

A Belgic Cremation-Burial from Burghfield (Cunning Man Site), 1956

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LIKE that of the Thames, the flood-plain of the R. Kennet is at present being worked extensively for gravel. The site yielding the burial with which this paper is concerned lies some two miles upstream of the confluence of those rivers, south of the Kennet and Avon Canal and the modern bed of the Kennet, and east of Burghfield Bridge¹ (fig. 1). It is being worked by Messrs. Hyde Crete Ltd.² Before the gravel can be exploited, it is necessary to remove an overburden, generally about 4 feet thick, formed of alluvium and shell malm: a witness to heavy flooding in the past³. From the start of this operation in 1954, quantities of Roman pottery (mainly of the 1st and 2nd centuries) have been recovered, through the efforts of Professor and Mrs. B. C. J. Knight of Reading University, and Mr. W. A. Smallcombe. The present subject was found in the summer of 1956.

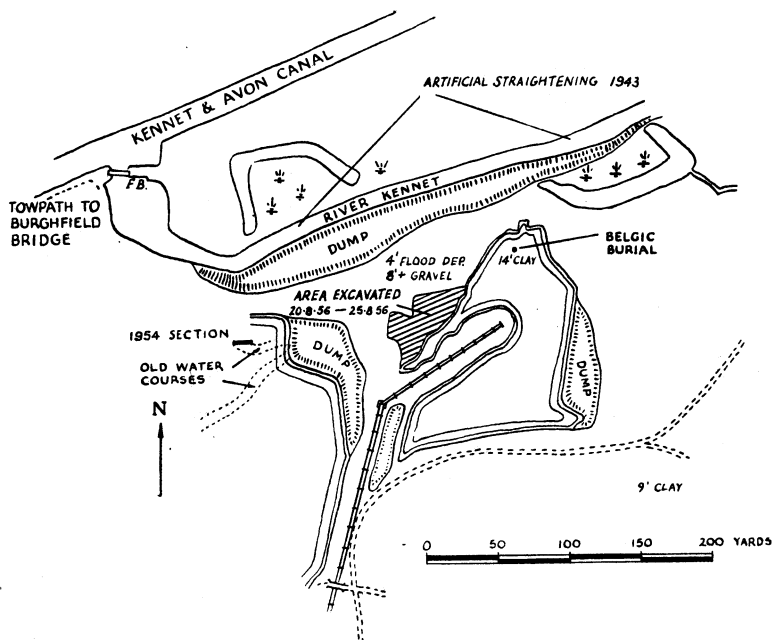


Fig. 1. Site of the cremation-burial and neighbourhood as in 1956.
(Surveyed by J.W.)

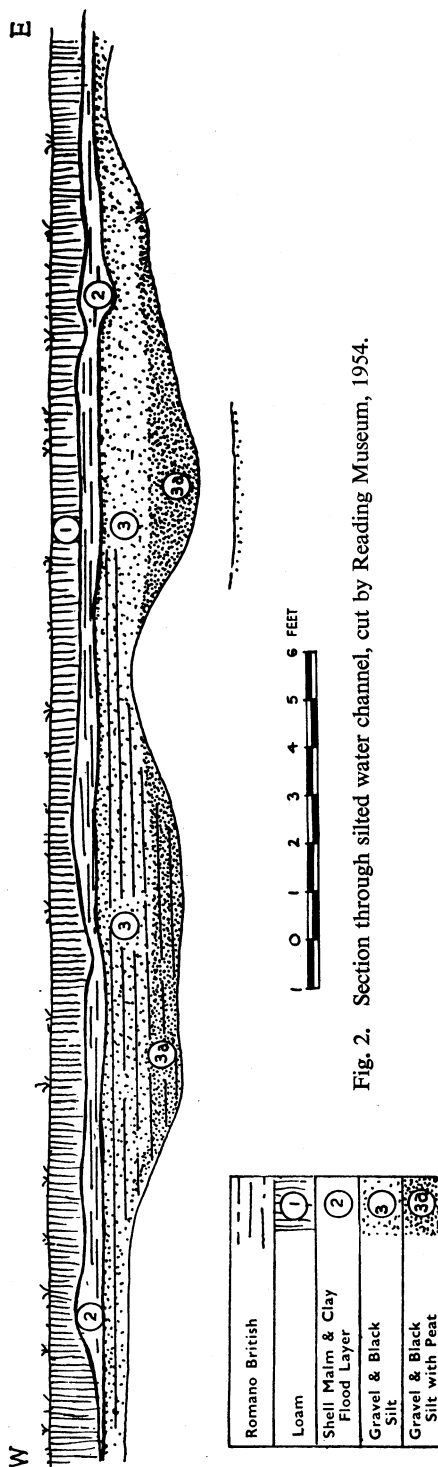


Fig. 2. Section through silted water channel, cut by Reading Museum, 1954.

Two steps were taken to decide upon the exact nature of the ancient deposits. In 1954, a section was cut by Mr T. L. Gwatkin of Reading Museum; and in 1956, one of us (J.W.) was appointed by the Ministry of Works to supervise the site for a week during the continuance of commercial excavation. In neither case was any ditch or structure found, and the 1954 section shows clearly (fig. 2) that a great deal of the pottery was localized in silted meanders of the Kennet⁴. We are not here concerned with this material⁵. It is evident, from its generally unabraded state, that it cannot have been brought, as scourings of the current, from afar; and accordingly, in default of positive evidence to the contrary, it must be supposed that all remains of the riverside settlement, from which this rubbish was derived, have been confused by periodic flooding and swept away. In the case of the cremation-burial, conditions were different. Instead of scattered potsherds, we were here presented with a compact group of five vessels, all obviously entire when first deposited. The discovery was made by the workman in charge of the grab, when the machine was at work at a depth of 2-3 feet in alluvial clay—*viz.* in the top of the filling of an abandoned meander some 14 feet deep. Part of this could be observed in section above water level in the great pit being formed by the gravel-digging.

The first vessel noticed (fig. 3, no. 2) was also the largest. Its neck was smashed by the grab, and from the workman's description, the vessel had been set upright in the ground. So, probably, were the other four—with the possible exception of no. 5, which contained the cremation⁶ and may have been inverted. Despite a careful search, no metal objects were found with, or near, the group. Iron concretions on the pottery, and mixed with the bone, are probably of natural origin, for the gravel, in places, is heavily ferruginous.

There can be very little doubt that this group was found quite undisturbed in the silted meander where it had been buried. Unfortunately, owing to the circumstances of discovery, as well as to the general disturbance of the surface of the ground in time of great flood, no suggestion can be made as to whether a barrow was erected to mark the spot.

Description of the Vessels

1. Butt-beaker of light buff well-fired fabric, decorated with rouletted bands. *Camulodunum Report* (1947), type 113; of possible British manufacture.
2. One-handled flagon of fine light buff fabric. *Camulodunum*, type 140B.
3. *Terra-nigra* plate, light grey surface, good ware. Stamped NOVI[. Mr M. R. Hull, F.S.A., compares this stamp with Holwerda, *De Belgische Waar in Nijmegen*, no. 113 (his pl. XX). This stamp Holwerda read NOVILX, but may rather read

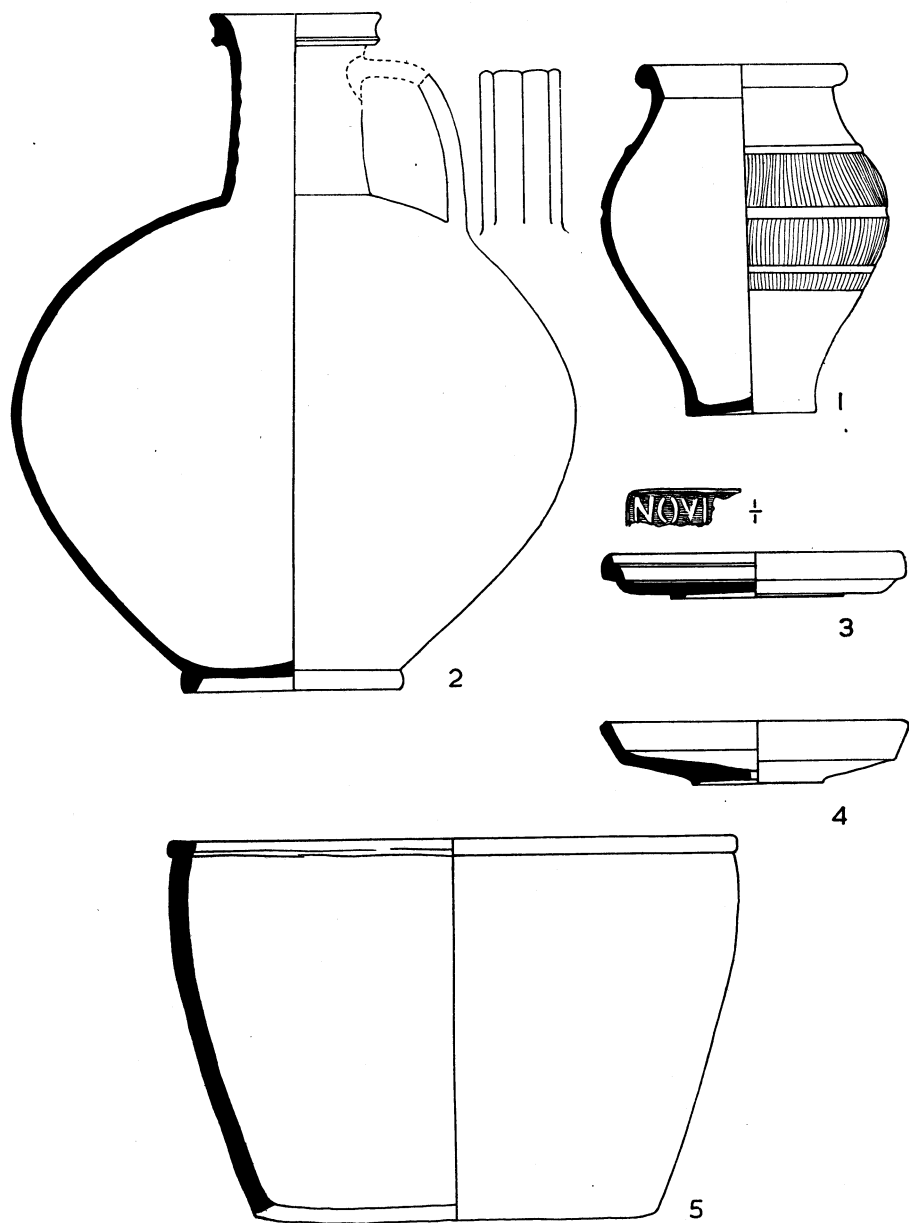


Fig. 3. Vessels from the cremation-burial. (Drawn by J.W., 1957). Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

NOVILIC (or similar) or perhaps NOVICIO or NOVICII. Two examples of this stamp were found in Cemetery E, and are reported from kilns at Sept Saulx (*Bull. Champ.* 1939, p. 32). They occurred on *Camulodunum*, type 8; the present vessel is *Camulodunum*, type 7; cf. fig. 47,7.⁷

4. Copy of *terra-nigra* dish in dark buff gritty ware (grit is calcined flint); black burnished surface. *Camulodunum*, type 21.
5. 'Saucepan' bowl of coarse brown-grey gritty ware, soapy surface; wheel-turned; bead-rim. A 'Wessex' type belgicized: c.f. *Hengistbury Head* pl. XIX, 8; *St. Catherine's Hill*, p. 114, AR6; cf. also *Maiden Castle*, pl. XXVIII, 9 (Côtes du Nord).

This vessel is one of the very few types found in the area ascribed to the Atrebates whose Aylesford-Swarling ancestry is not immediately apparent. The internal groove below the rim in this example is not functional, and is probably unimportant. The ware is unromanized.

Date of the Deposit

As their counterparts at *Camulodunum* show, four of these vessels (and so, by implication, the fifth) belong to the first half of the 1st century A.D. At *Camulodunum*, the range of vessels of our type nos. 1 and 3 covers the period c. A.D. 10 to 65. Little can be said about no. 4; its prototype (*Camulodunum*, type 1) is generally pre-Conquest, and copies similar in form, but not in ware, to no. 4 were found in the Belgic hut excavated at Silchester in 1957. No. 2 is of a type rare in the *colonia* levels at *Camulodunum*, and therefore agrees well in date with the other vessels.

There is no proof positive that the burial did not take place in early Roman times, but the absence of exclusively Roman wares, such as samian⁸, precludes a date later than c. 50. The upper end of the dating-"bracket" within the period specified is probably fairly well indicated by no. 2, for its rim-flange is not at all deeply undercut, as in the earliest examples of the series⁹. No. 3, however, has a flat base, and not the raised base typical of Claudian versions of the type¹⁰. In all, a date c. 25 to c. 50 seems most suitable, and a pre-Roman date, although not proved, most likely.

Further Remarks

As Radford has recently pointed out, cremation-burials of the Belgic period are rare in the region which has produced the present example¹¹. There are examples from Newbury, Silchester, Hurstbourne Tarrant, and Winchester¹², none of them demonstrably 'early' in the Belgic occupation of the area. To them might be added a discovery at Theale, where the base of a pedestal urn has been found¹³. This is normally a funerary vessel, and extremely rare in the Atrebatian area.

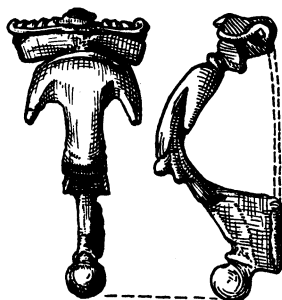


Fig. 4. Pannonian bronze anchor-brooch from Burghfield. Scale $\frac{1}{2}$.

The watch kept on the commercial digging in the neighbourhood of the discovery, mentioned above, was instituted primarily in case other burials might come to light. This was not to be so, however, and the total result of the inspection was about two dozen shards of Claudian date. Such a scarcity of finds suggests that the settlement suggested above lay a couple of hundred yards to the south-west, where the bulk of the Roman material occurred, and where the 1954 section was cut.

NOTES

¹ The site is also erroneously known as *Southcote*; it is in Burghfield parish, and will in future be known as here entitled. The *Cunning Man* is the name of a public-house on the Burghfield side of the bridge, the name having been transferred from a building opposite, now a café.

² Who have generously presented all the finds to the Reading Museum.

³ Typical section in flood deposits:

A: Humus	6 ins.
B: Alluvial clay, light buff when dry, containing shells and pieces of saturated wood	21 ins.
C: Similar, more shell and wood; lighter in colour when dry	12 ins.
D: Thick deposit of saturated wood above innumerable mollusc shells in a shingly matrix	9 ins.
E: True river gravel, last stage of last glaciation	—

Mollusc shells were collected from deposits B and D:

B. <i>Lymnaea peregra</i> (Müller)	1	<i>Cochlicopa lubrica</i> (Müller)	5
<i>Hygromia hispida</i> (Linné)	21	<i>Planorbis planorbis</i> (Linné)	3
D. <i>Lymnaea peregra</i> (Müller)	15	<i>Zonitoides nitidus</i> (Müller)	3
<i>Planorbis planorbis</i> (Linné)	4	<i>Bithynia tentaculata</i> (Linné)	29
<i>Pisidium amnicum</i> (Müller)	1	<i>Valvata piscinalis</i> (Müller)	45
<i>Theodoxus fluviatilis</i> (Linné)	4	<i>Pisidium casertanum</i> (Poli)	2
<i>Succinea pfeifferi</i> (Ross)	2	<i>Planorbis leucostoma</i> (Müller)	2
<i>Planorbis contortus</i> (Linné)	3	<i>Pupilla muscorum</i> (Linné)	1
<i>Retinella radiatula</i> (Alder)	1	<i>Lymnaea palustris</i> (Müller)	1
<i>Valvata leachi</i> (Sheppard)	4	<i>Hygromia hispida</i> (Linné)	10
<i>Planorbis albus</i> (Müller)	2	<i>Physa fontinalis</i> (Linné)	1
<i>Vallonia pulchella</i> (Müller)	3	<i>Cochlicopa lubrica</i> (Müller)	1

These shells were kindly identified by Dr. A. G. Davis of the British Museum (Natural History), who states that such a fauna could be Early Iron or Bronze Age. The shells in deposit B, particularly, may well not be precisely contemporary with their matrix, but may be derived from an earlier deposit: for similar accumulations of shells can sometimes be observed after modern floods in the Kennet valley around slight protuberances such as molehills.

Several semi-mineralized bones were found, mainly beneath the flood deposits and on top of the true river gravel: mainly of Red Deer and Ox.

Section observed during the Official Watch on the Site

A: Humus	9 ins.
B: Light buff alluvial clay containing shells and pieces of saturated wood	18 ins.
C: Mottled blue and ochreous clay with shells, specks of charcoal, and pieces of saturated wood; also the Claudian shards noted above, 2 bone fr., fr. brick, 2 calcined flints	24 ins.

N.B.—A few feet south of the section, the deposit thinned out, with no definite break, into light buff clay with shells and wood as B. All finds were made in the bottom 6 inches.

D: Clean, greenish-blue clay	18 ins.
E: True river gravel.	—

This is therefore a section towards the side of a meander.

⁴ In 1943, and again in recent years, it was necessary to attend to the course of the Kennet opposite our site; and before the Canal was cut, the river was no doubt subject to flooding of an extent and seriousness now unknown. In layers 3 and 3a (see fig. 2) there were patches of light blue vivianite staining, which is connected with decomposed animal matter.

⁵ Cf. *JRS*, 1955, p. 142. The main find, a Pannonian anchor-brooch, unstratified near the 1954 section, is here drawn as fig. 4. It is of a type excessively rare in Britain, and is Claudian. The Cuning Man site is but one of several in the lower Kennet valley; of these the Ballast Hole site, Theale (*Trans. Newbury F.C.*, VIII, p. 56) is the best known example. One of the most important of the others lay near Reading Gasworks (*Journ. Brit. Arch. Assn.*, XXXVII (1881) p. 265–6). The remains from these sites are mostly in Reading Museum, and an examination of them does not encourage the belief that, except for Theale, they represent pre-Roman occupation.

⁶ The cremated bones were submitted to Dr. H. Taylor, of Bristol, for examination. He reports as follows: About 4 oz. of burnt bone, the greater part fully calcined, together with a few small plates which appear to be iron (see above, p. 48). Black earth and rust-coloured concretions adhere. Two or three fragmentary limb bones of a small bird (?) are present, all calcined. The remaining bone may belong to one person between 30 and 40 years of age, probably nearer 40 (with the usual reservations). Sex is indeterminable, build and muscular development about average. All regions of the body are represented—skull, vertebrae, ribs, shoulder-blade, hip-bone, upper and lower limbs including hands and feet—although more than 95% is missing. (The presence of non-human bone, and the absence of a great proportion of the skeleton, is not unusual: GCB).

⁷ We are indebted to Mr. Hull for these observations.

⁸ As e.g. in a group from Folkestone, *Swarling Report* (1925) pl. V, 1.

⁹ *Verulamium Report* (1936), p. 171.

¹⁰ *Camulodunum Report* (1947), p. 218–9.

¹¹ PPS, 1954, fig. 3, p. 7, and pp. 22–3.

¹² *Trans. Newbury F.C.*, V, p. 220; Radford, *loc.cit.*, p. 22 (Reading Mus.); *Arch. Journ.* LXXXVII, p. 304 ff.; *Proc. Hants F.C.*, XI, p. 183.

¹³ *Trans. Newbury F.C.*, VIII, p. 58, no. 27. The second base mentioned does not appear to exist, at least in the Reading Museum series. The base of a similar urn, of rougher manufacture and probably a native copy, was found in the pit adjacent to the Belgic hut found at Silchester in 1957. This was not associated with burnt bone.