

# Divers coffins and the bones of men

GAVIN EVANS  
STEVEN PIERPOINT

'On the east side of this churchyard lieth a large field, of old time called Lollesworth, now Spitalfield, which about the year 1576 was broken up for clay to make bricks, in the digging whereof many earthen pots, called urnae, were found full of ashes and burnt bones of men. ... I myself have reserved ... one urn, with the ashes and bones, and one pot of white earth very small, not exceeding the quantity of a quarter of a wine pint, made in the shape of a hare squatted upon her legs ... There hath also beene found in the same field divers coffins of stone, containing the bones of men.'<sup>1</sup>

THE DISCOVERY and destruction of the Roman cemeteries of London is not a new phenomenon. In the fourth century stone tombs were swept away to be incorporated in a strengthening of the City's defences. Medieval and early post-medieval developments spread beyond Roman London's walls, sometimes inflicting further destruction. The evidence of archaeological excavation and documentary sources indicates that other areas of Roman cemetery are likely to have been destroyed by gravel and clay extraction at this time. The large scale building (including basements and piling) of the last 200 years or so has covered most of the old Roman cemeteries with bricks, mortar, concrete and glass.

This article is a first step in reassessing and understanding Londinium's cemeteries with special reference to the north and east of the City. We intend to compile a comprehensive corpus of all burials for the City area, available for consultation at the Museum of London.

Two pieces of work have begun to bring together work for Southwark<sup>2</sup> and part of the western City<sup>3</sup>. Over the last ten years the Department of Greater London Archaeology, North section (formerly the Inner London Archaeological Unit) and the Department of Urban Archaeology of the Museum of London, have excavated Roman burials from over a dozen sites north of the Thames. By far the largest and most important of them is West Tenter Street<sup>4</sup>, excavated by DGLA(N) in 1984, which produced evidence of some 120 burials by inhumation and at

least 21 by cremation. Even this is likely to be a tiny sample of Roman London's burials. An average population of only 20,000 people for Roman London and an average annual death rate of 50 per 1000 would require over a third of a million corpses to be interred. There are documentary records for only about 350 burials, or about 0.1% of this estimate. The average population of Londinium may have been considerably higher than 20,000 and estimates of between 500,000 and a million corpses have been made.

Roman London probably had the most important and most extensive cemeteries in the province. Because of the building developments of the last 200 years much of the evidence has been destroyed. It is important that we extract as much information as possible from what remains, both in current archaeological work and in reassessing old records and artefacts.

## The evidence

The last major assessment of the burials of Londinium was made in 1928<sup>5</sup>. There is much new material from work over the last sixty years. Several different forms of evidence are available:

1. Data from recent scientific excavations at: West Tenter Street<sup>6</sup>, St. Clare Street<sup>7</sup>, The Three Lords and Haydon Street (Minorities)<sup>8</sup>, Shadwell<sup>9</sup>, Spital Square (all DGLA), and St Bartholomew's Hospital<sup>10</sup>, Alderman's House, Cutler Street and Stothard Place<sup>11</sup> (all DUA).

2. Documentary sources. The Victorian age of industrial and commercial expansion inflicted tremendous damage on the cemeteries. The building of the railways associated with the development of Broad Street, Liverpool Street and Fenchurch Street stations was particularly significant. This age of change coincided with an awakening of interest in archaeology. Several individuals in London were

1. J. Stow *A survey of London: Containing the original, antiquity, increase, moderne estate and description of that city, written in the year 1598.* (Edition edited by H. Morley)
2. M. Dean 'Evidence for more Roman burials in Southwark' *London Archaeol* 4 no. 2 (1981) 52-3.
3. D. Bentley and F. Pritchard 'The Roman Cemetery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 33 (1982) 159-66.
4. R. Whytehead *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (forthcoming).

5. RCHM *An Inventory of the historical monuments in London* 1 'Roman London' (1928) 153-66.
6. R. Whytehead *op cit* fn 4.
7. R. Ellis 'Excavations at 9 St. Clare Street' *London Archaeol* 5 no. 5 (1985) 115-121.
8. R. Ellis *pers comm.*
9. D. Whipp *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (forthcoming).
10. D. Bentley and F. Pritchard *op cit* fn 3, 134-59.
11. DUA *pers comm.*

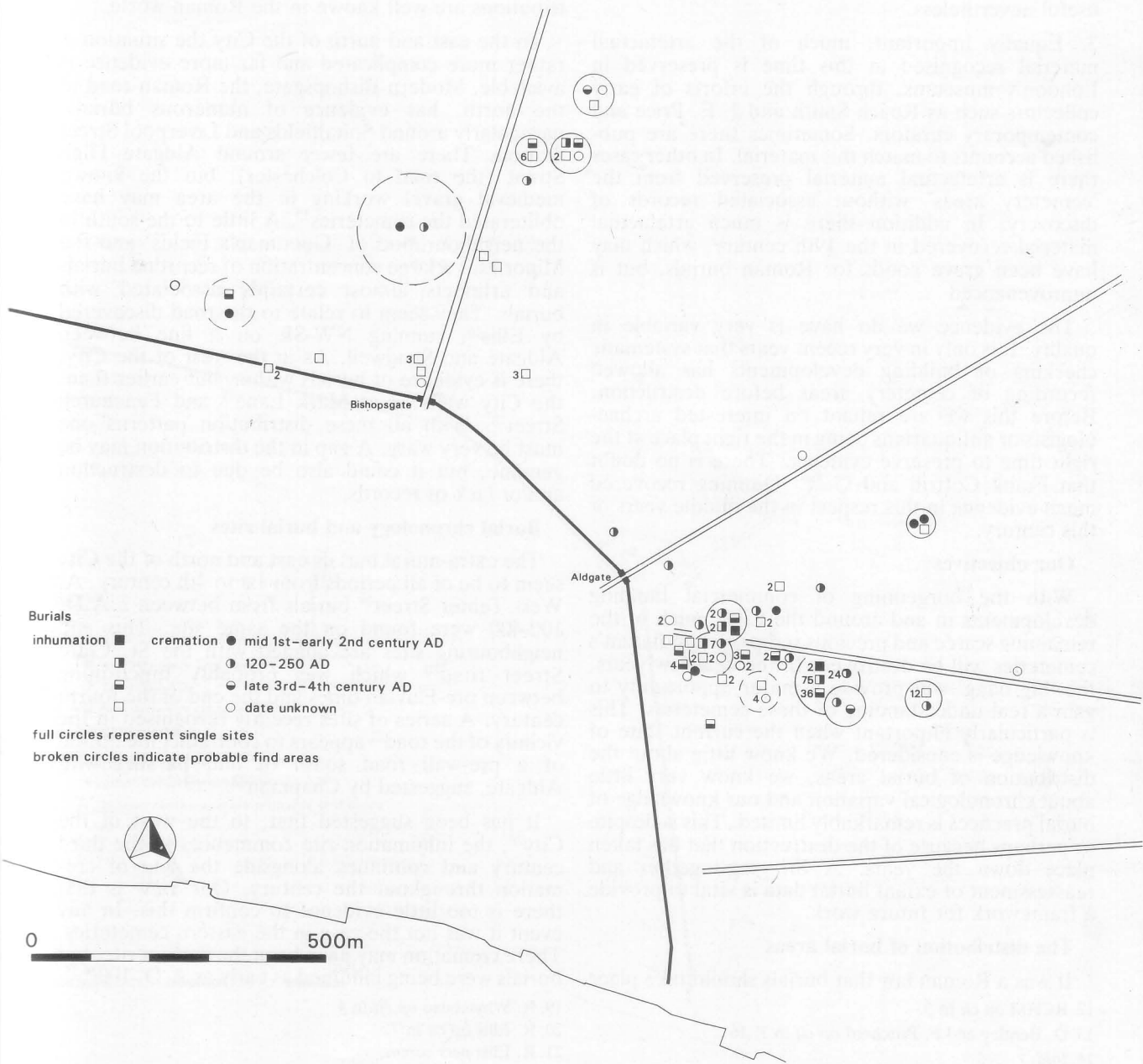


Fig. 1: distribution of Roman burials.

interested in keeping and noting ancient remains. A significant body of published records is therefore available<sup>12</sup>, however inadequate by modern standards. Accurate descriptions of the locations of these discoveries are rarer than we would like, but useful nevertheless.

3. Equally important, much of the artefactual material recognised at this time is preserved in London's museums, through the efforts of early collectors such as Roach Smith and J. E. Price and contemporary curators. Sometimes there are published accounts to match this material. In other cases there is artefactual material preserved from the 'cemetery areas' without associated records of discovery. In addition there is much artefactual material recovered in the 19th century, which may have been grave goods for Roman burials, but is unprovenanced.

The evidence we do have is very variable in quality. It is only in very recent years that systematic checking of building developments has allowed recording of cemetery areas before destruction. Before this we are reliant on interested archaeologists or antiquarians being in the right place at the right time to preserve evidence. There is no doubt that Frank Cottrill and G. C. Dunning recovered much evidence in this respect in the middle years of this century.

### Our objectives

With the burgeoning of commercial building developments in and around the City, much of the remaining scarce and precious scraps of Londinium's cemeteries will be destroyed. In the next few years, the 'big bang' will provide a major opportunity to gain a real understanding of these cemeteries. This is particularly important when the current state of knowledge is considered. We know little about the distribution of burial areas, we know very little about chronological variation and our knowledge of burial practices is remarkably limited. This is despite or perhaps because of the destruction that has taken place down the years. A bringing-together and reassessment of extant burial data is vital to provide a framework for future work.

### The distribution of burial areas

It was a Roman law that burials should take place

12. RCHM *op cit* fn 5.

13. D. Bentley and F. Pritchard *op cit* fn 3, 161.

14. *Ibid*

15. R. Whytehead *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (in press).

16. R. Ellis *op cit* fn 7, 117.

17. RCHM *op cit* fn 5, 155.

18. *Ibid*.

outside the city bounds. Bentley and Pritchard<sup>13</sup> have used this information to suggest changes in the extent of the Roman City. They have also shown the correlation between roads and burials west of Newgate<sup>14</sup>. Links between roads and burial distributions are well known in the Roman world.

To the east and north of the City the situation is rather more complicated and far more evidence is available. Modern Bishopsgate, the Roman road to the north, has evidence of numerous burials, particularly around Spitalfields and Liverpool Street Station. There are fewer around Aldgate High Street (the road to Colchester); but the known medieval gravel working in the area may have obliterated the cemeteries<sup>15</sup>. A little to the south in the neighbourhood of 'Goodman's Fields' and the Minories is a large concentration of recorded burials and artefacts; almost certainly associated with burials. They seem to relate to the road discovered by Ellis<sup>16</sup>, running NW-SE on a line between Aldgate and Shadwell. As in the west of the City, there is evidence of burials within, but earlier than, the City walls as at Mark Lane<sup>17</sup> and Fenchurch Street<sup>18</sup>. With all these distribution patterns one must be very wary. A gap in the distribution may be genuine, but it could also be due to destruction and/or lack of records.

### Burial chronology and burial rites

The extra-mural burials east and north of the City seem to be of all periods from 1st to 4th century. At West Tenter Street<sup>19</sup> burials from between c A.D. 100-400 were found on the same site. This and neighbouring sites are aligned with the St. Clare Street road<sup>20</sup> which was probably functioning between pre-Flavian times and the end of the fourth century. A series of sites recently recognised in the vicinity of the road<sup>21</sup> appears to contradict the notion of a pre-wall road south of and parallel with Aldgate, suggested by Chapman<sup>22</sup>.

It has been suggested that, to the west of the City<sup>23</sup>, the inhumation rite commences in the third century and continues alongside the rite of cremation throughout the century. Our view is that there is too little evidence to confirm this. In any event it was not the case in the eastern cemeteries. There cremation may have been the earliest rite, but burials were being inhumed as early as A.D. 100<sup>24,25</sup>.

19. R. Whytehead *op cit* fn 4.

20. R. Ellis *op cit* fn 7.

21. R. Ellis *pers comm*.

22. H. Chapman and T. Johnson 'Excavations at Aldgate and Bush Lane House in the City of London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 24 (1973) 12-13.

23. D. Bentley and F. Pritchard *op cit* fn 3, 165-6.

24. R. Ellis *op cit* fn 7, 118.

25. R. Whytehead *op cit* fn 4.

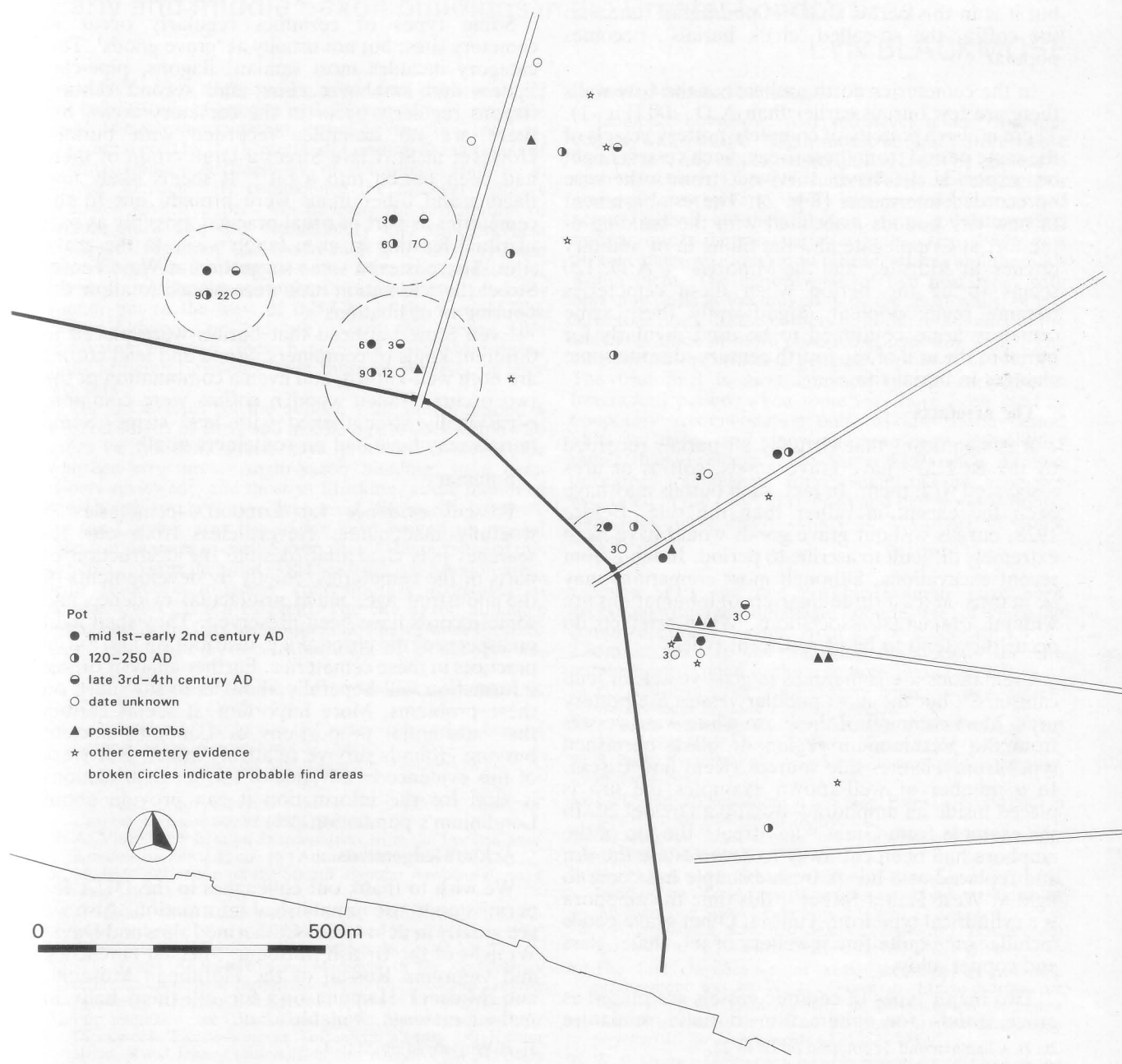


Fig. 2: distribution of complete pottery vessels.

Some early burials were even placed crouched rather than extended, reminiscent of prehistoric burial practice. One of the difficulties is that the earliest inhumations do not have pottery grave goods. There are very few cremations of third century date. All fourth century burials appear to be by inhumation, but it is in this period that the pouring of lime into the coffin, the so-called 'chalk burials', becomes popular.

In the cemeteries north and east of the City walls there are few burials earlier than A.D. 100 (Fig. 1). There is also a scarcity of complete pottery vessels of the same period from these areas. Such vessels might be expected to have survived from otherwise unrecorded interments (Fig. 2). The establishment of new city bounds associated with the building of the fort at Cripplegate and the filling in of 'military ditches' at Aldgate<sup>26</sup> and the Minorities<sup>27</sup> c A.D. 120 seems to be the period when these cemeteries became really popular. Significantly these same cemetery areas continued to be used regularly for burial to the end of the fourth century, despite some changes in burial rite.

### The artefacts

It is significant that virtually all burials recorded by the RCHM<sup>28</sup> have grave goods, coffins or urns associated with them. In fact, such burials may have been the exception rather than the rule. Before 1928, burials without grave goods would have been extremely difficult to ascribe to period. Judging from recent excavations, although most cremations may be in urns, at least three-quarters of inhumations are without artefactual associations. When artefacts do occur they tend to be of recurrent types.

Cremations are sometimes in glass vessels or lead canisters<sup>29</sup>, but the most popular vessels are pottery urns. Most common of these are white ware vessels from the Verulamium region or black burnished types from Thames-side sources (Kent and Essex). In a number of well-known examples the urn is placed inside an amphora – usually a Dressel 20. In the example from Great Alie Street<sup>30</sup> the top of the amphora had been cut away to accommodate the urn and replaced as a lid. A fresh example has come to light at West Tenter Street<sup>31</sup>, this time the amphora is a cylindrical type from Tunisia. Other grave goods include some quite fine jewellery of jet, shale, glass and copper alloy.

Two major types of ceramic vessels are placed as grave goods for inhumation burials; miniature

vessels or beakers and cooking pots. Vessels identical to the black burnished cremation urns occur as accessory vessels with inhumations. Beakers from the Nene Valley, Cologne and elsewhere are also popular. Other grave goods include jewellery, toilet sets, lamps, shoes and glass vessels.

Some types of ceramics regularly occur at cemetery sites, but not usually as 'grave goods'. This category includes most samian, flagons, pipe-clay figures and amphorae. First and second century flagons regularly occur in the cemetery areas, but there are no examples recorded with burials. However at St. Clare Street a large group of them had been placed into a pit<sup>32</sup>. It seems likely that flagons and other items were brought out to the cemeteries as part of ritual practice, possibly as part of ritual feasting or even family visits to the grave sites. There is even some suggestion at West Tenter Street that cremation urns were placed to allow the pouring in of libations<sup>33</sup>.

Even Stow<sup>34</sup> noticed that burials were placed in different kinds of containers. Stone and lead coffins are both well-known, and even a combination of the two occurs. Nailed wooden coffins were common, occasionally strengthened with lead strips. Some burials may have had no containers at all.

### Summary

Present evidence for London's cemeteries is woefully inadequate. Nevertheless from our researches it is clear that, despite the destruction of parts of the cemeteries, chiefly by developments of the industrial age, much artefactual evidence and some records have been preserved. They shed light on aspects of the chronology, distribution and burial practices in these cemeteries. Further analysis of this information will hopefully allow us to say more on these problems. More important, it seems certain that substantial proportions of London's ancient burying grounds survive relatively intact. Recovery of this evidence in advance of further deprivations is vital for the information it can provide about Londinium's population.

### Acknowledgements

We wish to thank our colleagues in the DUA for permission to use unpublished information. Also we are greatly in debt to Dr. Catherine Johns and David Wraight of the British Museum, Michael Hitchcock and Georgina Russell of the Horniman Museum, and Michael Hammerson, for all their help in making material available.

31. R. Whytehead *op cit* fn 4.

32. R. Ellis *op cit* fn 7.

33. R. Whytehead *op cit* fn 4.

34. J. Stow *op cit* fn 1.

26. H. Chapman and T. Johnson *op cit* fn 22.

27. R. Ellis *pers comm.*

28. RCHM *op cit* fn 5, 157-69.

29. *Ibid* 157.

30. *Ibid* 159.