

I.

NOTES ON A ROMANO-BRITISH CEMETERY IN HERTFORDSHIRE.

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Hertfordshire, one of the Home Counties of England, has proved itself possessed of a great many records of occupation during the Roman period in Britain, and an inventory of the discoveries I have recently compiled shows no less than one hundred places in the county from which remains have been obtained. It has to be observed that the greater number of "finds" have occurred in the north and north-east of the county, and many more or less follow the line of the Icknield Way.

This county, Charles Lamb's "Hearty, homely, loving Hertfordshire," has within its borders at least six ancient roads, namely, the Akeman Street, the Ermine Street, the Icknield Way, the Stane Street, the Watling Street, and a sixth roadway to which no definite name has been allocated. It also has, as you will know, the remains of Verulamium, where excavations have recently attracted so much attention.

The Romano-British cemetery with which this paper is concerned is situate at Baldock, in northern Hertfordshire, between Letchworth and Royston, in the north-western corner of a triangle formed by the crossing of the Icknield Way by the Stane Street, the site, known as Walls Field, being farm land, now the property of the Hertfordshire County Council under their Small Holdings Scheme.

The area of the field wherein the cemetery is situate is about 40 acres, and the whole of it, more or less, and indeed the areas adjoining, have revealed evidence of Roman times. Is it too much to suggest that a lost Romano-British town is in the vicinity?

Systematic excavations upon Romano-British cemetery sites have been few in number, and if one mentions the cemeteries at Colchester, Essex, and Ospringe, near Faversham, Kent, there really only remains the third one at Baldock to which any serious attention has been directed. Haphazard and unsystematic excavation has, as is well known, resulted in a great many disassociated objects being discovered up and down the country. Many of these have been lost, stolen, or strayed, and authentic records concerning them are difficult to obtain, so that one has to rely for authentic information upon the few sites that have, so far, been diligently and scientifically explored.

The archæologist has, as you know, to depend in many instances upon *chance* finds to direct his attention to an otherwise uncharted site, and whilst aerial photography, contour, intuition, experience, and other means have resulted in remarkable discoveries being made, in the case to which consideration is now being given, "chance" at first played an important part. Lack of funds has also, of course, prevented even well-known sites from being explored, and the time seems ripe—at least in England—when there should be some sympathetic and nationally constituted body to whom applications for grants to enable the necessary labour to be employed could be made with a fair chance of success.

In the case under review, the lack of financial aid has been encountered, in spite of the remarkable results that have been obtained, but it has meant a labour of love, coupled with very hard work, especially when, as I now make known, the whole cost of seven seasons' work has not exceeded forty pounds, and this amount was subscribed by private individuals and the Regional Society I represent.

Intensive cultivation by the tenant smallholder, Mr William Hart, resulted, in the spring of 1925, in the unexpected discovery of a cinerary urn and four associated objects—a jug, two beakers, and a large bowl—constituting a burial group of the early second century A.D. These objects were turned out by the plough only nine inches beneath the surface, and although Walls Field had been previously farmed by one person for a great number of years, only odd coins had been discovered, and the new spirit of field archæology had not then arrived. Fortunately, within hail of Baldock there is a Regional Museum of which I have been Curator since its inception in 1914, and when I was consulted as to the objects turned out by the plough in 1925, arrangements were at once made for excavation work to take place under my supervision, as and when the site was available. Seven seasons' work has, as is indicated, taken place, and the results have far exceeded the most sanguine expectations, for three hundred and twenty burial

groups have already been discovered, together with objects representing at least one hundred other groups, which, owing to inhumation being resorted to at a later period, smashed beyond recall these other unassociated objects.

The whole of the objects discovered have been deposited through the public-spiritedness of the Hertfordshire County Council in Letchworth Museum, and, under the reorganisation scheme now being carried out at this Museum under a grant for this purpose made by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, the more presentable burial groups and miscellaneous objects are now systematically arranged for the benefit of students of Roman Archæology, school classes, and the general public.

This cemetery site is situate at the foot of the south-eastern range of the Chiltern Hills. The ground constituting Walls Field slopes very gradually to the west from the remains of a Saxon baulk, now used as a pathway, but to the east of this there is an acute rise in the ground, which, within a very short distance, obscures the view beyond.

There was no indication above ground of the priceless treasures hidden beneath, and the burial groups were located by exploration in small pit graves holed out of the chalk, some being only 1 foot below the surface, whilst others were found at a depth of 3 feet 6 inches. The average depth at which the groups were discovered was 2 feet 6 inches, and where they had remained undisturbed throughout the centuries they were, except in a few instances, about 3 feet apart.

Here I may interpolate that trial trenches made elsewhere on Walls Field have revealed a Roman well, crude flint foundations of a building, and an extensive rubbish pit.

It is not necessary on the present occasion to mention in greater detail the actual plan of campaign, as it is rather the intention of this paper to place before you a conspectus of the results obtained, with supplementary notes of a general character. I should, however, like to add that a straightforward plan of work was not possible following each season, owing to growing crops, and the site yielding grave-goods had gradually to be pieced together as opportunity occurred. The area so far explored is 965 square yards, and whilst at present it seems, as a result of a fortnight's investigation in August 1931, that the cemetery site has petered out, it may be that its location has been temporarily lost owing to what may prove to be a roadway intervening.

Several of the burial groups discovered were placed very close together. Except in one or two instances, no attempt had been made to cover the objects except with earth, and all the vessels, with two

exceptions, were full of earth, flints, and chalk. The cremated remains occupied about one-half to one-third of the vessel in which they were contained, but in some instances the urn was almost full of remains which suggested a very poor cremation. No traces of teeth or skulls were found with any of the cremations.

As evidence of the richness of the cemetery, two hundred and twenty-six cinerary urns, jugs, beakers, bottles, lamps, and other objects representing eighty-six groups were excavated in less than a month, in March and April 1928. The perfectness of these objects is worthy of note, hardly any of these requiring restoration.

In some cases solitary urns were discovered without any associated objects. There were no Samian ware vessels with any of the two-piece groups, as these latter only appear with the three or more piece groups, and whilst coarse ware cooking or store pots were, in the majority of cases, used to contain the cremated remains, in one instance (Group 89) there was a Samian ware bowl, Drag. 37, with SACRILLUS and DÆCCUS both inscribed upon it. This was apparently a woman's burial, as forty-four beads of pinkish glass, gilded, forming part of a necklace, were contained in the bowl. In other instances (such as Groups 32, 38, and 60, eight-piece and eleven-piece respectively) the cremated remains were in the pit grave with the associated objects, but were unenclosed.

The largest burial group (No. 10) consists of thirteen objects, and this is, I believe, with one or two exceptions, the largest grave group so far recorded from Britain.

I now propose to describe a few of the more interesting groups which have been unearthed.

GROUP 3.—*Five associated objects. Early second century A.D.*

This was the group disinterred by the plough as already recorded. It consists of a cinerary urn, a jug, two perfect beakers and a coarse, buff ware bowl (fig. 1). The latter has a diameter of 12 inches and a depth of $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches. I have failed to trace any evidence of a vessel similar to this having been discovered elsewhere.

GROUP 9.—*Eight associated objects. End of first century A.D.*

This group, except for a cinerary urn, is quite perfect, and none of the objects have been restored. There are a pair of urn-shaped vases of smooth greyish-brown ware, a Samian cup and dish (Drag. 27 and Drag. 18 respectively), and a tall white ware flask. Its height is 9 inches.

GROUP 296.—*Six associated objects.*

This group, it is suggested, represents the burial of twins, as a small coarse ware urn containing cremated remains was accompanied by two small model amphoræ, two small grey ware dishes, and a joint beaker or drinking vessel. This has proved to be one of the most attractive grave-groups in the collection.

GROUP 51.—*Four associated objects.* 117-161 A.D.

This group was fortunately undisturbed, but the previous ten groups



Fig. 1. Pottery Vessels from a grave at Baldock (Group 3).

were mostly badly broken *in situ*, and several were jumbled close together. Group 51, however, is more or less perfect (fig. 2). This is a very interesting burial as the larger urn was purposely broken so that the smaller grey ware urn could be placed inside the larger one, and in this position it was found. Both vessels contained cremated remains. The pink ware jug, it is suggested, was a baby's feeding jug. This strengthens the opinion that here was the burial of a mother and child.

GROUP 65.—*Seven associated objects.* Circa 160-190 A.D.

In addition to this group having two glass decanters, in the smaller of which staining by liquid is discernible, there is a perfect black-coated thumb pot, and white ware beaker, a bone hollow object of unknown use, and bronze casket fittings. As there was no urn, and

the cremated remains were found close to the casket, it is suggested that the remains were placed *within* the casket. The way in which the highly polished indented beaker has weathered the centuries is worthy of note.

GROUP 69.—*Seven associated objects.* 180-200 A.D.

The feature of this group is two jugs and a hare and hound Castor ware vase, the hare and hound being in dotted panels with floral scroll.



Fig. 2. Pottery Vessels from a grave at Baldock (Group 51).

GROUP 102.—*Seven associated objects.* Circa 150 A.D.

The distinguishing characteristic of this group is the three glass decanters (fig. 3). The tallest is 12 inches in height, and has a moulded circle on the base containing the large letters M.A.P.; another decanter has two handles. The cinerary urn is the smallest one so far discovered, and is quite perfect. It is only 7½ inches in height, and of light buff ware.

GROUP 108.—*Four associated objects.* Early second century A.D.

It is not necessary to dilate on this group except to draw attention to the Rhenish ware vase, or dice cup, which is contemporary with one discovered at the Ospringe cemetery, though in the latter

case two ivory dice and twenty-four counters were found. The vessel is decorated with ears and blades of corn between a dotted panel.

GROUP 273.—*Three associated objects.*

This group consists of a cinerary urn, together with a small Samian cup, which formed a lid for an ovoid black-coated vase. With one exception, this vase was the only vessel devoid of earth and stones, the other one being a very large cinerary urn containing cremated remains, a Samian dish—potter's name Reginus—serving as a lid. Incidentally, this large globular urn took me two hours to disinter in pouring rain.



Fig. 3. Vessels of Glass and Pottery from a grave at Baldock (Group 102).

GROUP 309.—*Four associated objects.*

This group will in future be known as the Baldock Curse Group, as it contains a leaden tablet with a curse inscribed on it. The tablet is of irregular shape, and measures about 4 inches in length and depth. This is the fifth curse found in Britain, and Mr R. G. Collingwood's conjectural translation of the four lines of inscription—written from right to left—is as follows:—

VIIITIS
 QVOMODO . . . I. IIS
 SIGNIFICATVR
 TACITV DIIFICTA

Mr Collingwood suggests that the general sense is perhaps to the effect that "TACITA, OR BY WHATEVER OTHER NAME SHE IS CALLED, IS HEREBY CURSED." The form of the urn with this

Curse Group was seen practically complete *in situ*, but on being carefully lifted piece by piece, it was found to consist of ninety pieces, and has been very cleverly restored at the British Museum.

Amongst the other relics found, mention may be made of a bronze enamelled toilet set consisting of an ear-pick and a nail-cleaner, the tweezers which doubtless accompanied these being amissing; a very delicate Rhenish ware vase decorated with drooping ears and leaves of corn (fig. 4); and a hare and hound cup with a handle.

It is important to note that in every group which has come under my notice a piece was purposely broken from at least one of the objects, so that, as I understand, the ghost or spirit of the object could be released with the spirit of the departed.



Fig. 4. Vase of Rhenish ware from Baldock.

Very few coins were found with the burials. In one case, with an inhumation, there was a coin of Domitian, A.D. 81-96, in the mouth of the skeleton, but we have a collection of coins from the site picked up at odd times which ranges almost throughout the whole of the Roman occupation of Britain.

At least sixty potters' names have been interpreted from the Samian ware represented in the burials, and for working out these I have to acknowledge indebtedness to Mr G. C. F. Hayter, but it does not come within my province to deal with them on this occasion.

The value to archæological science of this discovery will, I believe, meet with your blessing. It is an earnest of what can be done with limited funds, provided that there is a combination of interest, enthusiasm, and hard work, and to a Hertfordshire man such as myself, who, nevertheless, claims that his forebears fought and died for Charles Stuart, you may well imagine the privilege it has been to take an important part in this interesting discovery. The romance and interpretation of it all will be patent to you. Often, when digging, I have conjured up a mind-picture of what these people, whose remains have been handled after being hidden for so many centuries, were like. Fortunately, not far away in a Romano-British cemetery at Welwyn, Herts, there was discovered a pipe-clay statuette buried with a Roman lady, obviously of high rank. This is also in Letchworth Museum, and forms part of a most interesting burial group.

As a matter of interest I conclude my paper by referring to the very beautiful Belgic cordoned urn discovered at Letchworth—within half

a mile of our Museum—in September 1912, which was described in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 2nd series, vol. xxvi. This late Celtic urn contained cremated remains, and a bronze connecting-link of a belt. The latter has an irregular trigram in the open-work centre, with two dots on the front, and is plain at the back, similar, I believe, to one which, appropriately enough, you have in this museum from Dowalton Loch Crannog, Wigtownshire.

The association of the bronze object and the cinerary urn is important from the chronological point of view, and my apology—if such is needed—for including this in my paper must be that I could not resist the opportunity of referring to what we in Letchworth Museum consider to be the *pièce de résistance* of our collection of regional antiquities.