



Fig. 1. Excavation of the coffin in progress.

(Photo: Stephen Curtis, L.B. of Tower Hamlets)

# A Roman Burial Group from Bow

IRENE SCHWAB

with a report on the skeletal remains by

W. J. OWEN

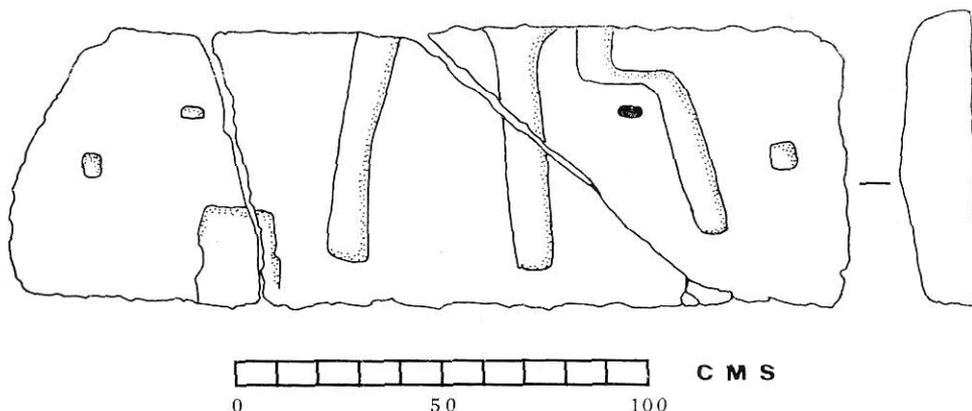
IN MAY 1972 at McInerney's Beale Road development site in Bow, the lid of a stone coffin was struck by a mechanical excavator.<sup>1</sup> During the next three days an emergency excavation was carried out to investigate the coffin and its immediate environment. A total of three burials was found but there

1. For area plan (Burial No. 11) see H. Sheldon and W. J. Owen "A Roman Burial from Armagh Road, Old Ford," *London Archaeol.* 1 No. 15 (1972) 348-9.

was no trace of any other Roman features.

The stone coffin (TQ 367.72 835.81), orientated at 5° E of N, was 2.07m. long by 0.71m. wide. Its external depth varied between 0.39 and 0.45m. and the internal depth between 0.32 and 0.34m. The base was therefore roughly the same thickness as the sides which were 0.10m. thick at the short ends and 0.11m. thick on the long sides. The sarcophagus

Fig. 2.  
Plan of  
coffin lid  
—lead fragment  
in black.



was carved from a single block of oolitic limestone and the mason's chisel marks could be clearly discerned, especially on the internal surfaces.

Six small rectangular niches (average 6 x 4 cms, 2 cms. deep) two on each of the long sides and one at each end, were presumably connected with the use of hooks and ropes to lower the coffin into its grave pit. As the grave pit was only three or four cms. wider than the coffin itself, this lowering mechanism would have had to be especially efficient.

The lid of the coffin was 1.95m. long by 0.72m. wide and 0.12m. thick at the sides rising to 0.15 cms in the middle because of a ridge running lengthwise along the centre. It had been broken in two places, once apparently in antiquity. A square niche at the centre of each short end corresponded with those in the coffin itself (fig. 2).

Also noted on the lid of the coffin were three shallow scorings 8 c.m. wide which converged slightly on one side. It is thought that these were for the attachment of ropes, either to lower the coffin into the ground, or to hold the coffin onto a cart for its journey from the place of death to the burial ground. A fragment of lead attached to the lid may indicate that it originally had a lead covering or decoration.

On removal of the lid a skeleton was found lying in an extended position on its back with the head to the south. The skeleton, judged to be a male of advanced years, was partly covered by a deposit of calcium carbonate<sup>2</sup> in a semi-liquid state. According to the wave like stains on the inside wall of the coffin, the calcium carbonate had been in this state for some if not all of the time in which the body had

been interred and therefore no trace of clothing or hair could be seen moulded within it.<sup>3</sup> At some stage the liquid level inside the coffin had been even higher according to the coffin stains. Removal of the banked-up gypsum towards the north revealed a second skeleton, partly disarticulated and judged to be of a middle-aged woman. It is assumed that she was the original occupant of the coffin, and on the death of the second person, possibly her husband, her semi-decayed body was bundled to one end to make room for his. Therefore whilst the skull, arms and thoracic regions had still retained some flesh the lower regions of the body had been piled up indiscriminately.

There were no grave goods within the coffin, but in the south end of the grave pit a shallow dish was found of wheel-thrown, dark-faced grey ware (fig. 3).

A black burnished sherd (Farrar — Black Burnished Ware category 1), probably from the shoulder of a cooking jar, with an obtuse lattice work decoration, was discovered later underneath the coffin. According to R. A. H. Farrar these wares were probably produced in Dorset between 250 and 400 A.D.

South of the coffin was a small round stakehole, 5 cms in diameter, which may have originally marked the grave.

On the east side of the sarcophagus a third skeleton was found on the same alignment, but slightly further north. As a result the lower half of its body had been destroyed by the mechanical excavator and only that portion actually alongside the stone coffin remained intact. It also appeared to be lying in an extended position on its back; the position of large iron nails around the body sug-

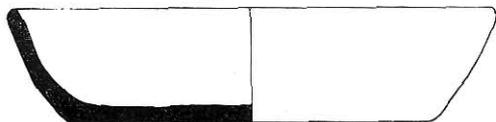


Fig. 3. Shallow dish (½).

2. According to S. A. MacKenna this is an example of extremely fine-grained calcium carbonate almost certainly derived from a marine limestone.
3. L. P. Weam, *The Romano-British Cemetery, Trentholme Drive, York* (1968).

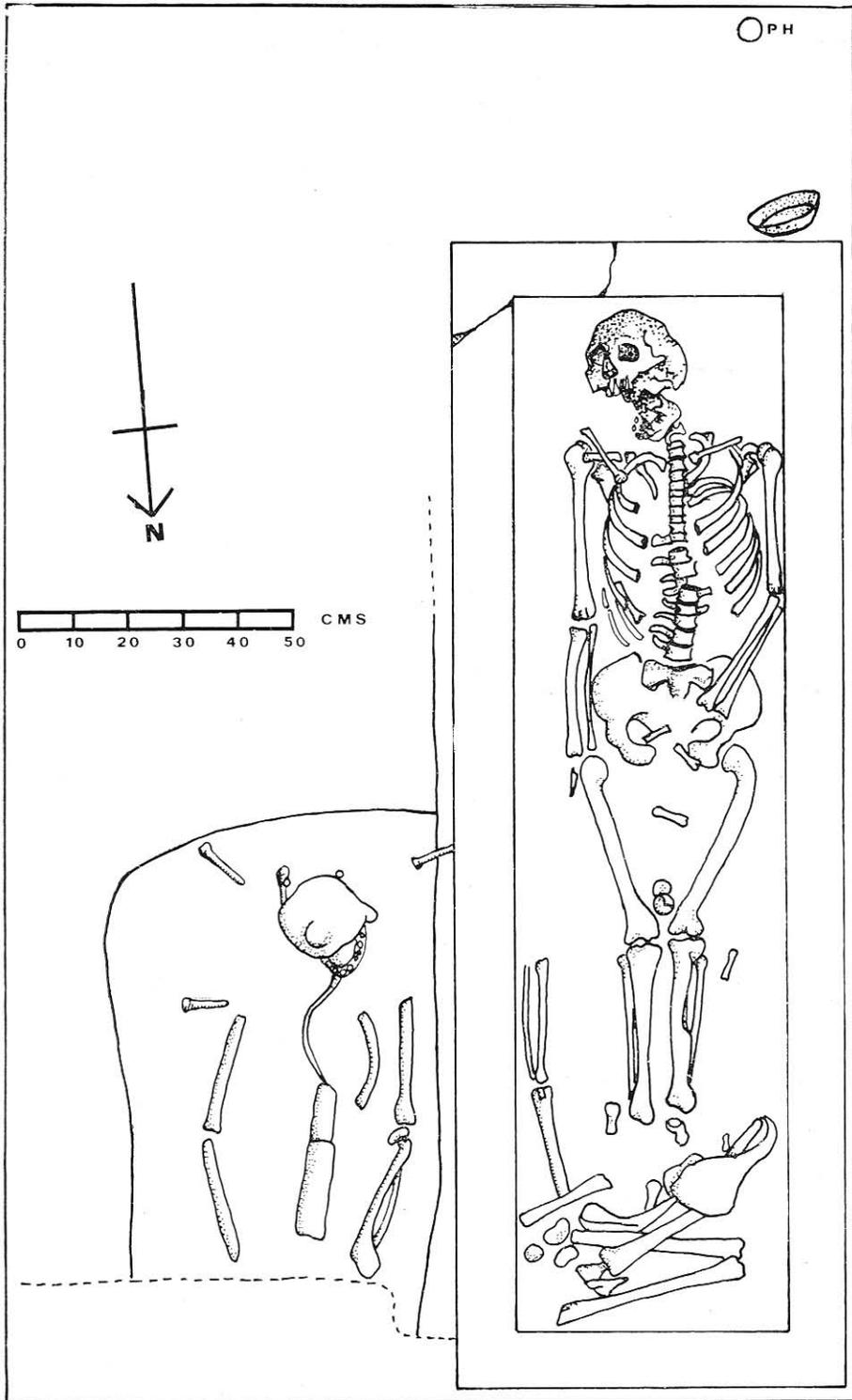


Fig. 4. Plan of burials.

gested that it had been buried in a wooden coffin, now completely decayed. In contrast to the skeletons in the stone coffin, this skeleton was in a very fragile condition because of the acidity of the surrounding soil. It seems likely that this was a family group buried within the general cemetery area of Old Ford.

The sarcophagus is now being stored by the Borough of Tower Hamlets and when study of the coffin and its contents is completed, they will be put on permanent exhibition within the Borough.

#### An Anatomical and Pathological Report

Two complete human skeletons were found in one stone coffin and were in relatively good condition. The upper of the two skeletons was apparently undisturbed from the time of its burial, whereas the lower one had been pushed down to the lower end of the coffin many years after its burial, as judged by the disarrangement of the bones. We will therefore refer to these skeletons in their chronological order: the lower earlier burial (skeleton 1) and the later upper burial (skeleton 2).

**Skeleton 1** was that of a woman, probably aged about 30 to 35 years and whose height is estimated to have been about 156cm. (5ft. 1½ins.).

Sexing of a skeleton can most reliably be determined by means of the pelvis. In this case the pelvis was typically female, with a large circumference (as an adaptation for childbirth) and relatively small acetabular (hip socket) diameter. Other features such as relatively smaller bony ridges on the skull (mastoid process at the base of the skull and supraciliary ridges on the forehead) all corroborate this.

Accurate determination of age is adult life on skeletal remains is sometimes extremely difficult as various bones give conflicting results. The skeleton was patently one of a person over the age of 25 years because of the disappearance of all cartilaginous growth plates and also the fusion of the basisphenoid suture at the base of the skull. Todd's<sup>4</sup> method of ageing skeletons depends on the degree of irregularity at this junction of the two pelvic bones and would put the age at about 30 years. There were signs of osteoarthritis (wear and tear changes) at the lower end of the lumbar spine. There was a moderate degree of dental wear on the occlusal surfaces of the teeth, even by Romano-British standards, when dental wear was more marked than it is today. There were two dental cavities. All these features, taken together with the pelvic bones would put the age at death at about 35 years.

The stature formulae of Krogman<sup>5</sup> were used to estimate height and are based on the long bone lengths. Three separate estimations based on femur,

4. T. W. Todd "Age changes in the pubic bone," *American Journal of Physical Anatomy* (1920) 3 (3) 285-334.

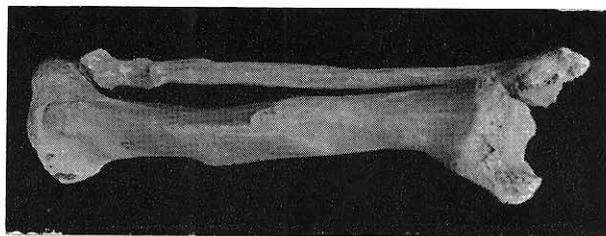


Fig. 5. Bones of left leg (Tibia and Fibula) showing the healed oblique fractures of both bones. This almost certainly resulted from an indirect force acting through the foot.

(Photo: John Earp)

radius and humerus lengths respectively have fairly consistent results averaging at 5ft. 1½ins.

The other features of note, apart from the dental pathology mentioned above, were the very prominent deltoid markings on the humeri (upper forearm) bone), the right being even more marked than the left. As the deltoid muscle is concerned with lifting of the arm, one may conclude that this woman had done a great deal of heavy lifting and was probably right handed.

The skull apart from being typically female had no special characteristics.

The arrangement of the bones comprising skeleton 1 suggested that it had been moved within a decade or so of death. The skeleton had been pushed down to the northern end of the coffin and was lying with its long axis at right angles to that of the coffin. The skull, upper part of the spine, ribs and bones of the arms were in the correct anatomical alignment; this was also true of the bones of the lower half of the body, but the two halves had however been disarticulated from each other. The conclusion that one draws is that the 2nd burial took place after an interval of time which was sufficient for the soft tissue linking the ribs and pelvis to have disappeared, and making separation of the two halves of the body easier; the relatively stronger ligaments of the limbs remained however and retained correct alignment of the bones of each half of the body.

**Skeleton 2** was that of a man, probably between 50 and 60 years, and whose height is estimated to have been about 165cm. (5ft. 5ins.).

The pelvis was characteristically male as were the prominent supraciliary ridges and mastoid processes on the skull.

The age, which is very old by Romano-British standards is based on:

- (a) calcification of thyroid cartilage of the larynx. This is seen radiologically in normal people only
5. W. M. Krogman *Human Skeleton in Forensic Medicine* (1962) Thomas Springfield, Illinois.

- over the age of 50 years and represents an ageing process in the cartilaginous matrix;
- (b) the presence of marked wear and tear osteoarthritis in the thoracic spine (T10 and T11) with fusion of two vertebrae by bony outgrowths;
  - (c) disappearance of most of the saggital suture of the skull. Although noted by Krogman to be a variable feature, it puts the age at over 50 years.

A well healed spiral fracture of the left tibia and fibula was found (fig. 5) which is the type of injury that probably resulted from a twisting force applied to the left foot rather than and direct violence to the shin. The position of bones (alignment of the two broken parts of the bones) was very good and resulted probably from a splint being used to stabilise the bone fragments after the injury — it was not possible to say at what age the fracture was incurred. The bones of the lower part of the left leg were shortened by 2cm. as a result of this fracture and might well have caused him to limp.

There was a very considerable amount of dental caries on the non occlusal surface of the teeth and at least five cavities were seen. A periapical abscess had formed in this region of the right lower premolar and had ruptured outwards through the mandible (fig. 6) and probably through the skin covering the lower jaw as a persistent discharging sinus; this would certainly have been a painful and miserable affliction. The wear on the occlusal surface of the teeth was very marked even for Romano-British. This probably denotes:

- (a) a tough fibrous diet;
- (b) an age of over 50 years.

Lateral profile of the skull presented a fairly low forehead and also an occipital bun which was noted by Warwick<sup>6</sup> as being a feature of many of the Romano-British skeletons found at the Trentholme cemetery, York. As in skeleton 1 the deltoid markings on the upper forearm bones (humeri) were exceptionally pronounced particularly on the right

6. R. Warwick *The Romano-British Cemetery, Trentholme Drive, York* (1968).

## Local Societies

Some further amendments to the list published in Vol. 1 No. 15 are noted below:

**City of London Arch. Soc.;** Sec. Miss R. Nash, 1 Phoenix Road, S.E.20.

**London Nat. Hist. Soc., Archaeology Section;** Sec. W. H. Prentis, 8 Glebe Avenue, Mitcham, Surrey. CR4 3DY.

**Nonsuch Antiquarian Soc.;** Sec. G. T. Wignall, 199 Barnett Wood Lane, Ashtead, Surrey.

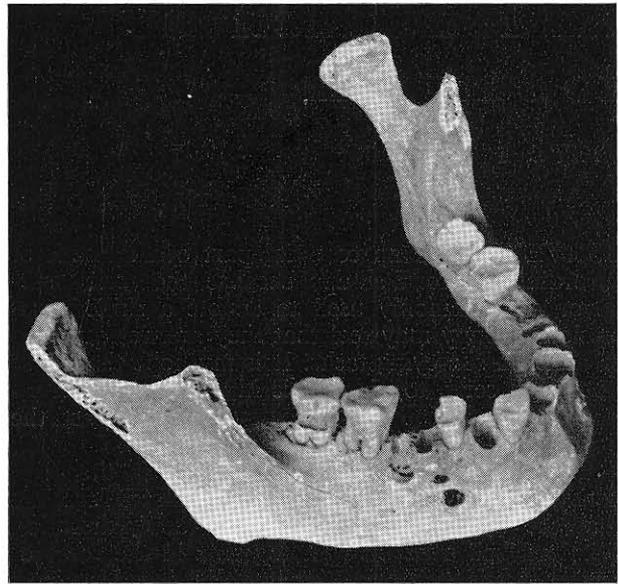


Fig. 6. Lower jaw belonging to skeleton 2 showing evidence of a dental abscess which had burst through. (Photo: John Earp)

side and again denote much heavy lifting during life and that this man was right handed.

The main points of interest therefore that stem from the study of these bones are:

(i) the extensive dental decay found. Romano-British teeth in general tended to be very healthy and free of caries; this has been related to the tough fibrous diet and also the lack of refined sugars;

(ii) it is tempting again to speculate that, if the burial of the male took place about 10 years after that of the female in the same coffin, then they were husband and wife;

(iii) the only marker of racial affinity in this find is the occipital bun which was seen on skeleton 2.

### Acknowledgements

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