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ROMAN GODMANCHESTER

H. J. M. GREEN

Part III: Emmanuel Knoll

SUMMARY

THE excavation in 1971 of the roadside mound on which Emmanuel Knoll tree formerly stood showed the mound to be a natural feature accidentally formed by nineteenth-century ditching round the base of the tree. However, much additional information was obtained about the nearby excavation in 1914 of the original tumulus called Emmanuel Knoll, including unpublished grave goods. This material is published here together with a reassessment of the original discovery. This comprised a primary in-urned cremation with accompanying grave goods. The burial dates to the late second or early third century.

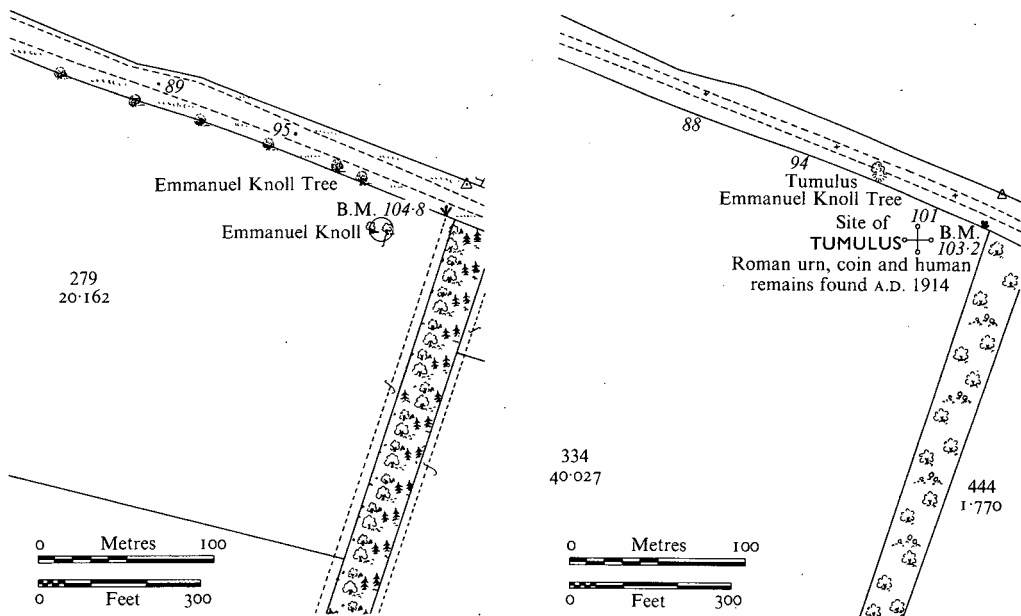
INTRODUCTION

The proposal by the Eastern Road Construction Unit of the Department of the Environment to improve the A 604 east of Godmanchester in 1972-3 necessitated the removal of the roadside mound on which Emmanuel Knoll tree formerly stood. This mound which lies immediately south of the road about a mile outside the town (TL 265701), had long been considered to be a tumulus¹ and was a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Fig. 1*a*). Arrangements were therefore made for its excavation, which were carried out over a period of a week in August of 1971. The work was supervised for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society by the writer and was financed by a grant from the Department of the Environment.

The field lying to the south of the mound is farmed by Mr Edward Page, who is the last survivor of the group who watched the excavation of the nearby tumulus, known as Emmanuel Knoll,² on his father's land in 1914 (Fig. 1*b*). Although unfamiliar with the published report, his clear memory of this boyhood event confirms and substantially amplifies our knowledge of the original excavation. The late Mr Inskip Ladds, the architect, made careful measurements of the structure at the

¹ S. Inskip Ladds, 'Excavation at Emmanuel Knoll, Godmanchester, Hunts.', *Trans. C. and H. Arch. Soc.* iv (1915), 16. C. Fox, *The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region* (Cambridge, 1923), p. 198. *R.C.H.M. Hunts.* (1926), p. xxxiii and p. 116.

² Stukeley's Diaries and Letters, *Publications of the Surtees Society* II (1883), 218-19. Ladds, *loc. cit.* pp. 14-16. Fox, *op. cit.* p. 195. *V.C.H. Hunts.* I (1926), 254 and pl. II, 4. *R.C.H.M. Hunts.* (1926), p. xxxiii and p. 106. G. C. Dunning & R. I. Jessup, 'Roman barrows', *Antiquity* xxxvii (1936), 50.



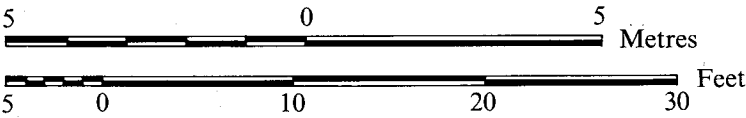
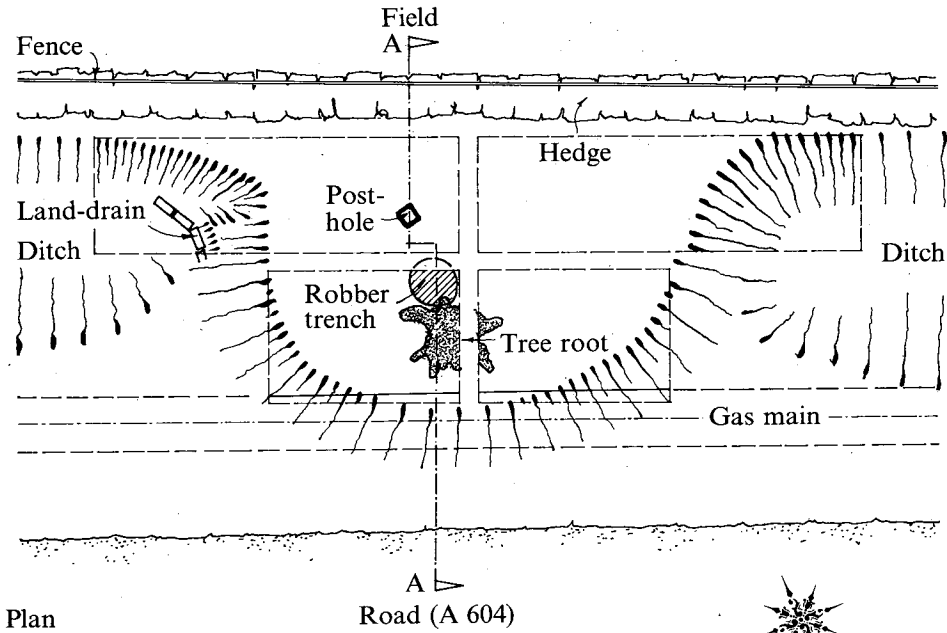
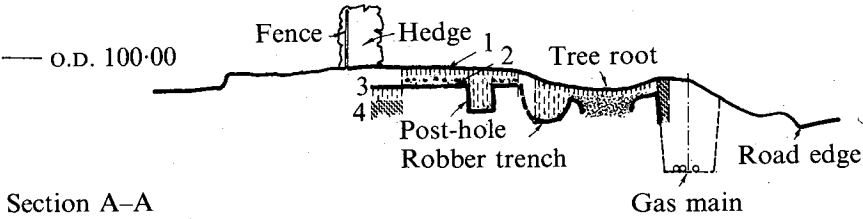
° Fig. 1. Emmanuel Knoll; site plan.
 (a) O.S. 1888. (b) O.S. 1926.

time. Using these together with his description and that of Mr Page it has been possible to reconstruct the mound and burial (Fig. 3). The reconstruction is necessarily somewhat schematic, but is believed to be substantially correct.

The deficiencies of the 1915 account were apparently due to an unfortunate incident which, understandably, did not feature in the report. Shortly after the discovery of the burial urn, the decorum of the inspecting party of antiquarians was disturbed by an acrimonious exchange about the ownership of the pot. This led to the precipitate exit of the visitors before the excavation could be properly completed and the remaining grave goods discovered.

Both former mounds lie near the top of a spur of high ground, at about 100.00 ft O.D., overlooking the Great Ouse river valley and the town of Godmanchester. The subsoil is a brown-blue chalky boulder clay (C horizon) with a yellow-brown weathered boulder clay (B horizon) above. The latter is known locally (but geologically incorrectly) as 'gault' and contains chalk and flint. Where preserved under the roadside hedge the 'gault' (layer 3, Fig. 2) is 1 ft 6 in. thick and has a 12 in. soil cover (A horizon). In the adjoining field the plough soil is also about 12 in. thick, but comparison of the relative levels suggests that the old weathered B horizon has largely been ploughed out in the last century or so, with perhaps a considerable soil creep downhill.

Godmanchester
Emmanuel
Knoll tree 1971



- Clay
- Clayey loam
- Gravel
- Wood fibre

Fig. 2. Emmanuel Knoll tree.

Godmanchester
Emmanuel Knoll 1914

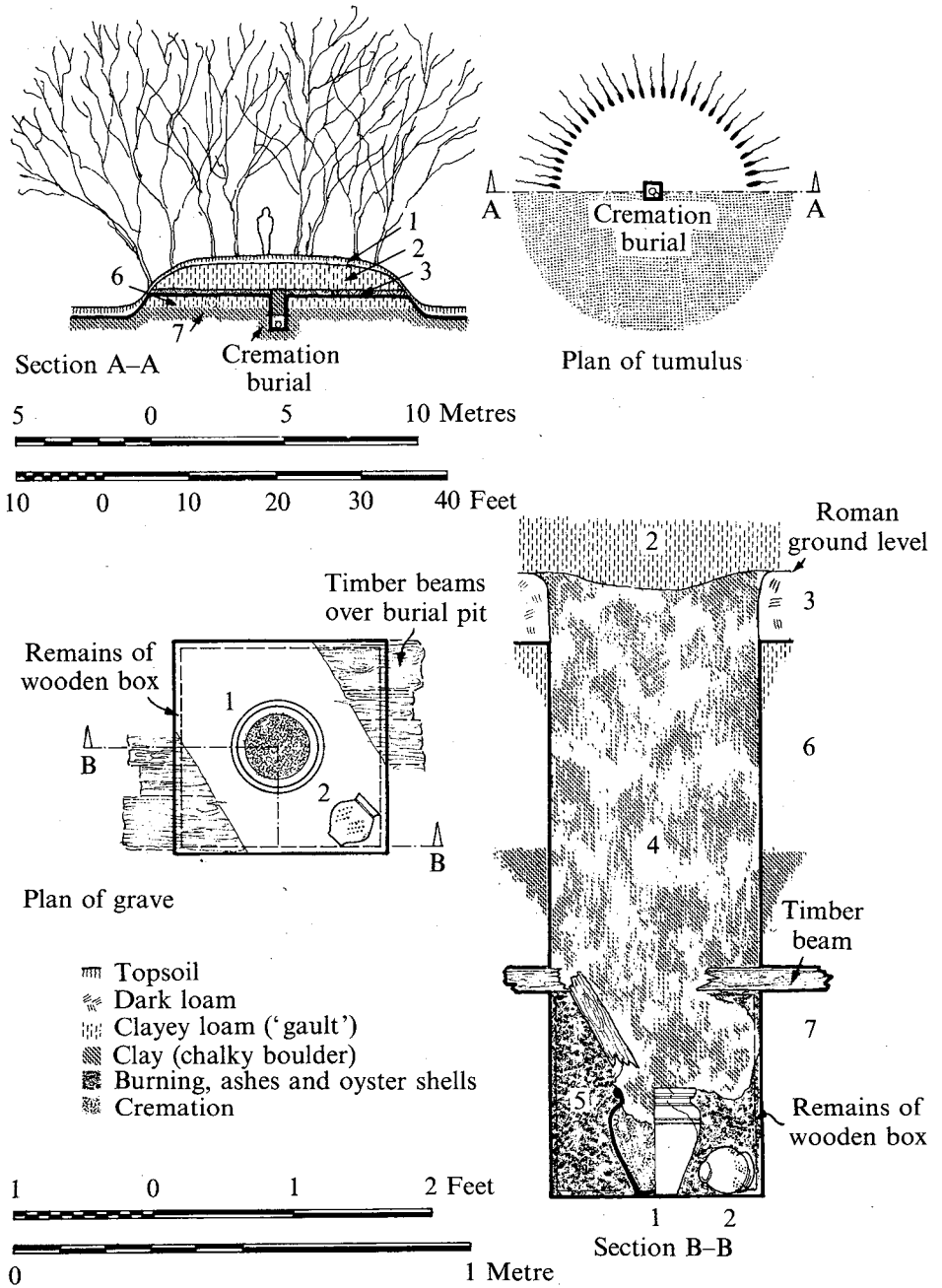


Fig. 3. Emmanuel Knoll.

EMMANUEL KNOLL TREE (Fig. 2)

The old wych elm which crowned the mound was blown down in about 1944. In 1971, after clearing the mound of undergrowth and suckers from the roots, the surface was stripped using a modified quadrant method. It rapidly became clear that it was not a true mound at all, but rather the survival of a promontory of ground projecting from the field. On the east and west sides deep road ditches had been dug up to the roots of the tree, and the drainage flow maintained by providing a land drain round the north side. Before the road was metalled in the last century erosion of the road surface had led to a hollow-way effect on the hill slope, with the result that the present road surface is some 3 ft below the field level on the south side of the road. The ground round the foot of the tree was not subject to this process, with the result that a small mound was gradually formed.

The reason for the careful preservation of Emmanuel Knoll tree is not now clear. However, the site is close to the parish border and there is an unsubstantiated local tradition that it was a hanging tree.

Date

Study of the material from the primary filling of the road ditches suggests that they date only from the mid-later nineteenth century. On the mound itself, apart from an unstratified sherd of Roman colour-coated ware, nothing earlier than the nineteenth century was found. The archaeological evidence is supported by the early O.S. 25 in. series of 1888 (Fig. 2*a*), which shows the tumulus excavated in 1914 and Emmanuel Knoll tree, but there is no indication of the mound beneath the tree. The O.S. 25 in. map of 1926, however, clearly shows this mound (Fig. 1*b*).

Features

Immediately beneath the turf on the top of the mound was found a 3 in. layer of gravel (layer 2) overlying the natural. This appears to be the metalling of a road, perhaps the southern edge of the main road. Pottery and glass from layer 2 date to the earlier nineteenth century. No trace of Roman metalling or road ditches was found, although Walker¹ notes having seen a section through the road in this vicinity.

Two features post-dated layer 2. A substantial 12 in. square post-hole was found 5 ft south of the tree. The post had been withdrawn at some period and the hole backfilled with clayey loam. The post would not appear to have formed part of the

¹ Walker, *Proc. C.A.S.* VIII (1909-10), 163 n. 3*b*.

field boundary, but its alignment suggests that it may have been the footing of a prop for one of the branches of the tree. In the centre of the mound and of recent construction was a small round pit, dug probably by treasure hunters.

EMMANUEL KNOLL (Fig. 3)

The tumulus

The former mound lay some 70 ft south of the road hedge and 125 ft west-north-west of Emmanuel Knoll Plantation (Fig. 1). The mound is recorded to have been about 32 ft in diameter (45 ft on the O.S. map of 1888) and 5-6 ft in height with a slightly flattened top. On the summit was a copse of 6 or 8 wych elms (known locally as 'doddles').

The body of the mound was 'composed of clay with chalk nodules', which included ammonites and an admixture of dark loam. The material was probably derived from the Roman A and B horizons (layers 3 and 6, respectively, Fig. 3). No surrounding ditch is recorded, but this, if shallow, may already have been ploughed out.

Mr Page remembers that the blue clay subsoil (layer 7) appeared after the mound had been cleared to field level. This suggests that the Roman A and B horizons lay at a higher level in the mound but were not recognized at the time. A possible reconstruction of these levels is shown in the drawn section (Fig. 3), but their exact thickness is not known.

The burial

On levelling the mound the burial chamber was not evident, and it was not until a trench was dug across the centre that it was discovered by the workmen falling through into the grave. This lay near the centre of the mound with the bottom at a depth of 2 ft 6 in. from the surface of the field. The grave had been dug to contain an 18-in. square box whose decayed remains and nails were found round the edges of the hole. Judging from the clenched nails, the sides of the box must have been about $\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick.

Standing upright in the centre of the box was the funerary urn (Appendix II no. 1) holding the cremated remains. In one corner lying on its side was a poppyhead beaker (Appendix II no. 2) containing a sestertius of Commodus (Appendix I no. 1) and an amethyst jewel (Appendix I no. 2). Before closing the box, the inside had been filled with the charred wood and ashes from the funeral pyre. Numerous oyster shells were also found mixed with the burnt debris.

Over the top of the box a roof of ash beams was inserted into the sides of the shaft. Mr Page stated that they were charred, and it seems probable that they were partially burnt timbers re-used from the pyre. The shaft over the grave had been backfilled

with blue boulder clay. The depth of the shaft over the grave is uncertain, but it was probably some 3 ft from the Roman surface. Eventually the decay of the roof timbers resulted in their collapse. Clay poured into the grave and the top of the cinerary urn, which was cracked with the impact.¹

DISCUSSION

In the 1915 report of the excavation the coin, which from its description could only have been that of Commodus (Appendix I no. 1), was stated to have been found amongst the roots on the surface of the mound. Mr Page, however, was adamant that it was really found in the bottom of the poppyhead beaker. The writer believes that Mr Page's version is the correct one, and that the discrepancy must be attributed to the unfortunate circumstances of the excavation. It is possible that the coin found on the surface of the mound is that described as being of Licinius I (A.D. 307–24) from the site of the tumulus, but not published until 1934.² The coin of Commodus is closely dated to A.D. 188–9, but it is very worn and its deposition probably dates to the late second or early third century, a date which is broadly supported by the pottery grave goods. The function of the coin is presumably that of the traditional Charon's fee, sometimes found with cremations but more usually with inhumations.³ The burial is thus rather late, both as a cremation and in the tradition of tumulus burials,⁴ reflecting perhaps old-fashioned religious practices in a rural area.

The tumulus is believed to have been the smallest in Britain.⁵ Another distinctive feature was its truncated top. This is commonly found amongst Roman tumuli, but the absence of a surrounding ditch is unusual.⁶ The use of wooden chests or boxes to house the cremation appears to be particularly common in the Cambridge area. The best known, of course, are from the Bartlow Hills.⁷ At a humbler level the tumulus at Deadman's Hill, Barton probably also had a wooden container.⁸ Other cremation burials in wooden chests are known from the flat cemeteries at Litlington⁹ and Girton.¹⁰

The sex of the cremation is uncertain. All diagnostic bone and teeth fragments had already been removed, possibly by the late Dr J. R. Garrood, at the time of the

¹ Mr Inskip Ladds suggests that the cracking was due to the expansion and contraction of the clay, but at this depth under the mound the moisture level in the clay would have remained constant.

² *Trans. C. and H. Arch. Soc.* v, 251.

³ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and burial in the Roman World*, p. 49.

⁴ J. Liversidge, *Britain in the Roman Empire*, pp. 476 and 497.

⁵ Toynbee, *op. cit.* p. 181.

⁶ Dunning and Jessup, *loc. cit.* p. 38.

⁷ For a recent summary see Liversidge, *op. cit.* pp. 395 f.

⁸ Fox, *op. cit.* p. 196.

⁹ A. J. Kemp, 'Account of Sepulchral Vessels found in 1821 at Litlington', *Arch.* xxxvi (1836), 368–76.

¹⁰ E. Hollingworth and M. O'Reilly, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Girton College* (1925).

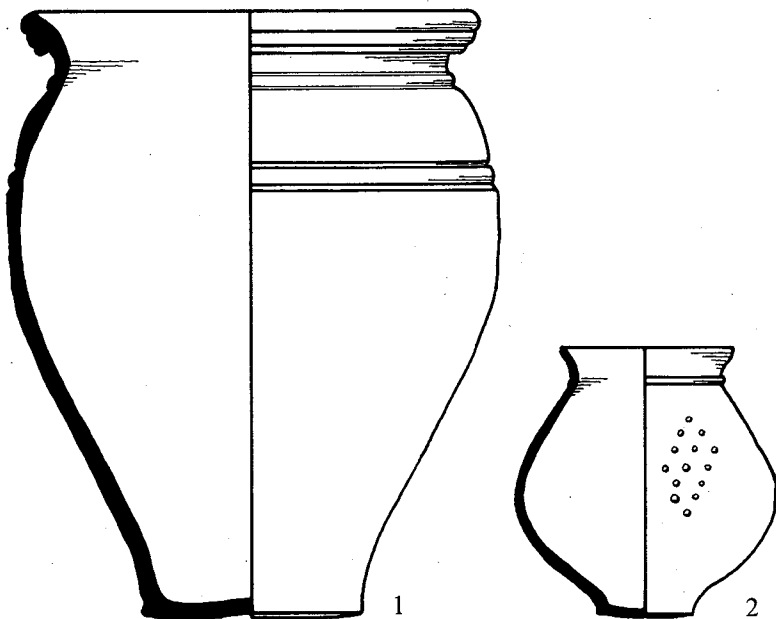


Fig. 4. Pottery grave goods from Emmanuel Knoll. Scale 1 : 3 (approx.).

original discovery. The presence of the amethyst suggests, perhaps, that it may have been a woman.

The oyster shells in the grave are probably from the funeral feast (*silicernium*). If they had been grave offerings they might perhaps have been expected to be in some sort of container. Animal bones from the funeral feast are known from the tumulus at Riseholme, Lincolnshire.¹

It is possible that the Emmanuel Knoll tumulus may have been the focus of a cemetery such as has been found elsewhere in south-east England.² The earlier account of the tumulus in Stukeley's diary of 25 July 1740 states 'A tumulus on this road upon the first eminence beyond Godmanchester. This was a Roman burial place, many urns etc. have been dug up here.'³ No trace of these discoveries survives now and Mr Page says that he has found nothing when ploughing. It is likely that the burials were found when the upper levels were ploughed out (see above).

¹ Liversidge, *op. cit.* p. 493.

² R. F. Jessup, 'Walled Cemeteries in Roman Britain', *J. Brit. Ass.* ser. 3, xxii (1959), 11-32.

³ Stukeley, *loc. cit.* p. 219.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Huntingdon and Peterborough County Council who kindly gave permission for the work to be carried out on the site of Emmanuel Knoll tree, and generously loaned equipment to enable the site to be fenced off. The various statutory undertakers of services in the area were also approached, and in particular the Eastern Gas Board and the Post Office Telephones whose lines ran close to the mound. Officials from these utilities kindly visited the site and located the exact position of their services. Much friendly help was also given by Mr Dant and Mr Page whose land adjoined the site. I am deeply indebted to Mr Page for the information about the 1914 excavation of Emmanuel Knoll, and for allowing the material from the excavation to be drawn and the coin to be examined by the British Museum. I wish to thank Mr R. A. G. Carson for identifying the coin. I am also grateful to officers of the Department of the Environment and the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, particularly Miss S. A. Butcher, Miss J. Liversidge and Mr C. J. E. Steff, for helping to arrange and finance the excavations.

APPENDIX I

Small finds from Emmanuel Knoll burial

(1) Copper sestertius of Commodus in worn condition. The coin is of B.M.C. Commodus 625-6 type with *obv.* laureate head right and *rev.* Mars standing left with spear. Minted *c.* A.D. 188-9. Found in the poppyhead beaker (Appendix II no. 2). Not illustrated.

(2) Oval polished stone of amethyst which was egg shaped, the size of a blackbird's egg (Mr Page). The stone was possibly from a necklace or earring, whose bevel setting was perhaps destroyed at the time of the cremation. Found in the poppyhead beaker (Appendix II no. 2). Not illustrated (lost).

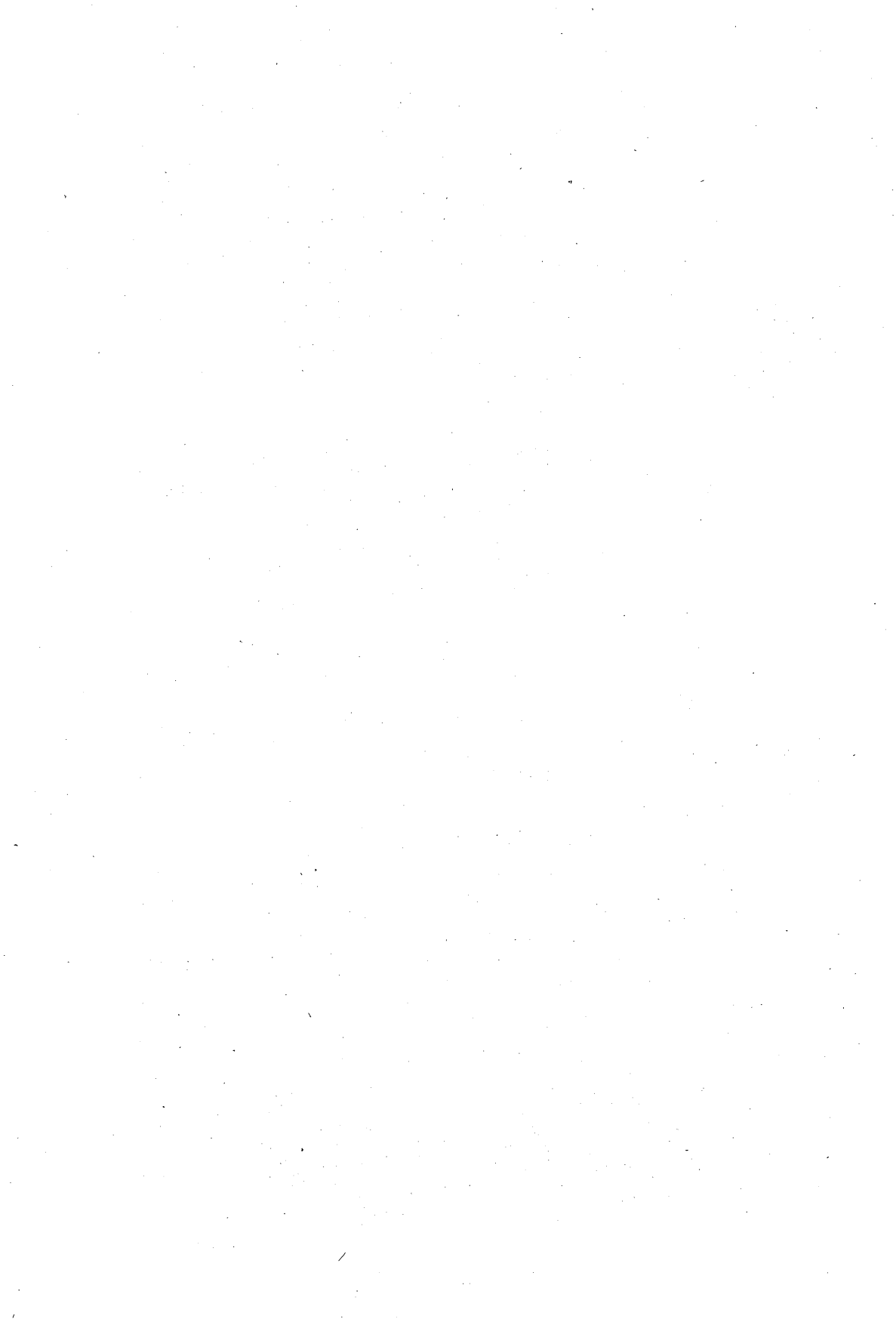
APPENDIX II

Pottery from Emmanuel Knoll burial (Fig. 4)

(1) Cinerary urn with reed rim and cordons on neck and shoulder. Buff-pinkish fabric with grey-black patches on surface (the vessel is not of black Castor ware as stated in the 1915 report). The upper part is cracked. The urn is a variant of the standard type of local cooking pot during the second and third centuries. A close parallel from pit R78 at the *Mansio* site, Godmanchester, dates to the late second century.

(2) Poppyhead beaker with everted rim, cordon on neck and foot ring. Barbotine panels of diamond shape. Grey fabric. Cf. with parallel from grave group 1 from No. 52 Cambridge Villas, Godmanchester, dating from the second half of the second century.¹

¹ C. F. Tebbutt, 'Roman Cremation Group from Godmanchester', *Proc. C.A.S.* LIV (1961), 83 and pl. XII(b).



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