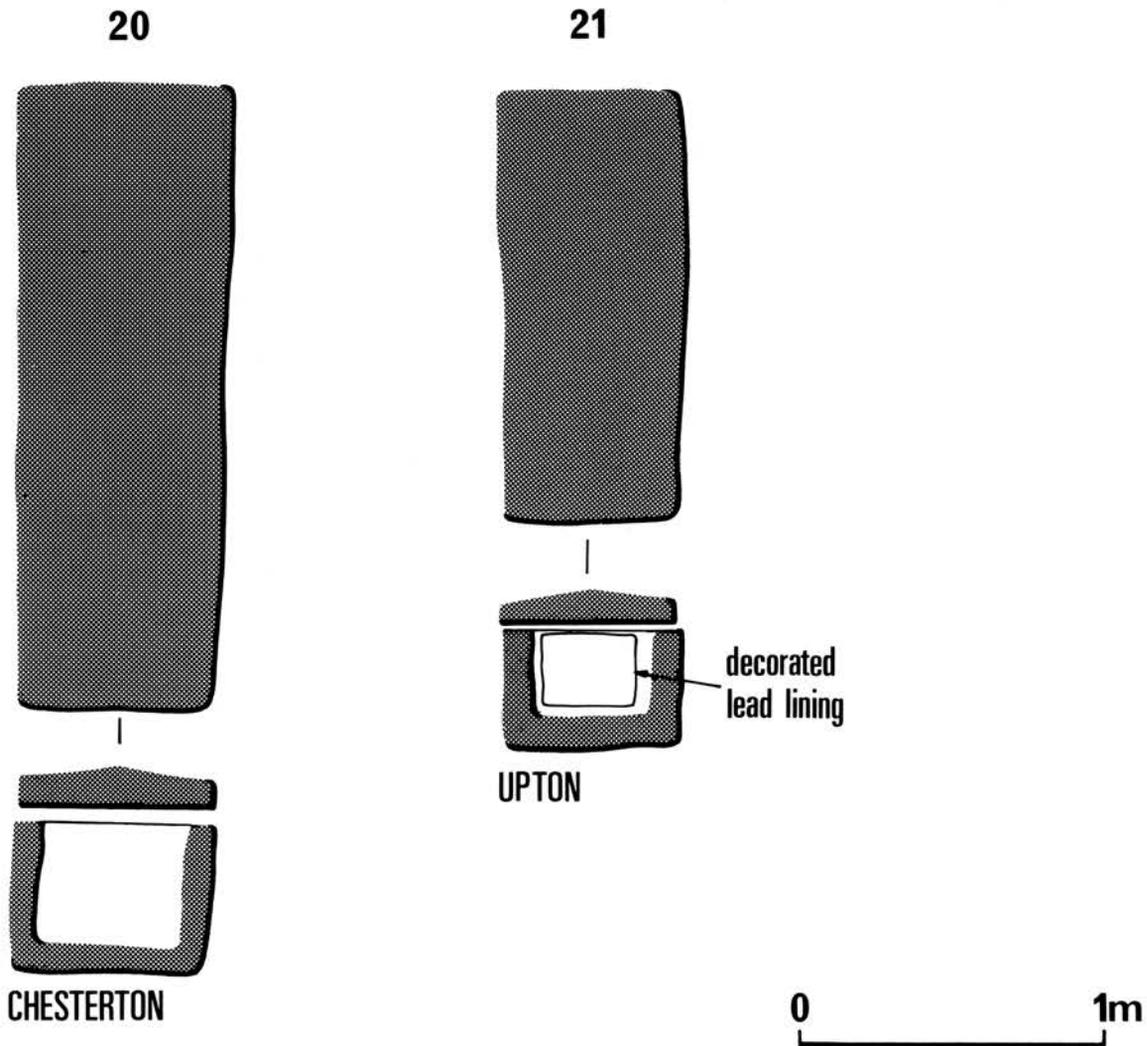
As can be seen, the mandibular third molars are congenitally absent. The ante-mortem tooth loss of the right maxillary third molar probably occurred relatively shortly before death, as there is very slight alveolar resorption. General alveolar resorption, due to periodontal disease, is marked with moderate calculus build-up. There is slight gonial eversion.

The post-cranial skeleton, in general, shows a moderately muscular individual with an estimated stature of 173.90 cm (approximately 5 ft 9 in). The ulnae, radii and fibulae display marked interosseous crests. There is no marked discrepancy between the left and right long-bone measurements except for the clavicles. The left clavicle measures 153 mm long and 10 mm in diameter, while the right measures 147 mm long and 13 mm in diameter. As the right clavicle shows a more marked muscular development, this may be evidence for right-handedness.

Evidence for osteoarthritis is marked on the acromial facets of both clavicles and scapular acromions; and there is marked lipping of the dens facet and dens of the atlas and axis and the intervertebral facets of the remaining five cervical vertebrae.

Two *Bos* tarsal bones were included with the remains.

Details of the measurements are held in the county sites and monuments record.



Roman stone coffins in Cambridgeshire (Figures 2, 3 and 5)

Parish	Description	Present location	Reference
Alwalton	Male burial with 'silver plate', glass, jet and bronze ornaments, coins and a piece of white wood inscribed with Greek and Latin words, found 1754	?	RCHM, <i>Peterborough New Town</i>
Barton	Female burial in a barrow with 2 bone pins, pottery, bird bones and animal teeth. Layer of stones in place of lid	?	Walker, 1908
Bourn	'Others believed to have been found with it'	CAAM	Liversidge, 1977, 24
Broughton	Contained 2 'vases'	Rectory garden	VCH Hunts 1, 264
Cambridge, Arbury Road	Male and female burials in 2 lead-lined coffins, one in a chalk mausoleum. Third to fourth century	CAAM	Fell, 1956
Cambridge	Documentary reference to coffin taken to Ely for St Etheldreda's burial	?	Bede's <i>Ecclesiastical History</i> , Caius, 1574
Cambridge	Coffin with rounded head NE of Castle, 1820	?	RCHM, <i>Cambridge</i> , 1, lxiv
Cambridge	Two coffins. Female burial accompanied by 4 glass flasks, bronze vessel, colour-coated beaker, pottery dish amulet, 2 jet pins. Nothing survives from male burial	One in Fitzwilliam Museum	Liversidge, 1977, 16
Castor	Found with inhumations in wooden coffins. Female burial with gold earrings, silver brooch, bronze bracelets, shale spindle whorl, bone comb, colour-coated flagon. Fourth-century date	Peterborough Museum	Interim report by J. P. Wild, 1968
Chesterton (Peterborough)	Ten coffins shown on illustration	One in churchyard	Artis, 1828
Chesterton (Peterborough)	Six coffins	Two in Peterborough Museum?	Greenfield, 1958
Chesterton (Peterborough)	One coffin. Male burial. No grave-goods	Farmyard	<i>Northants Archaeology</i> , forthcoming
Eye	Second-century pottery around site	Garden in Yarwell	—
Hemingford Abbots	Male burial with third-century Castor beaker said to contain gold coins of A.D. 50	Church	<i>VCH Hunts</i> , 1, 266
Litlington	Within stone chamber in cemetery	?	Liversidge, 1977, 31
St Ives	Documentary reference. Eleventh-century account of discovery of coffin in 1001, containing metal chalice and brooches, 2 more burials found near by	?	Edgington, 1983
St Neots	Male and female burials in 2 complete coffins plus fragments of another, surrounded by occupation debris. Disturbed in Roman times	One in Bedford Museum, one in a farmyard at Hail Weston	Rudd & Daines, 1971
Stibbington	Skeleton and broken urn found in stone coffin, 6 ft 8 in × 2 ft 5 in × 16 in, without cover	?	St Joseph, 1941
Stilton	Male and female burials (? 1 coffin). Found with tiles and pottery	In situ?	<i>VCH Hunts</i> , 1, 265
Stuntney	Male burial. No grave-goods	Ely Museum	—
Upton	Child, 9 years old, contained within a lead lining decorated with scallop shells and twisted cord. Associated pot, late third to fourth century	Peterborough Museum	<i>Northants Archaeology</i> , forthcoming
Water Newton	Two coffins, found when A1 was dualled. One coffin (possibly originally from Chesterton)	Norris Museum. Near Helpston Cross Churchyard	—

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