RPS Planning, Transport and Environment

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A19/A64 INTERCHANGE, FULFORD

ROAD IMPROVEMENT SCHEME

REPORT ON AN

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

CONTENTS

List of Figures

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1. Introduction

On the 16th of April 1997, York Archaeological Trust was called by the York Coroner's Officer to inspect a stone sarcophagus discovered whilst machine excavating a new drainage service trench at the Fulford A19/A64 interchange road improvement scheme (NGR SE 6135 4790). Following this an archaeological watching brief was carried out on the 16th and 17th of April to retrieve it and the skeletal remains of a burial found inside. Further monitoring was also carried out on excavation work in the area where the sarcophagus was originally located. The work was funded by North Yorkshire County Council and was carried out with the assistance of the Highways Agency and Caddick Construction. The site lies just to the west of the A19 and south of the A64 in what was formerly agricultural land to the north-east of the former Naburn Hospital.

1.1 Methodology

The methodology was based purely on a rescue operational basis as it was a chance find not predicted within the planning process. On arrival at the site it was clear that the remains had been heavily disturbed, the sarcophagus only being recognised at a late stage when it had been machined out of its original position, and inverted on the spoil heap. It was carefully excavated from the spoil heap under strict archaeological supervision using a JCB site master mechanical excavator, and the part of the sarcophagus containing the skeletal remains was carefully turned over. The skeletal remains discovered within were photographed, sketched and carefully excavated and recorded. The sarcophagus itself was also photographed and carefully recorded. The remainder of the machine excavation work on the drainage trench was carried out under close archaeological supervision.

Site records and finds are currently stored with York Archaeological Trust under the Yorkshire Museum accession code YORYM: 1997.51

1.2 Geology and Topography

The natural geology of the area is glacial sand and gravel (Geological Survey of Great Britain (England and Wales) Sheet 71 1973). The topography was difficult to discern in the immediate vicinity of the burial due to heavy landscaping by the new road improvements and the A64 which lies directly North of the site. It would seem that the burial was situated on a slope that rises to the south east from the A19.

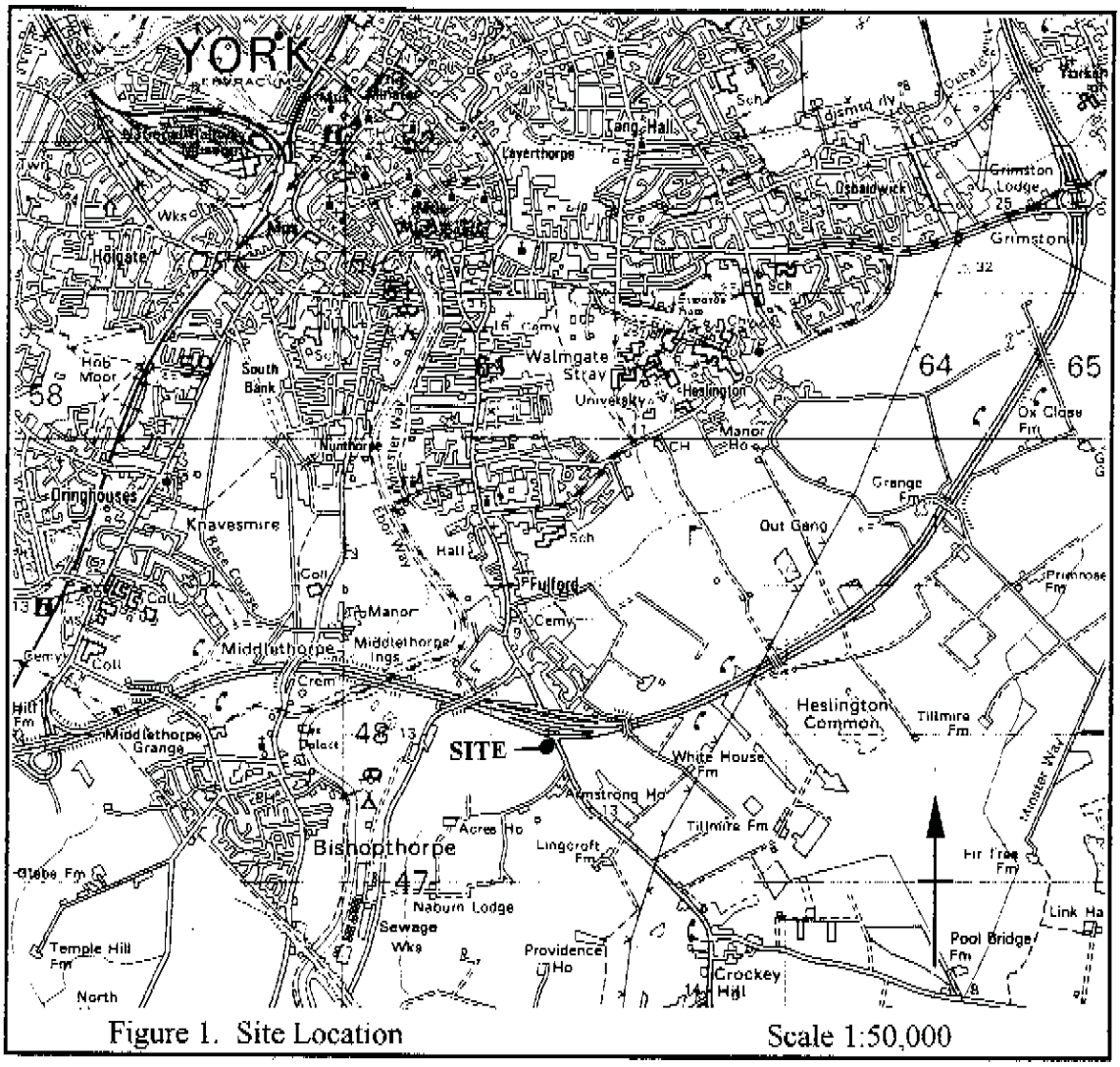

Figure 1. Site Location

1.3 Archaeological and Historical Background

Prior to the discovery of the Roman sarcophagus at the new road improvements scheme, little was known archaeologically about the site. During the construction phase of the A64 in 1973-4, Roman pottery was recovered during fieldwalking in the area close to the A19. The only substantial Roman settlement is the Roman town of York (Eboracum) that lies c. 4.5 km to the NNW. However, excavations at Lingcroft Farm 0.75 km SSE have revealed evidence of Romano-British field systems dateable to the 2nd-century AD (Jones, 1988), possibly hinting at a villa landscape. Other recent excavations to the north-east at Germany Beck, Fulford by MAP Archaeological Consultancy Ltd in 1996 also revealed further possible evidence of a villa landscape dateable from the 1st - 4th-centuries AD (Finney, pers comm and CBA Forum 1996), but to date the site of the villa(s) associated with this landscape have

remained elusive. Therefore in the light of the intensity of Romano-British land use and occupation discovered in the vicinity, the probable wealth and prosperity of its inhabitants, and its proximity to a rich centre of Roman culture in the form of the Roman town of York (Eboracum), such a find is thought not to be unusual for the area.

2.0 Results

The excavation results are presented in the order in which recovery, assessment and recording was chronologically carried out on site.

Natural subsoil was found to be a mid-yellowish orange sand (1000). The grave cut (1001) excavated for the interred sarcophagus appears to have cut into this natural subsoil layer but upon arrival at the site this was completely unrecognisable due to machine disturbance. The grave appears to have been disturbed at least twice before, once probably in antiquity possibly by grave robbers and the second in modern times, as disturbance seen in section reached down from just below the plough-soil. The sarcophagus also seemed to confirm this hypothesis as a number of fragments appeared to have weathered breaks indicating that it had been broken in antiquity.

2.1 The Gritstone Sarcophagus

The Sarcophagus was made of gritstone and would have originally been in two parts. On discovery the lid (1003) was in five fragments and appeared complete, and the base or coffin (1002) was in approximately 20 fragments and may be incomplete. Both were roughly cut and still show tool marks on the surface, but unfortunately no inscription was found. The base, used to house the burial consisted of a single block of quarried gritstone 0.54 m thick which had been roughly hollowed out to form a space for the body. The hollowed out centre was found to be rectangular in shape with rounded corners at each end with internal dimensions 1.85 m long, 0.38 m wide and 0.38 m high.. The lid, again fashioned from a single block of stone 0.16 m thick at the edge and 0.20 m thick in the middle, was ridged on the upper surface and was flat on the lower. The complete coffin would have stood to a height of 0.74 m and would have been 2.15 m long and 0.62 m wide at the bottom and 0.75 m wide at the top.

2.2 The Skeletal Remains

The skeletal remains (1004) were particularly fragile, and of a fragmentary nature due to the disturbance suffered when machine excavation took place. Only the upper torso of the skeleton survived in a semi-articulated state, none of the lower torso was retrieved. The skeletal remains consisted of the left arm and part of the rib cage, the upper part of the spine and a complete skull. The skull appeared to be tilted down towards the rib cage, whether this was due to decay processes or subsequent disturbance is unclear. The bones were contained within a mid orange brown sand matrix (1006), which was seems likely to have been deposited after burial, probably being washed into the coffin by water seepage.

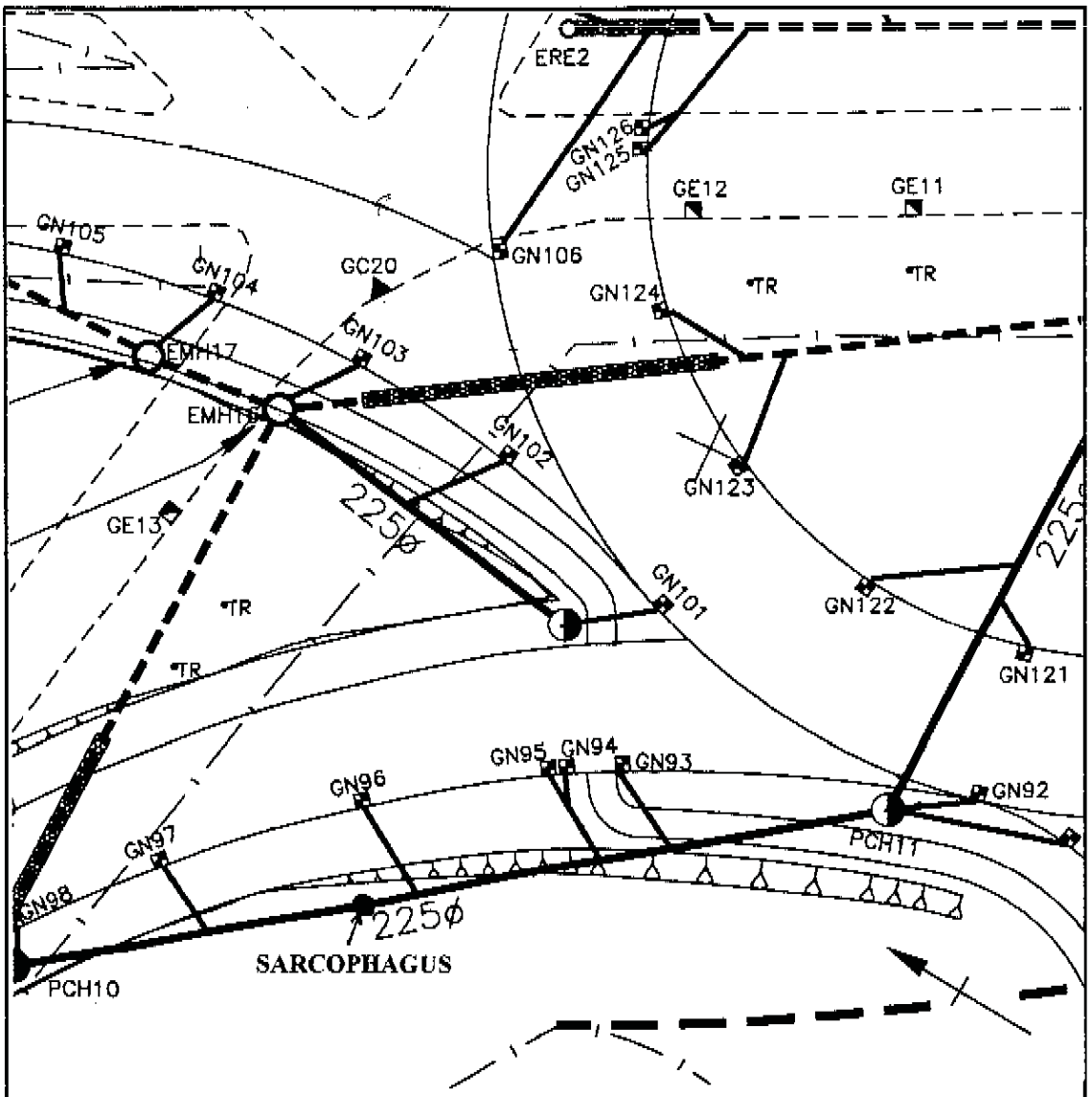

Figure 2. Location of sarcophagus Scale 1: 500

Dr Keith Dobney reports that the skeletal remains were in a fair to poor state of preservation, very fragmented with evidence of recent breaks. Partial remains of the skull, right and left femora, left humerus, right ulna, radius, both clavicles, some ribs and cervical and thoracic vertebrae were present. The individual would appear to have been an adult male - a pronounced mental eminence, large mastoid processes and flared ramus at right angles to the tooth row suggest this.. All epiphyses were fused but uneven wear on the teeth made an estimation of age difficult although 18-25 years of age was suggested. Significant evidence of dental decay was recognised including a large mesial caries lesion on the right lower 1st molar (M1) and moderate lingual calculus throughout. Several teeth had been lost during life. The left maxillary 2nd premolar - 1st molar (P2-M1) and the right maxillary second premolar (P2) were all missing with much associated remodelling of the alveolar bones. The anterior teeth were quite heavily worn.

2.3 Associated materials

The body was surrounded with a light greyish white gypsum (1005), which followed the contours of the skull and the bodies left side, probably being poured into the coffin after the body had been placed in the central hollow. This was examined for evidence of fabric or skin impressions, which may have been left when these materials decayed but none were found although the analysis of the substance as gypsum was confirmed.

2.4 Finds Assessment

No finds were found in direct association with the body, but several sherds of medieval and post-medieval pottery were located unstratified in deposits close to where the coffin was discovered and in spoil deposits located close to the remains on the spoil heap.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The discovery of the inhumation burial within a stone sarcophagus at the Fulford A19/A64 interchange has been significant in shedding new light on the Roman period not only in the local area of Fulford but in Roman York and Yorkshire as a whole. A substantial coffin requiring good transportation routes to get it to its final resting place raises a plethora of questions as to how the sarcophagus arrived here without having a known Roman road nearby. The road network was vital for transportation of artefacts of this kind. Romano-British cemeteries associated with walled urban centres were characteristically placed along Roman roads leading into but remaining outside the walls of these towns. The largest and most substantial burial tombs, mausolea, and sarcophagi of the rich and powerful, often grouped close to the line of these roads to ensure a prominent position not only for pious reasons, but also to remind visitors and locals alike of who the most important people in the community were (Ottaway, 1993, 92).

The inhumation burial rite is thought to have been introduced to Roman Britain from the mid 2nd-century onwards, especially in the major towns and fortresses (Philpott, 1991, 57). Vertical stratigraphic studies from the cemetery at Trentholme Drive, York suggests a probable mid 2nd-century date for some inhumations (Philpott,1991, 58). Unfortunately without any stratified finds from the Fulford inhumation burial it is impossible to assign a date from artefactual evidence alone. But other characteristics of the burial may shed light on this.

Large stone coffins although appearing to become more common in the 4th-century (Philpott,1991,92) are known throughout the Roman period so this cannot be used to assign a more specific date. Its presence however may give us an idea of the social status of the individual. Stone coffins are characteristically identified with the wealthy, their distribution being associated with walled urban towns or high-status rural villas (Philpott,1991,53). Thus it is likely that the individual found within the grave at Fulford is likely to have been of some social standing within the community, having considerable wealth to acquire such a coffin. The rural context does not

preclude the fact that the person was a local land owner, they may have been a York resident, situated only 4.5 km away, who wanted his/her tomb to be seen as travellers approached York, on a route as yet unknown close to the river, possibly even on the line of the modern A19.

The burial of a body either encased, partially encased or sprinkled with gypsum (Calcium Sulphate), known as plaster burial, within a stone, lead or wooden coffin, is an increasingly common aspect of late Roman York, with over 50 now recorded in the local area, 17 of which are of certain 4th-century date (Ottaway,1993,108). Plaster burials appear to be a largely urban phenomenon with major concentrations at other towns such as Dorchester, London, and Colchester (Philpott,1991,90). Yorkshire however seems to be an exception to the rule where the rite appears to have spread out into the hinterland as well. Sources for the gypsum appear to have been local. The earliest securely dated examples in Britain of plaster burials are early 3rd-century in date. Again analysis of a plaster burial within a stone coffin at Trentholme Drive has proved to be of this date (Philpott, 1991, 91).

Gypsum or plaster is highly water retentive and would have functioned as both a liquid absorber during decomposition of the body, and a preventative in ensuring that no water entering the coffin from the outside would reach the corpse. The use of plaster within burials is therefore normally interpreted as an attempt to preserve the body (Philpott, 1991, 92). The rite originates in North Africa before the Christian era but by the 3rd and 4th-centuries AD it was common in Christian cemeteries there (Green 1977 and 1982, Ramm 1971). Philpott after much discussion suggests that

> *'It is likely that it was introduced to some major towns in Britain in the late 2nd or more likely the 3rd century, either directly by N. African immigrants practising their traditional regional rites or as a secondary development by people from Italy or the Rhineland where plaster burial had been adopted from African practices. Some of these immigrants may have been Christians' (1991,95).*
>
> *'The rites popularity in York may have been stimulated, if not actually initiated by the selection of York as the seat of the imperial government in the early 3rd century by the African emperor, Septimus Severus, some of whose officials and entourage would certainly have been familiar with the practice from their homeland'(1991,223).*

One of the main characteristics of these burials is the presence of substantial coffins and often grave goods, in urban and villa cemeteries. This leads to the conclusion that the rite became increasingly fashionable and popular with the wealthy and higher echelons of Romano-British society in the early 4th century. In York the rite may have been imitated from African practices among Roman officials leading to its adoption by local powerful families and eventually a broader popular appeal of a wider social spectrum of the population.

The Fulford burial can therefore be placed within a chronological framework from the early 3rd to the 4th century AD from the burial rites associated with the inhumation. The individual was probably a wealthy individual possibly of high status within the community either resident in York, or a wealthy land owner who possibly resided nearby. The burials location close to the A19 raises the question of whether this follows the course of a Roman road or if not, was there a Roman road that ran close

to the river Ouse ? The cremation cemetery discovered at Fishergate, thought to be of 1st to 2nd century date, is unusual in the fact that it is not on the line of any known Roman road. but it is on the line of medieval Fishergate, which perhaps suggests that this and its continuation , the A19, may have had a Roman precursor.

4. Archaeological Implications

The discovery of a 3rd or 4th century Roman sarcophagus at Fulford, raises questions about Roman transportation routes, land ownership, and burial practices in late Roman York. Indeed, further work in the form of evaluation and excavation in the area is vital to answer some of these questions. Unfortunately further work in connection with the Naburn Hospital development seems unlikely but every effort should be made in the future to ensure proper evaluation prior to development in this area, in the heart of a clearly important Roman villa landscape which can be associated with the work carried out at Lingcroft Farm and Germany Beck.

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