Excavations under Southwark Cathedral

Photography by the Museum of London

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Introduction

THE OPENING in 1977 of a long-sealed crypt below the choir of Southwark Cathedral, for use as storage, revealed it to have been filled with 19th century coffins requiring proper burial. In anticipation of the archaeological destruction that this reburial might have involved, the Cathedral authorities invited the Southwark & Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee to carry out a rescue excavation.

The Cathedral stands within the northern part of the Roman and Medieval settlement (Fig. 1), astride the projected line of the Roman road from London Bridge to Lambeth. Previous excavations, and pre-20th century records of substantial Roman remains both in the vicinity and below the Cathedral itself, showed the site to be within an area occupied soon after the Roman conquest and within that smaller part of the settlement which revived after the decline of the later 2nd-earlier 3rd centuries[1]. Earlier excavations include those by S.L.A.E.C. at Montague Close[2] (Fig. 1; a), the District Heating Scheme[3] (b), Topping's Wharf[4] (c), 1-7[5] and 11-17[6] St. Thomas' Street (d, e); by Dr. G. Dawson at Montague Close[7] (f) and Tooley Street[8] (g) in 1967-71; by the Guildhall Museum outside the Cathedral[9] in 1947 (h); and by Dr. F. Celoria at Winchester Palace[10] in 1963 (j).

The Cathedral covers a large area where little excavation could be envisaged in the foreseeable future and the opportunity to excavate was thus particularly welcome.

To dig—or not to dig?

At the outset an unexpected hazard arose. As mentioned, a large number of burials, in lead coffins, had been laid on the crypt floor during the years prior to its being sealed in the 1840's. The lead had corroded heavily, lead oxide being present in quantity in the soil filling the crypt and therefore in any dust raised. The potential hazard to health, both from handling soil and breathing dust, could not be ignored. Soil tests[11] showed levels of lead enough to warrant protective clothing and masks until the upper soil levels were removed. Rising humidity added to the discomforts of this uniform.

The presence of such comparatively recent burials, including those of children, also raised the question of survival in the soil of viruses which may have killed them, such as Typhoid fever, cholera, smallpox, diphtheria and poliomyelitis. Medical sources consulted were divided in their opinions; one quoted the survival of anthrax at up to 60 years; another that of smallpox as at least a few days. None had any information on survival over 140 years, and, relying on vaccinations received at one time or

11. I am grateful to Mrs June Almeida of the Wellcome Foundation for arranging these tests.

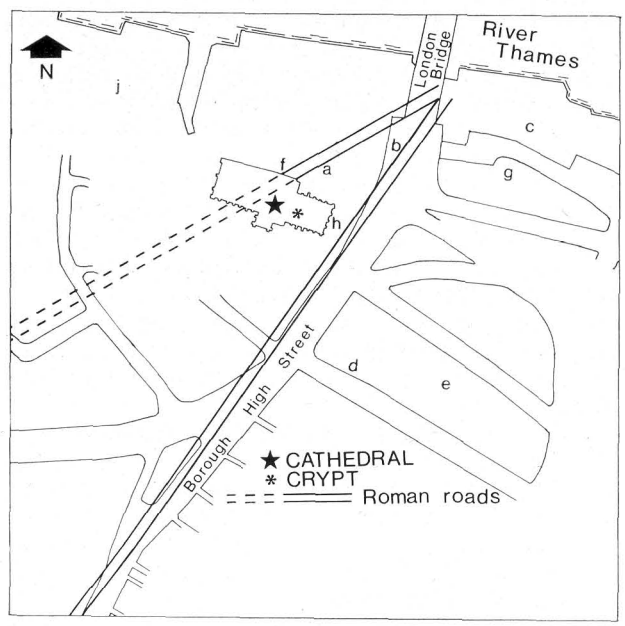

Fig. 1: location plan of Southwark Cathedral and previous finds from area.

1. *London Archaeol.*, **2,** No 11, 278ff.
2. Report forthcoming, joint publication No. 1, London & Middx. Archaeol. Soc. and Surrey Archaeol. Soc., 1978.
3. Report forthcoming.
4. *Trans. London & Middx. Archaeol. Soc,* **25** (1974), 1-116.
5. *op. cit.*, note 2.
6. Report forthcoming.
7. S.A.E.C. *Interim,* 1969.
8. *London Archaeol.*, **1,** No. 5, 114.
9. *Trans. London & Middx. Archaeol. Soc.*, **20** (1961), 168.
10. S.A.E.C. *Interim,* 1963.

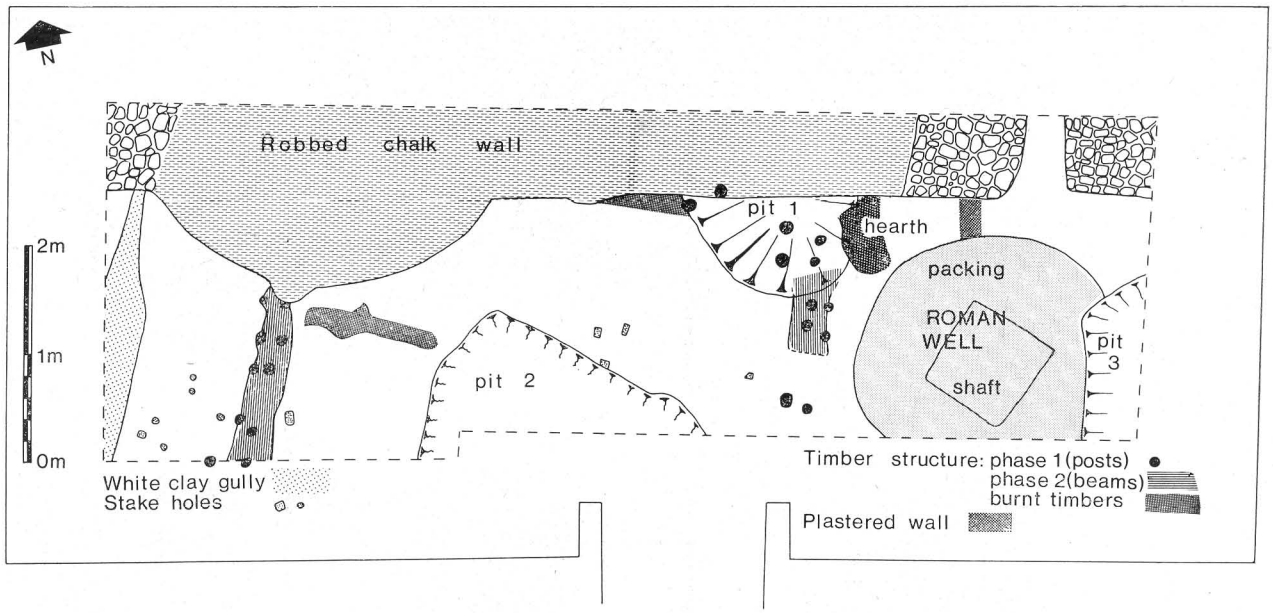

Fig. 2: the Crypt: plan of features.

another, we decided to proceed with the excavation. Survival rate, happily, proved to be 100 per cent.

This digression has been mentioned in detail as it presented a problem of unknown potential. Medical opinion differed widely, and for those who asserted flatly that no virus could survive so long, others thought it rash that the excavation should proceed at all.

The Excavation

The Crypt was constructed in 1703, below the western end of the Choir. No archaeological finds were recorded at the time, although the chalk wall (see below) must have been encountered. It measures 11.6 x 5.1 metres (plan, Fig. 2; the interior face of the crypt walls forms the border of the figure), but a reserve of 1 metre was kept for structural safety. The construction had caused extensive archaeological damage, and, apart from later intrusive features, only about 0.4-0.5 metres of occupation levels survived.

The natural subsoil is loose sandy gravel, at least 2.50 metres thick, its surface at *c.* +1.20m O.D. The site seems, at the time of the Roman conquest, to have been on the northernmost of a series of clay-capped sand and gravel islands surrounded by marshes, across which the Roman road to London Bridge was built, probably in the 50's of the 1st century[12].

The surviving occupation levels seem to date to the second half of the 1st century; the sequence of structures described below was unclear, owing to extensive disturbance, and must be regarded as provisional.

Over the natural gravels was an earthy deposit about 15cm thick, containing pottery and tile, probably a gradual accumulation rather than a deliberate dump. Most of the finds came from its surface. Over the western two-thirds of the Crypt this was sealed by a layer of gravel, possibly a renewal or extension of a yard, above which was another earthy layer. The whole was covered by a deposit of sand mixed with clay.

1st Century Structures (Fig. 2)

Part of the north, east and west walls of a timber structure were delineated by a double row of postholes, which were hollow from the decay of the stumps left *in situ*. It is likely that a relatively short period elapsed before the posts were cut off at ground level and a new building erected, on the same line of construction but resting on a foundation of timber beams. It may have had a baked clay floor, but this is not clear. This structure may have partially burnt down; its northern foundation-beam, and a possible partition wall foundation in its western half, were burnt, whilst the other timbers were rotted *in situ*. An early 2nd century pit at the junction of the north and east walls (Fig. 2, pit 1) destroyed any relationship between the burnt and unburnt walls.

East of this two-phase building, extensive later disturbance rendered the sequence of occupation

12. *op. cit.*, note 2.

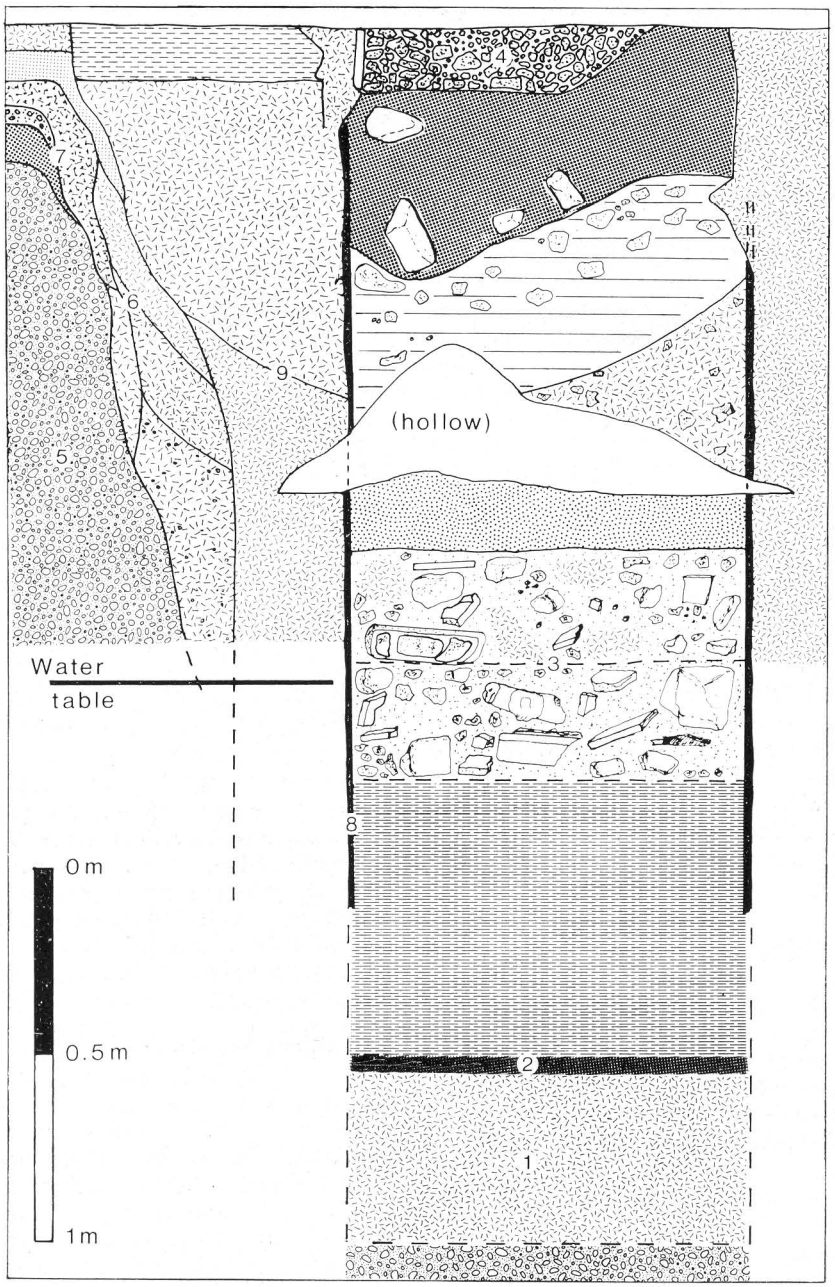

Fig. 3: section through Roman well.

obscure. There was only one, gravelly, deposit corresponding to the pre-building levels mentioned; over this was a clay floor the surface of which was covered with a thin deposit of charcoal flecks; on it lay a charred plank, which seems to have supported a plastered clay wall, but it is not at present possible to relate this to any other structure.

Between this and the east wall of the timber structure, a small hearth seems to have been inserted. It was filled with baked clay lumps and charcoal; its purpose is uncertain, although a small quantity of slag-like material was present.

All of the foregoing features were covered by a dump of clay, the uppermost surviving layer on the site. This may derive from the walls of a demolished structure, possibly the timber building itself, of a type known from elsewhere in Southwark[13].

13. *e.g.* at Topping's Wharf, *op. cit.*, note 4.

Fig. 4: the Hunter-Deity.

At the western edge of the Crypt, an unsealed gully, 40cm wide and 25cm deep, cut the clays sealing the western wall of the timber structure. Its fill comprised lenses of orange sand and white clay; its nature and date are as yet quite unknown.

The Roman Well

(Plan, Fig. 2, and section, Fig. 3)

(a) Date and Construction

No sealing layers survived over the well; however, none of the finds, either from construction levels or fill, appear to be post-Roman.

A circular pit *c.* 2.50 metres in diameter was sunk into the natural gravels. These gravels (Fig. 3:5) are extremely loose, and collapsed continually during our excavation. This problem must have faced the original diggers, and it appears that during the sinking of the well a preliminary stabilising lining of clay was packed against its sides; however, even at this stage the layers above (Fig. 3:7), undermined by the collapsing gravels, seem to have fallen continually into the well.

Next, a wooden shaft (Fig. 3:8) 1 metre square was lowered into the centre of the well, and the space behind packed with clay (Fig. 3:9). This packing contained three mid-3rd century coins, the latest of Postumus (A.D. 259-268), suggesting a construction date by, or not long after, A.D. 270. It also contained some tile and ragstone, which might represent either a substantial building wholly or partially demolished by that time, or the residue from contemporary building works.

(b) Destruction

At a quite unknown date, but possibly during the 4th century, the well was deliberately filled. Whilst in use, virtually no domestic debris was thrown down it. The lowest layer, a clayey deposit (Fig. 3:1) contained the skeletons of an old dog and a young cat[14], no ritual significance can be attached to their presence, which is just as likely to have resulted from the age-old antagonism of the two species, ending this time in disaster for both.

Above this layer was a deposit of well broken-up charcoal, *c.* 10cm thick. The remainder of the well's

14. Identification by Mrs. A. Locker.

Fig. 5: the Genius

fill consisted of layers of dumped building debris in large quantity, including pilae, tile tesserae, ragstone blocks, mortar chunks, and a little painted wall plaster. Much of it was caked with soot. Virtually no other useful dating material seems to have been present. It is not known what building this debris derived from, although early records indicate that substantial Roman structures existed in the immediate vicinity.

(c) The Sculptures

A highly important group of Roman sculptures was recovered from the well. All, with the exception of the tombstone fragments (from the topmost surviving level, Fig. 3:4) were from the deposits astride the water table (Fig. 3:3) and must have been dumped there together with the other debris. I am indebted to Professor J. M. C. Toynbee and to Ralph Merrifield for the detailed reports from which the following notes are taken.

The Hunter-Deity (Fig. 4): The largest sculpture is of a stocky male figure, 73.5cm high, in oolitic limestone. He wears a short tunic and a Phrygian cap, holds a bow in his left hand and reaches with his right for an arrow from his quiver. He carries a military-looking short sword and is accompanied by two animals; on his left, a dog which gazes up at him, and on his right a cloven-hoofed animal, possibly a sheep or deer, whose head is missing. Anomalously, most of the major features of this figure point to Diana, and the relief of the altar from Goldsmith's Hall, London[15], identified as Diana, has most of these attributes. The Phrygian cap, however, reminiscent of Atys[16], hints at a confusion of imported iconographies to create a male hunter-deity, not apparently of British origin but nevertheless possibly owing something to Apollo-Maponus.

15. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London,* 1965, pl. 86. Is the "topknot" of hair on this figure really a Phyrgian cap?

16. cf. Merrifield, *op. cit.,* note 15, pl. 87. The figure is only tentatively described at Atys.

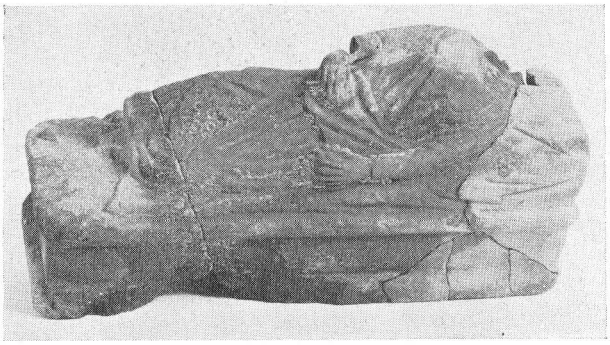

Fig. 6: the Funerary Ash-Chest.

Fig. 7: the Marble Figure

However, the stylistic tone is classical. No specically Celtic element appears, and although the hound's head is stylised, both animals are otherwise naturalistically carved; any inadequacies in the carving must derive from an unskilled imitation of Roman work. The date of the piece is very difficult and all that can at present be suggested as somewhere between, say, AD 150 and 250.

The Genius (Fig. 5): A sandstone figure, 27.5 cm high, of a Genius, a Graeco-Roman god personifying the spirit of a locality. The head, much of the arms and legs, and the altar over which it poured a libation, are missing. It is well-sculptured, and the treatment of drapery and cornucopia, its most striking features, suggest a date in the first half of the 3rd century, when Celtic styles once more began reasserting themselves over local carvers still influenced by Graeco-Roman treatment of sculptures.

The Funerary Ash-Chest (Fig. 6): This is unique in Britain, and extremely rare elsewhere in the Roman world, being more familiar in Etruscan funerary art. It is 38 cm long, and represents a draped woman reclining on a couch. She holds a fruit or cake in her left hand and a bunch of grapes

in her right. The figure is carved in the same stone as the genius. It can only be surmised that the sculptor had access to copybooks illustrating such a figure. The combination of the rite of cremation with a sarcophagus-like container suggests an early to mid-3rd century date, when inhumation was coming into fashion; the head is missing, robbing us of the dating evidence of the hair style.

The Marble Figure (Fig. 7): In contrast is the 15cm high fragment of a statuette in Greek marble, representing the left leg of a male person, probably Neptune or Oceanus, accompanied by a Dolphin. It may be a small-scale copy of a major classical work, and is almost certainly the earliest of the sculptures, being 1st or 2nd century A.D.

The Votive Altar (Fig. 8): This is 22cm high, in limestone, and bears the inscription (probably originally of three lines) (.....)/CASSIANUS/ POSVIT, "(? To the God .....) Cassianus set up (this altar)". It is badly damaged and may originally have been surmounted by a carved figure, of which a stump remains. The name of the God to whom it was dedicated is lost.

Fig. 8: the Votive Altar

Fig. 9: the Tombstone.

The Tombstone (Fig. 9): From a higher layer came three fragments of a tombstone, in a slate-like stone which has so far proved difficult to identify. In finely-carved letters 4.5cm high it records the name of the deceased, of which only)TIC(or)TIO(survives; his age, XXX ( )I M, possibly 41 years and an unknown number of months, and the name of the woman who dedicated the stone, MATRONA, a name paralleled throughout the Roman world, particularly in North Africa.

General Comments: The sculptures were associated with quantities of building debris, deposited maybe in the mid-4th century, though a later date cannot be ruled out. The hunter-god was broken in half, probably by a blow on its chest, and its lower half shows signs of having been burnt subsequently; this suggests that it was broken in its original position and the building around it subsequently burned.

Can this destruction be attributed to religious causes? Whilst the fanatical Christian iconoclasm of the 350's provides a convenient reason for the presence of the sculptures, the majority probably derive from a rich family mausoleum rather than a temple, as they are predominantly funerary in nature, and the deposit may merely represent the disposal of pagan objects retaining some aura of the supernatural. A feature of iconoclasm is often dis-figurement of the head, which has not occurred on the hunter-deity, and whilst the genius and the ash-chest figure have their heads missing, they are far more delicate and thus more liable to damage if carelessly handled.

It may not, of course, be entirely coincidental that a Christian Church was later founded on the same spot, and that the figures came from a building with some religious significance for which a religious

tradition persisted; however there is as yet no archaeological evidence to bridge a very wide time-gap, the first Christian foundation on the site appearing to date from the mid-9th century.

Later features

All that survived were a pit (Fig. 2, pit 3) of uncertain date, cutting the edge of the well, and the foundations of two chalk walls of unknown date, one of which had been extensively robbed in or after the 16th century.

Acknowledgements: A full list must await final publication, but thanks must be given here to the Provost of Southwark Cathedral, the Very Rev. Harold Frankham, for inviting us to excavate; to the Cathedral Stonemason, Tom Adamson, for much valuable assistance, and to those staff of S.L.A.E.C. who worked on the excavation, notably Eric Ferretti, Robin Densem and Peter Hinton.

Dr. Gerald Dunning

JOHN DONNE wrote "Any man's death diminishes me". For those of us who lack a poet's sensibility or are perhaps less "involved in Mankind", this sense of personal diminishment, like the loss of some part of one's own personality, is felt mainly for losses within out most intimate circle of friends and for the departure of certain rare spirits outside it. Gerald Dunning was one of these, and I suspect that all of his enormous circle of archaeological acquaintances—who were inevitably also his good friends, however seldom they met him—have felt this sense of diminishment at the news of his death.

His outstanding characteristics were great scholarship and great kindliness—and the combination is less common than one would wish. His erudition and expertise were always at the disposal of the humblest enquirer, without any trace of patronage or of that possessiveness which is the besetting sin of scholars.

He is best known as the great pioneer in the study of medieval pottery, in which for years he had the field to himself. As an Inspector of Ancient Monuments he had the opportunity to examine many assemblages of finds from excavations, and he had a photographic memory. His instinct for research led him to investigate the study collections of museums, and his visits invariably brought new enlightenment to their curators. He also pursued many lesser byways of knowledge—querns and quern-stones, chimney-pots and roofing materials were among his special interests. The breadth of his knowledge was perhaps best demonstrated in discussions at the Society of Antiquaries, in which he often made notable—and usually humorous—contributions on subjects that were remote from his particular studies.

Readers of this journal have a special interest in another field in which Gerald was a notable pioneer. He was employed by the Society of Antiquaries from 1929 to 1934 as an investigation of excavations in the City of London, under the general supervision of Mortimer Wheeler, then Director of the London Museum. His role was to visit builders' excavations, and to glean such scraps of knowledge as could be obtained by limited archaeological excavation, whenever it became possible, usually during the workmen's lunch-hours. It was frustrating work in the old tradition of single-handed archaeological rescue in the City, that began with Roach Smith and ended (we hope) with Peter Marsden. Gerald made a notable contribution by recovering what is still the best dating evidence for the great basilica, and set the pattern for his later work by supplementing his observations in the field by research in museums. His studies of burnt levels on site and of burnt samian in museum collections led to the identification of two great fires of Roman London, Boudiccan and Hadrianic, with important implications for the growth of the Roman City.

Gerald had recently been collaborating with Peter Marsden in sorting out the earlier evidence relating to the basilica and forum, and Peter had the brilliant idea of recording on tape his pioneer memories of archaeology in the City. It is sad that this intention was frustrated by Gerald's death. It would have been good to have had that deep chuckle recorded for posterity.

RALPH MERRIFIELD

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