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THREE ROMANO-BRITISH INHUMATIONS AT UPPER LAMBOURN

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With a report on the skeletal material by H. Carter

In January, 1976 human remains were noticed in the hole left by a fallen tree in the garden of 'Lynchets', Upper Lambourn. The upper portion of one skeleton had been removed by the uprooting of the tree. Subsequent excavation of a small area by the Berkshire Archaeological Unit revealed two further inhumations. With the permission of Mr Haslam the finds have been deposited in Reading Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Mr and Mrs Haslam, of 'Lynchets', Upper Lambourn for allowing excavation to be carried out in their garden, and to Mr H. Carter for assisting with the excavation and for preparing the report on the skeletons.

THE EXCAVATION

The site (Fig. 1)

The inhumations, centred on SU 31788000, lay on the Middle Chalk at a height of approximately 132 m O.D. in the valley of the Upper Lambourn.

The stratification was as follows. (Fig. 2). (All depths given as below present ground level).

Layer 1: Dark, loose topsoil (ploughsoil and garden humus) to a depth of 15–20 cm. Contained abraded Romano-British sherds plus medieval and post-medieval material.

Layer 2: Hard, reddish-brown alluvium with chalk, flint and sarsen fragments to a depth of 35–50 cm. Contained largely unabraded Romano-British material.

Layer 3: Frost shattered/decomposed chalk to a depth of c. 70 cm. No finds.

Layer 4: Natural, unweathered chalk.

The graves (Fig. 3)

Grave I: Cut through Layer 3 and into Layer 4. No sealing stratification owing to root disturbance and removal. Grave filling; loose, sandy coloured redeposited chalk with flint and sarsen fragments. No finds.

Grave II: Cut through Layer 3 and into Layer 4. Partially sealed by Layers 1 and 2. Grave filling as Grave I. The exact stratigraphic relationship of this grave with Grave I had been removed by the tree roots, but examination of the section still visible in the roots permitted the conclusion that Grave II cut the edge of, and thus post-dated Grave I.

Grave III: Cut into Layer 3, sealed by Layers 1 and 2. Grave filling; crushed chalk with admixture of alluvium, plus flint and sarsen fragments. The exact stratigraphic relationship of this grave with Graves I and II was impossible to determine owing to root disturbance.

Other features

Two post-holes in the area of Grave III (Fig. 3). These appear to have been cut from the same level as the grave and while one was totally stratigraphically unrelated the other was cut by, and thus pre-dated Grave III. No finds.

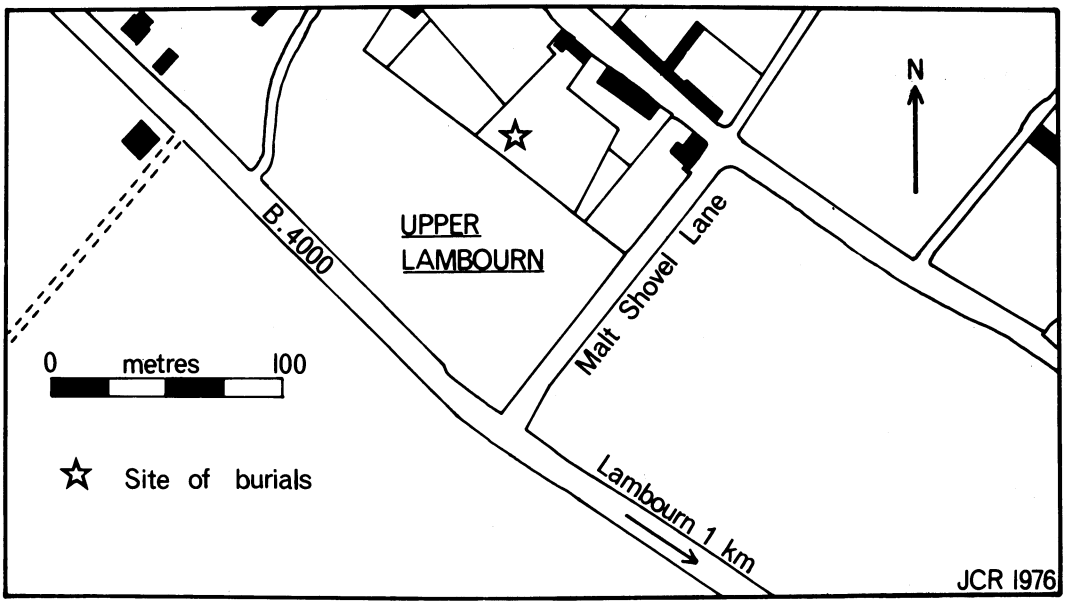

Fig. 1. Site location map.

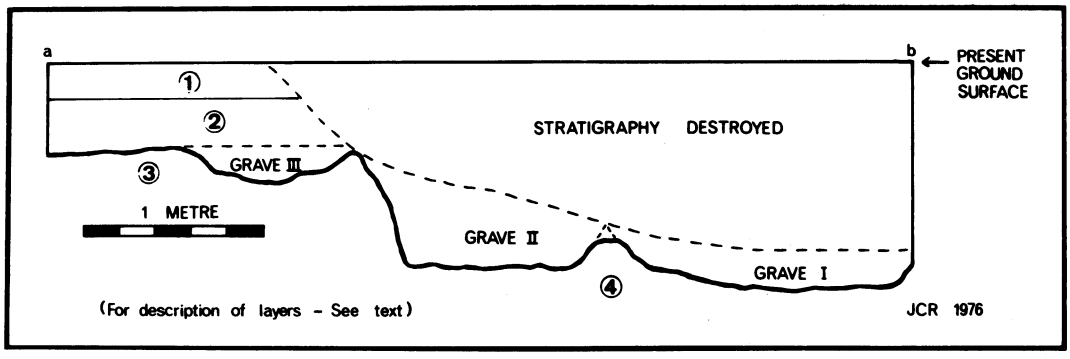

Fig. 2. Cross section of graves.

DISCUSSION

In the light of the small area excavated the possibility of both more graves and/or a small associated settlement cannot entirely be dismissed. The latter can perhaps be tentatively postulated on the basis of the stratified pottery sample (however small) and on the occurrence of the two post-holes in the area of Grave III. While no firm dating was available for any of the graves, the shoe nails in Grave II (which make this inhumation one of the type commonly known as a 'Hob-nail' burial) and the pottery sample would together seem to indicate a late Roman date. No parallels have been found for the nail in the mount of the skeleton in Grave II. General parallels can be drawn with the cemetery north of Lambourn (at SU 349816) from which a 'hob-nail' burial was recorded[1] and possibly with the burials 'lying on their sides in a contracted position' from the area of Maddles Farm, north-west of Upper Lambourn.[2]

The skeletons from Graves I and II are typical in all respects of the Romano-British population of this area, the skull shape, limb proportions and teeth showing slow to moderate wear all being characteristic. Rapid tooth decay, as seen in the skeleton from Grave II, is also frequent among Romano-Britons.

The skeleton from Grave III, with robust build and nearly standard limb proportions, approaches the condition of typical Saxons, and, in so far as his skull differs at all from that of the skeleton from Grave II, it does so in a Saxon direction.

Of course even in a pure-bred Romano-British population (if such a thing ever existed) there would have been considerable individual variation, so this point must not be over emphasised. The chemical data tends to confirm the relative order of the graves suggested by the undisturbed stratigraphical relationships, and to suggest that the spread of dating could be quite wide, spanning perhaps two centuries.

The only anomalous figure is the low organic percentage for the skeleton from Grave III. This might be explained away by the age of the man at death (the bones of old people tend to be low in collagen) or by the shallowness of his grave which afforded him less protection than the other skeletons.

(Compare the figures for the Kintbury Saxon cemetery, where organic percentages ranging from 43% to 59% were obtained by the same method).

THE FINDS

Pottery

Layer 1:

(a) Rim sherd, black burnished category 1. Cf Portchester[3] type 126. Circa 280–400 AD (Fig. 4, sherd a).

(b) Three undiagnostic, sand tempered storage jar sherds; late Romano-British.

(c) One sand tempered, green glazed body sherd; medieval.

(d) Much post-medieval material.

Layer 2:

(a) Rim sherd, grey coarse sandy fabric with plain black surface. For form cf. Portchester type 131. Circa 280–400 AD (Fig. 4, sherd b).

(b) Rim sherd, grey medium sandy fabric with plain grey surface. For form cf. Portchester type 144:4. Circa 280–400 AD (Fig. 4, sherd c).

(c) Twelve undiagnostic, sand tempered body sherds, none of which can be closely paralleled for date, but all of which suggest a late rather than early Roman date. (Third and fourth centuries.)

Grave II:

(a) Wall fragment of dish; black burnished category 1. Cf. Portchester type 107:7–10. Circa 280–400 AD.

(b) Undiagnostic sand tempered body sherd of jar.

[1] *Trans. Newbury & Dist. Field Club,* Vol. 1 (1871) p. 207.

[2] *Trans. Newbury & Dist. Field Club,* Vol. 1 (1871) p. 208.

[3] Cunliffe, B. W. *Excavations at Portchester Castle,* Vol. 1 (Roman), Soc. of Ant. London 1975.

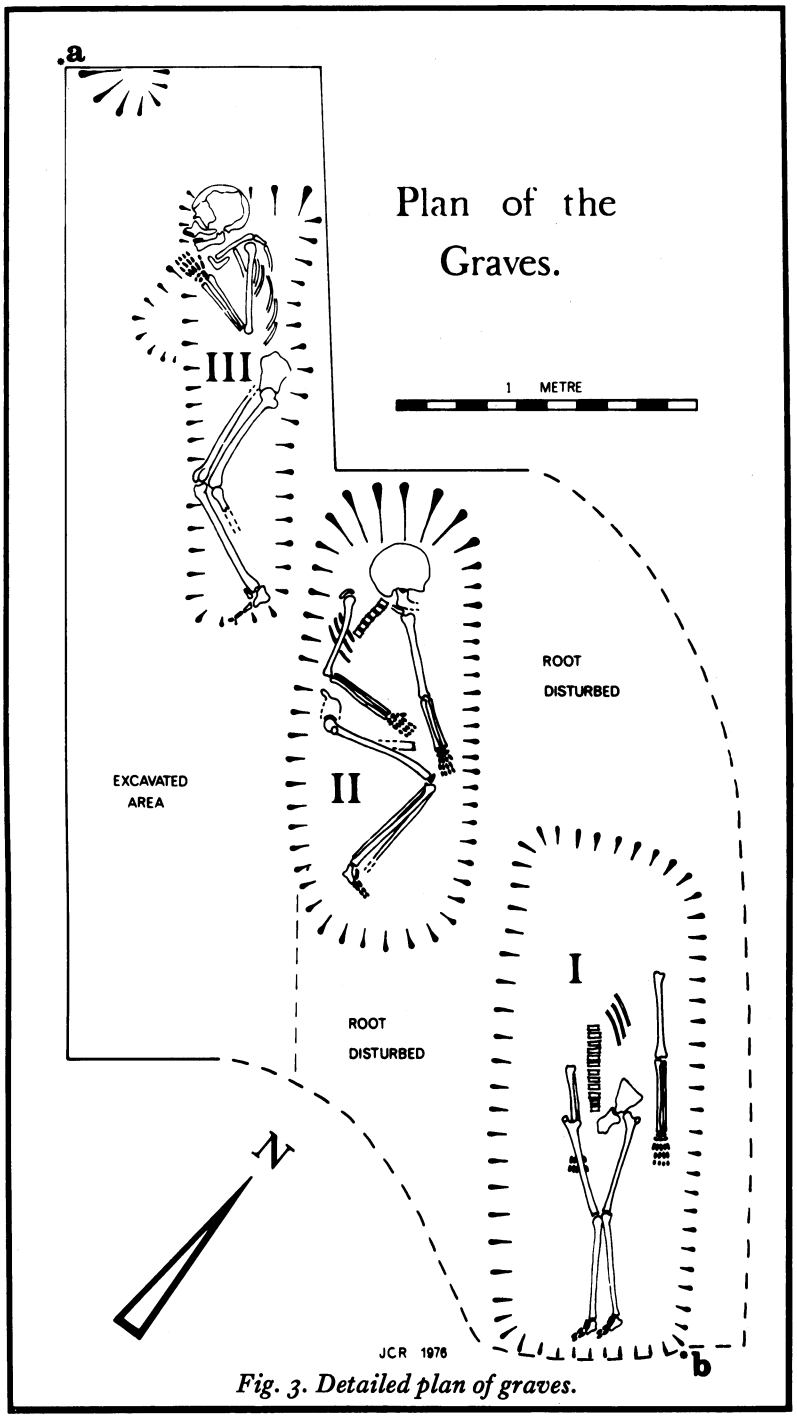

Fig. 3. Detailed plan of graves.

Metalwork

Grave II:

(a) Iron nail, length 7·5 cm, square section, head flattened. From inside mouth of skeleton. (Fig. 5a).

(b) Twenty-seven small iron nails, average length 1·7 cm, tapering stem (most with end bent at 90°) domed or shouldered head. From under feet of skeleton. (For specimens, Fig. 5b).

The skeletal remains

Grave I: This was a female, aged about 27 years, estimated height 1·555 m (about 5 ft 1 in.), of slender build (left clavicle 132 mm and all bones gracile), cephalic index 78·3. The teeth are in excellent condition with no trace of caries (but periodontal disease was present) but were large for the size of the face, so that the upper incisors are strongly proclinate, leading to a moderate degree of overbite. The rate of wear was moderate, reaching 2+° in Brothwell's[4] notation on the first and 2° on the third molars. The proportions of the skull are close to those of other Romano-British material from Berkshire; length 175 mm, breadth 137 mm, masto-bregmatic height 137 mm. The tibiae are short in comparison with both femora and arm bones (right femur 397 mm, tibia 315 mm, humerus 295 mm, left humerus only 280 mm, right ulna 239 mm). The onset of osteo-arthritis in the vertebrae is already evident, though not advanced to the degree seen in the skeletons from Graves II and III.

In its original position the skeleton lay prone, with the head rotated to the right and the feet to the left and the arms at the sides. The upper portion, however, came up with with the roots of the tree when this was blown down, leaving only the bones from the level of the seventh thoracic vertebra downwards *in situ*. It was therefore impossible to check the estimate of height directly.

[4] Brothwell, D. R. *Digging up bones*, British Museum 1963.

Grave II: This was a male, aged about 35 years. The extensive tooth loss and the absence of the pubic symphysis make this estimate uncertain. The estimated height is 1·705 m (about 5 ft 7 in.) and the build slender (right clavicle 135 mm, very short for a man of this height, and all bones rather gracile) cephalic index 77·6. The teeth are in lamentable condition. Two lower incisors, an upper premolar and nine molars had been lost during life and their alveoli resorbed; resorption of a tenth had begun, and the socket of an eleventh was occupied only by its separated roots. In addition, the anterior teeth were displaced and rotated through overcrowding. The degree of wear is moderate reaching 3° on the one remaining molar, with a similar amount on the anterior teeth. The proportions of the skull are close to those of the skeleton from Grave I; length 183 mm, breadth 142 mm, masto-bregmatic height 147 mm. So also are the proportions of the limb bones (right femur 457 mm, tibia 342 mm, humerus 324 mm, ulna 275 mm). Osteo-arthritis was well advanced, with extensive lipping of the thoracic vertebrae and indications of the disease in the knee joints.

This skeleton lay on its left side, with the hip and knee joints flexed to 90°, and the hands brought together close to the knees. The pelvis was turned through 60° about the long axis of the body and the neck bent to the right so that the head was nearly vertical. (pl. 1).

Grave III: This was a male, aged about 60 years, but the estimate is uncertain for the same reasons as in the skeleton from Grave II. Fusion of the cranial sutures was complete. The estimated height is 1·694 m (about 5 ft $6\frac{3}{4}$ in.) and the build robust (right clavicle 166 mm, and all bones robust), cephalic index 76·0. The teeth are nearly as bad as those of the skeleton from Grave II, with one canine, one premolar and six molars definitely lost during life with alveoli resorbed, the alveolus of one molar undergoing resorption, and the fate of three molars uncertain due to loss of part of the jaw bone. Wear was far advanced, attaining 5++° on the remaining third molar,

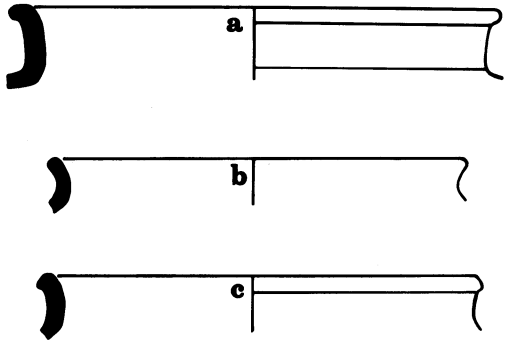

Fig. 4. Stratified pottery. Scale $\frac{1}{3}$.

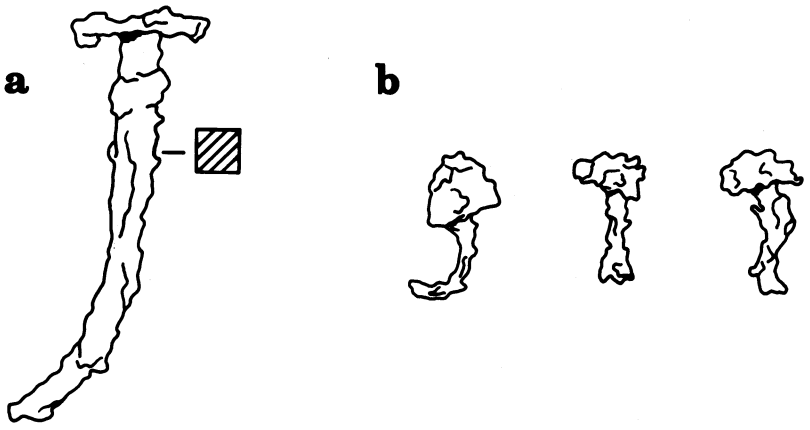

Fig. 5. Metalwork. Scale $\frac{1}{1}$.

but in view of the man's probable age, this need not indicate a rapid rate. Caries was seen in one premolar. The anterior teeth showed no obvious displacement, but the centre of the maxilla is lacking and all the incisors are much worn. The proportions of the skull are similar to those of the skeleton from Grave II; length 188 mm, breadth 143 mm, masto-bregmatic height 146 mm. The proportions of the limb bones differ from those of the skeletons from Graves I and II, the femora being somewhat short and the tibiae normal (right femur 442 mm, tibia 359 mm, humerus 320 mm, ulna 258 mm). The bones of the hands and feet are noticeably longer and stouter than those of the other two skeletons. Osteo-arthritis was severe. Both dorsal and lumbar vertebrae were affected, with ankylosis of several upper thoracics, and destruction of a part of the anterior and posterior articular surfaces of the centra of nearly all the affected vertebrae, forming a shallow oval or irregular pit in the middle of each surface.

This skeleton lay on its right side, with the hip and knee joints flexed and the head and pelvis on their sides in conformity with the rest of the body. Parts of the skull and the extremities were missing, probably ploughed out. (pl. 2).

Estimates of collagen loss and mineralisation

These were arrived at by calcinating bone fragments of known weight and volume, and are expressed as percentages of the amount to be expected in the same volume of fresh unaltered bone.

	Skeleton I	II	III	
Organic	32%	38%	34%	
Mineral	174%	162%	138%	(i.e. gain from surrounding soil)

The figures for mineralisation are probably as much, if not more influenced by the soil composition as by date. The soil at this site becomes increasingly chalky with depth, and their are clear signs in the lower levels of re-deposited calcite leached out from the soil above. The organic figures are therefore of more significance for dating, though the method used is too crude to give an accuracy of more than a few centuries.

Animal bones

The following fragments of animal bone were recovered:

Layer 1: Pig tibia shaft fragment.

Layer 2: Horse large metatarsal distal fragment (breadth 48 mm). Cattle long bone fragments, large L. lunate. Mandible and rib fragments. Sheep/goat rib fragments with knife cuts, vertebra fragment, radius shaft fragment, tibia shaft fragment.

Grave II: Cattle long bone fragment. Sheep/goat maxilla fragment.

Grave III: Sheep/goat tibia shaft fragment.

The publication of this report has been greatly aided by a grant from the Department of the Environment.

PLATE 1. *Grave II.* (Photograph by M. Haslam).

PLATE 2. *Grave III.* (Photograph by J. C. Richards).