Channel Tunnel Rail Link

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Human remains from Thurnham Roman Villa, Kent

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TABLES

1 INTRODUCTION

Human bone – cremated and unburnt - from three contexts was received for analysis. The two inhumations, (20431 and 10633) dated to the early 2nd century AD and the late 3rd century AD respectively. Cremated bone was recovered from an undated context (10097). The deposit appears to represent an unurned burial with redeposited pyre debris.

2 METHODS

The general methodology followed that set-out in 'Specialist Study Package 6' of the *CTRL Section 1 Project Design* (RLE 2003). Where possible age was assessed using long bone length (Scheuer *et al.* 1980) and deciduous tooth formation (Moorees *et al.* 1963). Sex was ascertained from the sexually diagnostic features of the skeleton (Standards Workshop 1980; Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994).

The cremated bone was analysed according with the standard procedures used for the examination of cremated bone set out in McKinley 1994a, 5-6.

3 RESULTS

A summary of the results are presented in Table 1, details are held in the archive.

Table 1: Summary of results from analysis of human bone

context	cut	quantification	Deposit type	age/sex
unburnt bone				
10633	10626	30%	Inhumation	infant, 4-8 months, unsexed
20431	-	20%	Inhumation	neonate, 38-39 weeks, unsexed
cremated bone				
10097	10096	389g	Unurned burial	adult > 18yr. female?

3.1 Disturbance and condition

The cremation-related feature 10097 represented the remains of an *in situ* deposit. The cut (10096) was 0.23 m deep and bone was visible at surface level. All fragments were chalky in appearance (eroded), with little trabecular bone surviving especially in the 5 mm and 2 mm fraction sizes. Both are largely reflective of the acidic burial environment.

Skeleton (20431) was in a good condition but largely incomplete. Skeleton (10633) was in a poor condition and consisted of mainly long bone shafts.

3.2 Demographic data

A minimum number of three individuals – one adult female by the cremation burial, one infant and one neonate by the unburnt articulated remains.

3.3 Pyre technology and cremation ritual

The cremated bone was generally white in colour indicative of full oxidation (Holden *et al* 1995a and b; McKinley 2000, 40); a few fragments of tibiae and cranium are white with a black core and one black canine root. The relatively low weight of bone may partly be due to loss from the burial as a result of the potential loss of trabecular bone in the acid soil condition. The highest proportion of bone (49%) was recovered from the 5mm sieve fraction and the maximum surviving bone fragment was relatively small at *c*. 36mm. A number of factors may affect the level of fragmentation to cremation bone (McKinley 1994b), in this instance the soil acidity is likely to have been major factors resulting in small fragment size. Elements from all skeletal areas were represented in the deposit; the relatively high proportion of cranial fragments is due to the ease of identification. There was no apparent preference in skeletal elements included in the deposit.

Pyre debris – comprising fine fraction fuel ash and burnt flint – was recovered from the grave fill, but the bone was present throughout the feature. The deposit probably represents the remains of an unurned burial with pyre debris mixed in it rather than all the deposit representing redeposited pyre debris.

3.4 Discussion

The neonate was situated within ditch fill 20431 and dated to the early 2nd century AD. This burial was beneath the corner of the main wall for the main room of the roman villa, and may therefore be a foundation. The infant may not necessarily have been sacrificed, a natural death may have resulted in the use of a potential life force to ensure the longevity of the building burial (Philpott 1991; 100-101).

The infant (10633) dates to the late 3rd century AD and was buried in a stone cist (10628) with two ceramic vessels (10629 and 10631). The burial was located a few meters north-west of the villa. Grave goods with infants is relatively scarce but when it occurs, pottery is a common item (Philpott 1991; 99). Other examples includes an infant cist burial at Chedworth villa (Philpott 1991; 64).

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