

Mucking Project: Archive appraisal for the Roman period settlement

Introduction

As detailed in the general introduction to the site's paper and computer archive (above), the analytical potential of the Mucking Archive for the Roman-period settlement (as for all the phases of activity) is extremely high, and far exceeds initial expectations. This section will deal first with the cemeteries, before moving on to look at the potential of the archaeological features, and how these might be integrated with the recorded artefactual and ecological data.

The Roman cemeteries at Mucking

Roman Mucking has four discrete cemetery areas (Cemeteries 1-4), plus areas of LPRIA burial (including up to seven cremations within square enclosures), and further isolated LIA and RB burials. One hundred and seventy-four Romano-British burials are represented, along with up to fifty later Iron Age burials (mainly cremations). While inhumations are predominantly represented by body stains and silhouettes in the acidic soil, some ageing and sexing information was obtained during MPX from the cremations. All grave-goods and the majority of grave plans are inked up ready for publication. The grave-goods have now been reported on and dated which, together with the stratigraphic and comparative data available, has enabled a phasing to be formulated.

Cemetery 1, lying in an enclosure at the far south-west of the site, to the west of the RBI enclosure, has two distinct phases of burial: a later 1st to 2nd-century group of ten urned cremations, with a subsequent 3rd to 4th-century inhumation cemetery, consisting predominantly of accompanied coffined burials (grave-goods comprising mainly hobnailed boots or sandals, bracelets and accessory vessels).

Cemetery 2 lies within a sub-enclosure of the double-ditched enclosure (DDE) that probably represents the main settlement enclosure: this comprises 16 cremations and 12 inhumations, along with a remarkable *epula* deposit of the later 2nd century: the remnants of a ritual meal, with up to ten place settings represented by lamps, platters, *tazzae*, beakers and coins. Several of the cremations in Cemetery 1 were placed in wooden caskets, along with accessory vessels and other grave-goods generally of 2nd- or early 3rd-century date. The inhumations were more varied: contemporary in date, the adult burials were placed inside coffins (and in two cases wooden vaults), while children were uncoffined, but still furnished, largely with accessory vessels.

Cemetery 3 again lies within its own enclosure, immediately to the north-east of the DDE; it comprises ten cremations and fourteen inhumations. Cremations here again are generally 2nd to 3rd-century in date (accessory vessels often being placed inside the main cremation urn, and no evidence of wooden caskets). Some of the inhumations are coffined, but these are otherwise unfurnished, and difficult to date.

Cemetery 4 lay at the edge of excavation, to the south-west of the DDE. This comprised seventeen cremations and a later 4th-century gypsum burial in a stone coffin. The cremations were, however, earlier in date at mid to later 2nd-century. An interesting practice seen here was the use of platters as lids for cremation vessels, with other accessory vessels placed inside.

A further nine inhumations (some simply furnished and some in unnailed coffins) were found in a linear arrangement next to part of the 'Banjo' enclosure; these are probably PRIA in date. There were a substantial number of apparently isolated burials or small clusters of cremations (a total of twenty

cremations and two inhumations). These occurred in groups of two or three, and sometimes more, and included urned cremations and casket burials. The most favoured position for the digging of these burials was in ditches, usually at the corners of fields and enclosures.

The analytical potential of these cemeteries is considerable: the high proportion of grave furnishing means the cemeteries have been closely dated, and a detailed chronological breakdown has been prepared. This is enabling a thorough analysis of the cemetery and other burial groups by date, location, burial type, degree of furnishing, age and sometimes sex. The interpretation of the significance of these burials can then feed back into the wider interpretation of the Romano-British settlement at Mucking as a whole. Which of these cemeteries were in contemporary use, and do they reflect the presence at Mucking of different social groupings, subsequently distinguished in burial location, type and furnishing?

The Roman settlement at Mucking: background and phasing

Gazetteers have been compiled for the following elements of the Roman-period settlement: the kilns and corn-driers, the enclosures, the wells, and the structures, as well as the cemeteries and isolated burials (see above). Some of these entries had already been compiled during the original MPX stage of the work (mainly by Rosemary Jeffries); these were then taken by Chris Going and used as the basis for his draft texts. We have completed and updated these gazetteer entries, using original notebook data, combined with plans and sections. These thus describe the archaeological features, giving dimensions and relevant details of construction: in all, twenty-three kilns, three corn-driers, eight wells, fifteen structures and a complex series of enclosures are so dealt with (as well as in excess of 250 cremations and inhumations, each of which has a detailed gazetteer entry). What remains to be done is the integration of the settlement finds data with the archaeological information. This section will describe how this might be carried out, before moving on to detail the analytical potential of doing so.

That the finds data exists at all in electronic format is somewhat remarkable. While a few classes of data (in particular the flint and some of the fired clay) were migrated onto the Torch system used by the EH/BM phase of the project, the majority of the finds cataloguing data existed only on a series of 8-inch floppy disks, last updated in 1983. With the help of a specialist company, and with funding from the British Museum, all of this data has been retrieved from the floppy disks and turned into usable spreadsheet data (it should be noted that this data therefore belongs to the British Museum; as its retrieval was not funded by English Heritage, it will not be lodged at this stage with ADS). Relevant to the Roman period settlement, the following amounts of material are fully catalogued and described:

Over 145,000 sherds of LIA and RB pottery (including approximately 2700 Samian, 350 mortaria and 1130 amphorae); over 7000 fragments of tile and CBM, and over 400 fragments of Roman glass.

There are also several other categories of material that are not intrinsically dateable as Roman, but which will comprise large amounts of Roman material, once phased: within this category falls the fired clay and related artefacts, the animal bone, the charcoal, the worked stone, iron, copper alloy and lead artefacts, metalworking slags and related debris.

Obviously, before the analysis of the site can proceed, this material has to be employed in generating a detailed phasing of the site as a whole. At the moment, the finds material (from which phasing of discrete features must be generated) exists as separate spreadsheet files. It is intended to link these together through ArchGIS, so that all the finds from single features can be searched for simultaneously (a far less laborious process than looking up each feature in each spreadsheet separately). For the first time, it will be possible to identify a pit or posthole as Roman, by the presence of RB pottery *and the absence of any later material*.

Using the pottery type-series, which has been refined and updated by Rosemary Jeffries, it will also be possible to present a more detailed phasing of the Roman-period settlement itself (until now this has been phased just as 'Roman', with no further elaboration). Thus, as well as being able to identify discrete features as Roman, it will also be possible to assign them to a phase within the Roman period. The ditches comprising the enclosures can be dealt with in a similar way to refine their phasing. As well as the stratigraphic evidence that is currently documented, the chronological development of the enclosure systems can be tied down using this pottery data. Key to this is that artefactual material was recorded using the Jones' layering system: it is therefore possible to see what pottery (and other material) was found in the lowest fills of ditches; it is this which helps to assign them to phase (as it is the time at which they were dug which is of most relevance here).

The Society of Antiquaries of London has funded work on the other intrinsically-dated material from the Roman period: the coins and other copper alloy material, including the brooches, and the glass. This is all either complete (the coins and brooches) or in progress (the other copper alloy and the glass). This data can be used alongside the pottery in the site phasing. Once the full phasing of the Roman period settlement is achieved (and this is something which goes far beyond what the project set out to do, which was merely to produce a Roman site plan), the full analytical potential of the site can be explored. One point to note here is the (now) unusual density at which features were excavated. Between 75% and 100% of every feature was excavated, and all the finds recorded (against a modern – perhaps inadequate - sample of 10% for ditches and 50% for most discrete features). Essentially, this is a site recorded in three dimensions through its finds, and its like will not be seen again; it has enormous potential for exploring different sampling strategies.

The Roman settlement at Mucking: analysis

Analysis of the site needs to proceed on three different levels: looking at the site as a whole; characterisation of the enclosures and other site areas, and focusing in on particularly interesting features or assemblages as case studies. Approaches to these are described here in turn.

Romano-British archaeology has become increasingly adept at using finds material in combination with archaeological data to characterise sites. With the realisation of the range of variability seen in the Roman landscape, the potential of finds assemblages to define what 'type' of site is being dealt with is being more fully explored (Hingley and Willis 2007). Coin profiles have been used in this way for decades (Reece 1980), but it is also possible to expand this approach into other artefactual classes. The coin profile from Mucking is predominantly early, with a general absence of 3rd- and 4th-century coinage, and a profile closest to a number of early military sites. This is something worth exploring; Margaret Jones consistently referred to the RBI enclosure as 'the paramilitary enclosure', and the number of early brooches on the site, as well as the transitional pottery assemblages, and a series of LPRIA burials, strongly indicate considerable pre-Conquest activity. An initial aim will therefore be to identify the chronological duration of the settlement at Mucking: when does it start (is there continuance from the high density of MIA settlement?), and for how long does it continue? Although the coin profile does not indicate extensive later Roman settlement activity, the initial pottery distributions suggests that there may be an element of 3rd- and 4th-century activity or settlement, as do a number of the burials.

Having defined the chronological extent of the settlement, the next matter to deal with is its nature. Margaret Jones saw Mucking as the infields of a villa settlement, assuming the villa itself lay off to the east. This is now not considered a viable model for the site. In its layout of enclosures, Mucking strongly resembles other recently excavated sites (such as that at Langdale Hale in Cambridgeshire), and is probably a fairly 'normal' Roman rural settlement, with the core of the settlement excavated, rather than just its periphery (although what 'normal' is, in terms of Roman rural settlements, has yet to be subject to detailed critique). This is a hypothesis that needs fully exploring, however, given its tentative indications of possible military involvement (and full discussion of the role of the kiln industry will be key here), and its highly strategic location overlooking that part of the River Thames that may well have seen a major crossing. The site's involvement in trade networks also needs analysis (again, centred on the pottery industry, but also other imports and possible exports): was this a producer site for products other than pottery (something the animal bone and worked stone may help indicate)? Finally, what was the status of the settlement? Comparison of its finds assemblages against other local and regional sites will be necessary (with care taken to compare assemblages statistically, in order to account for the variation in sampling strategies). The findings from the cemeteries can also be drawn in here, as they give a direct link to the resident population of the site through the Roman phases (and the high status late 4th-century stone coffin burial in Cemetery IV is particularly intriguing in this context).

Having established the duration and probable nature of the settlement, its inner workings will need more detailed analysis. The Roman settlement is comprised of a series of

enclosures (with two of the Roman cemeteries reusing existing Late Iron Age enclosures), which presumably were either of differing date or function (or both). With the refinement of the phasing, the development of the enclosure systems will have been mapped (and its relationship with the LIA occupation explored). The finds data, together with the archaeological detail, can then be used to explore what the enclosures were used for. While there are fifteen timber structures already assigned to the Roman-period settlement, the phasing may well reveal more, as well as indicating possible sites for others. Analysis of the nature of these structures, and the finds assemblages from nearby ditches and negative features, can help shed light on their function and duration (for a comparable approach to a major Anglo-Saxon settlement, see Lucy *et al.* forthcoming). Enough Roman timber buildings are now documented (for example in excess of 65 from the major site at Earith Campground) to provide adequate parallels, and data for comparison. Again, the interaction with the kilns of the major pottery industry will need defining, and the location of the corn-driers (now identified as probable malting ovens), and butchered animal bone will shed light on potential agricultural processing areas of the site. Again, status is an issue that will need addressing, in relation to the zoning of the site: can areas of higher status activity be defined, either through the structural evidence or through the finds distributions?

Finally, there will be aspects of the structural sequence that are of intrinsic interest, and will demand detailed analysis through a series of case studies. The corn-driers have already been mentioned, and the structures will also require this detailed treatment, as will several of the wells (the kilns have a detailed report already). One feature that consistently stands out is Well 4, located in the Double-Ditched Enclosure (DDE). This massive feature [measurements] stands out for its remarkable finds assemblage: [more details]. Its chronological history and function (is it a 'ritual shaft'?) will comprise one of the key case studies.

In short, the Roman settlement at Mucking deserves thorough and detailed analysis, and its recording –both of features and of finds – is more than capable of sustaining this. It is unique, both in terms of its sheer extent (having four Roman cemeteries and a large series of enclosures stretching over 28 hectares makes it one of the largest and most complete Roman rural settlements ever excavated), but also in terms of its density of excavation and quality of finds recording. It has the potential to be the standard against which all other Roman rural settlement excavations can be compared.