A Roman cremation cemetery at 11–15 Offington Lane, Worthing, West Sussex

by Alice Thorne

with contributions by
Anna Doherty
Charlotte Thompson
Lucy Sibun
Trista Clifford

Five cremation groups were discovered during archaeological work at 11–15 Offington Lane, Worthing in May 2006. The remains comprise a small Roman cemetery, dating from the mid-second to the earlier third century AD. *The results of this evaluation and excavation contribute towards knowledge of the Roman landscape of Worthing and in particular towards the understanding of rural funerary practice in the area.*

INTRODUCTION: LOCATION AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF FIELDWORK

In 2006 Archaeology South-East (a division of the Centre for Applied Archaeology, University College London), were commissioned by Taylor Woodrow Ltd to undertake a field evaluation of land at 11–15 Offington Lane, Worthing (Fig. 1) (NGR TQ 13315 04748). This piece of work was commissioned in response to a planning condition imposed by West Sussex County Council in advance of residential development. The site was located within the back gardens of two adjoining properties at around 17 m OD.

The initial work at the site comprised the machine excavation of six evaluation trenches. All but one was found to be devoid of archaeological remains. However, despite significant modern intrusion within the area, in particular deep flower-beds and garden structures, a small group of cremation vessels were revealed within the southwestern corner of the site, lying *in situ* in a shallow pit. As a result of these discoveries, the work progressed to a stage-2 excavation, and an area of approximately 156 m^2 was opened up for investigation (Thorne 2006).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The settlement pattern within the environs of the site during the Roman period is characterized by rural farmsteads with associated field systems. These rural settlements (many of which originated in the Iron Age) were generally associated with farming, and are thought to have provided increasing competition for the richer farms of Sussex — the villas — by the second century AD (Rudling 1998, 51; 2003, 115).

Whilst there is limited published information available regarding rural settlements on the coastal plain, the West Sussex Historic Environment Record (HER) holds information about a possible Roman settlement site located less than a kilometre to the northwest at Half Moon Lane (HER 3105). This site, excavated in the 1950s, comprised traces of huts, pits and pottery dating from the first to the fourth centuries. There is also evidence of Roman occupation debris and first- to third-century field systems to the southwest and southeast of the site (HER 3298) (HER 3226) (HER 3295). Two further possible villa/occupation sites have been identified to the south at Chapel Road (HER 4321) and near the junction of Grand Avenue and Lansdowne Road (HER 3239). A substantial Roman villa is known approximately 3 km west of the site at Northbrook Colleges, Goring (HER 3314). In addition, the line of the proposed Brighton to Chichester Roman road is thought to pass by to the north of the site (Margary 1947).

Evidence for Roman cremation burial within the area includes two second-century burials identified at Worthing golf course, some 2.5 km to the northwest of the site (HER 3132). Here the accessory vessels included a poppyhead beaker and samian ware. A second-century greyware cremation urn has been found in Findon valley to the north (HER 3002), and a Roman cremation cemetery believed to have contained over 30 vessels was revealed during groundwork in 1881 approximately 2.5 km to the southeast of the site (HER 3321).

Fig. 1. Location plan.

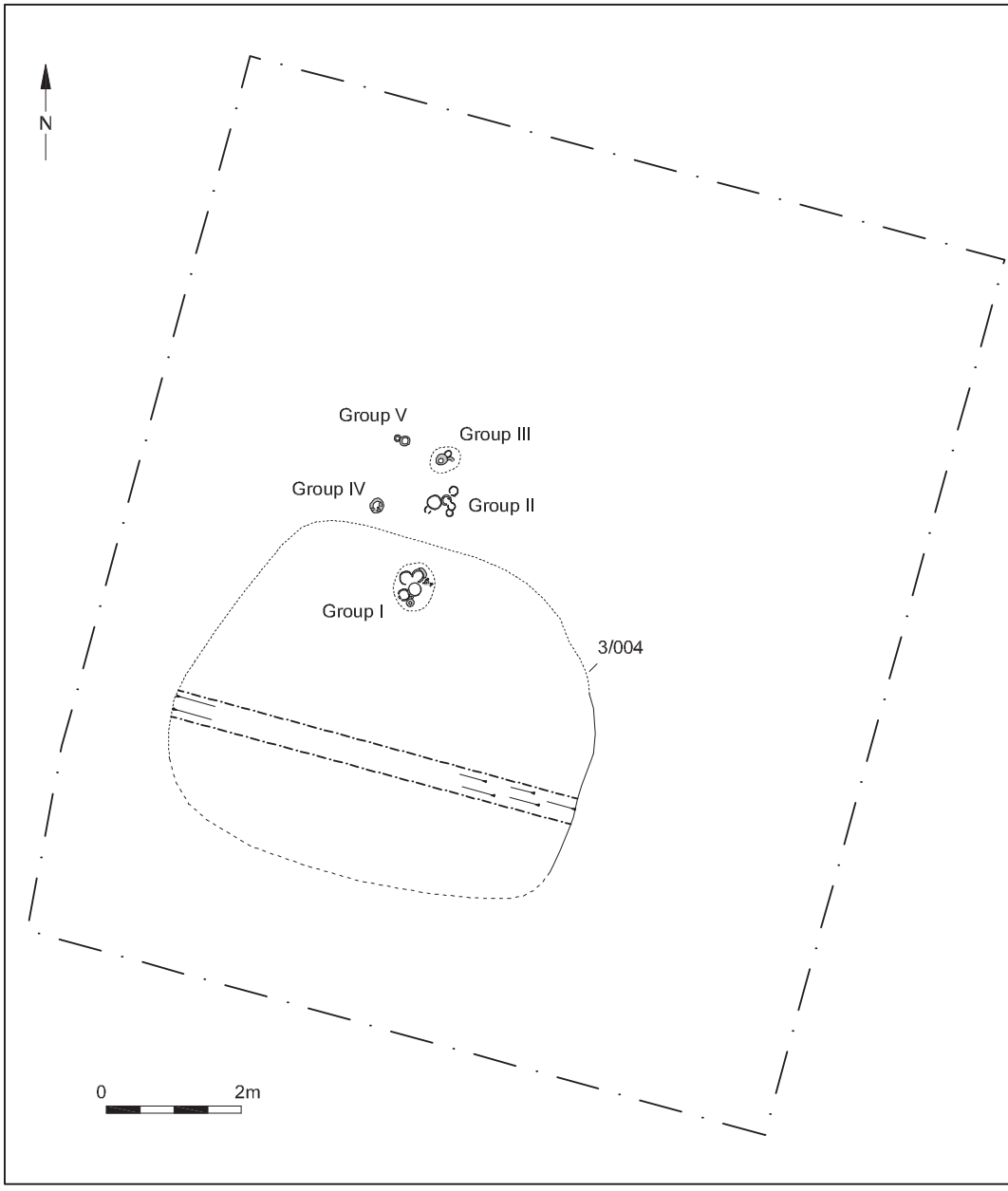

Fig. 2. Site plan.

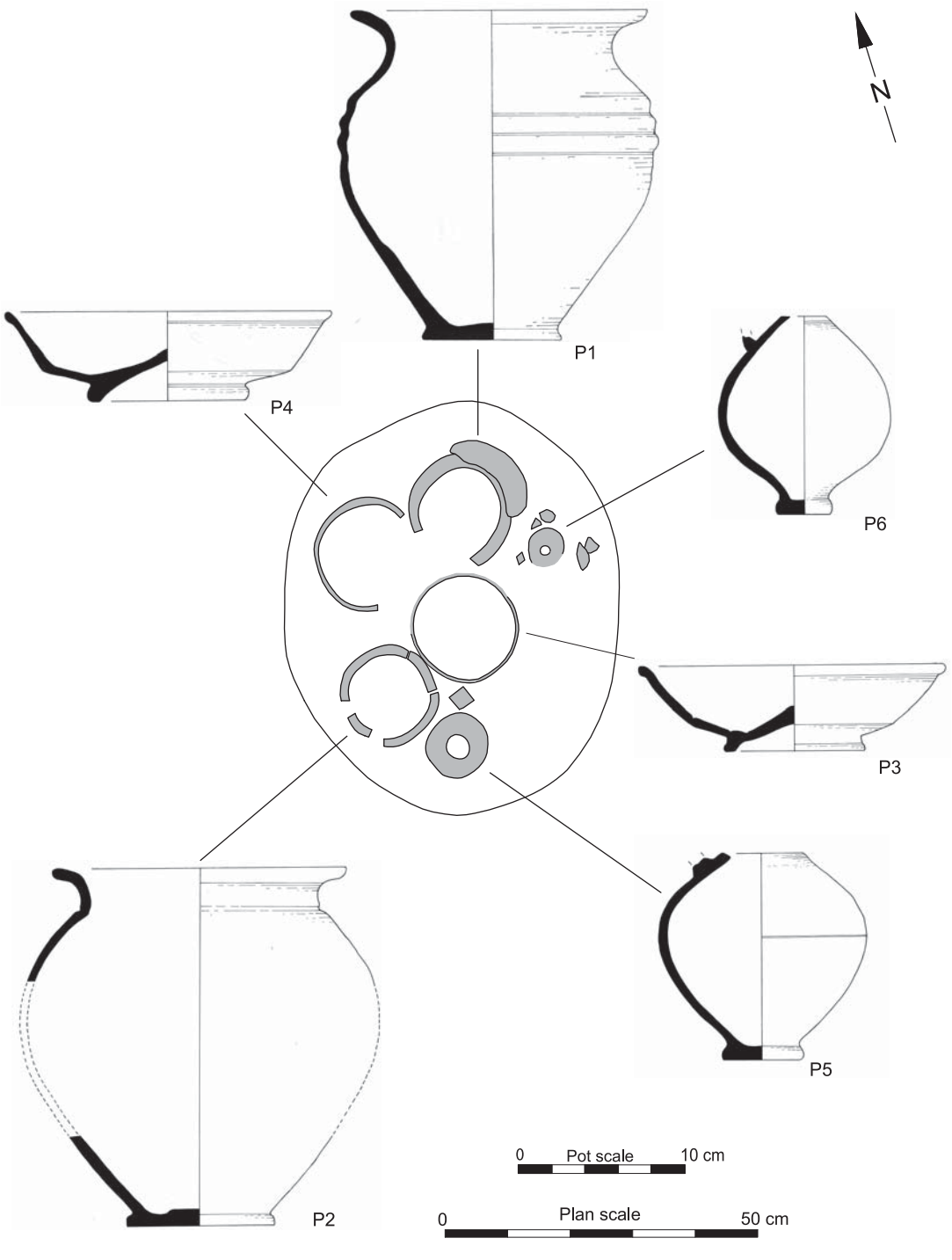

Fig. 3. Group I.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

The excavation revealed five groups of funerary vessels, clustered closely together within a small area of just under 3 m² (Figs 1 & 2). The condition of the pottery vessels was generally good. They had been located immediately below a deep flower-bed and in some cases root systems had penetrated the vessels, leaving them in a fragmented but complete state.

GROUP I (Figs 2 & 3)

Group I comprised a set of six vessels, two of which contained cremated bone. This group was contained within a very ephemeral shallow pit, and as such, represents one burial event. However, it has not been possible to establish if the cremated bone represents the remains of one or two individuals, and it is possible that the assemblage represents two burial groups. Two large subangular flint nodules were located below the vessels, and may have been positioned to aid placement of the assemblage.

The funerary urn, P1, is a necked jar with a rounded shoulder in a fabric similar to locally-produced Arun Valley greywares (Lyne 2003, 142). A similar smaller vessel, P2, also contained fragments of human bone. The funerary vessels were accompanied by two samian Dragendorff 31 dishes P3, P4: one of central and one of east Gaulish origin. Both are stamped on the basal interior but neither stamp is legible because of heavy abrasion. The group also contains two white-ware flagons both truncated above the shoulder. The fabric and body profile of vessel P5 is consistent with types produced locally at Wiggonholt (Evans 1974, fig. 10, 133), whilst the other, P6, is in a slightly finer ware with a bulbous body and an unusual narrow stubby pedestal base. Overall the group is dated to AD 150–230.

GROUP II (Figs 2 & 4)

Despite successive cleaning no feature cut could be identified for Group II. As the group lay directly below a flower-bed this may have been in part due to disturbance resulting from root action.

This group comprised a set of six vessels. The cremated bone was contained within a Rowlands castle greyware jar, P7: a form first produced in the late second century, but mostly dated to the third century at Fishbourne (Cunliffe 1971, 237). The flagon in this group, P8, is an undecorated white-ware vessel. The fabric is strikingly similar to New Forest wares and the narrow neck and simple rim form is fairly similar to Fulford's type 1.3 (Fulford 1975, 1.3, fig. 8, 45); however, considering the dating of the other groups and the simplicity of this form, a date slightly earlier than the main phase of production at the New Forest (beginning around AD 260) seems more likely. Also of particular note in this group are four unsourced Romano-British red-slipped cups, P9–12, imitating samian form Dragendorff 46, which was produced in Gaul between AD 70–230. On balance this group probably dates from the late second to early third centuries.

GROUP III (Figs 2 & 5)

Group III comprised a set of three vessels contained within a shallow sub-oval pit. The cremation was contained within a greyware jar, P13, with a simple upright rim. This is again probably a local product. A heavily abraded central Gaulish samian Dragendorff 27 cup, P14, and a small poppyhead beaker, P15, in Highgate C ware (Davies *et al.* 1994, 82), accompanied the urn. The date range for the group is AD 120–160: probably contemporary with group V and slightly earlier than the other cremations.

GROUP IV (Figs 2 & 6)

Group IV comprised a single cremation contained within a locally-produced jar, P16, with a distinctive pear-shaped profile, dated to the late second or early third century at Fishbourne (Cunliffe 1971, type 324, 240). No accessory vessels accompanied it, and no associated cut could be discerned. However, a small iron plate and fragments of three small copper-alloy conical lion-head mounts indicating the presence of a box or casket were recovered from the surrounding deposit.

The small iron plate is 40 mm long and 10 mm wide, tapering to 5 mm at the opposite, slightly rounded end. The object is highly corroded, but appears to have an iron rivet *in situ* close to the tapered end. Some wood grain is preserved at the widest end. The object is closely paralleled by a tongue-ended strip from a wooden casket at Butt Road, Colchester (Crummy 1983, fig. 90.2205). A fragmentary square-headed iron nail was associated with the plate.

The three high-relief lion-head mounts are of a type closely associated with cremation burials, and were in use from the first to the third century (Partridge 1981, 315–16). All are highly

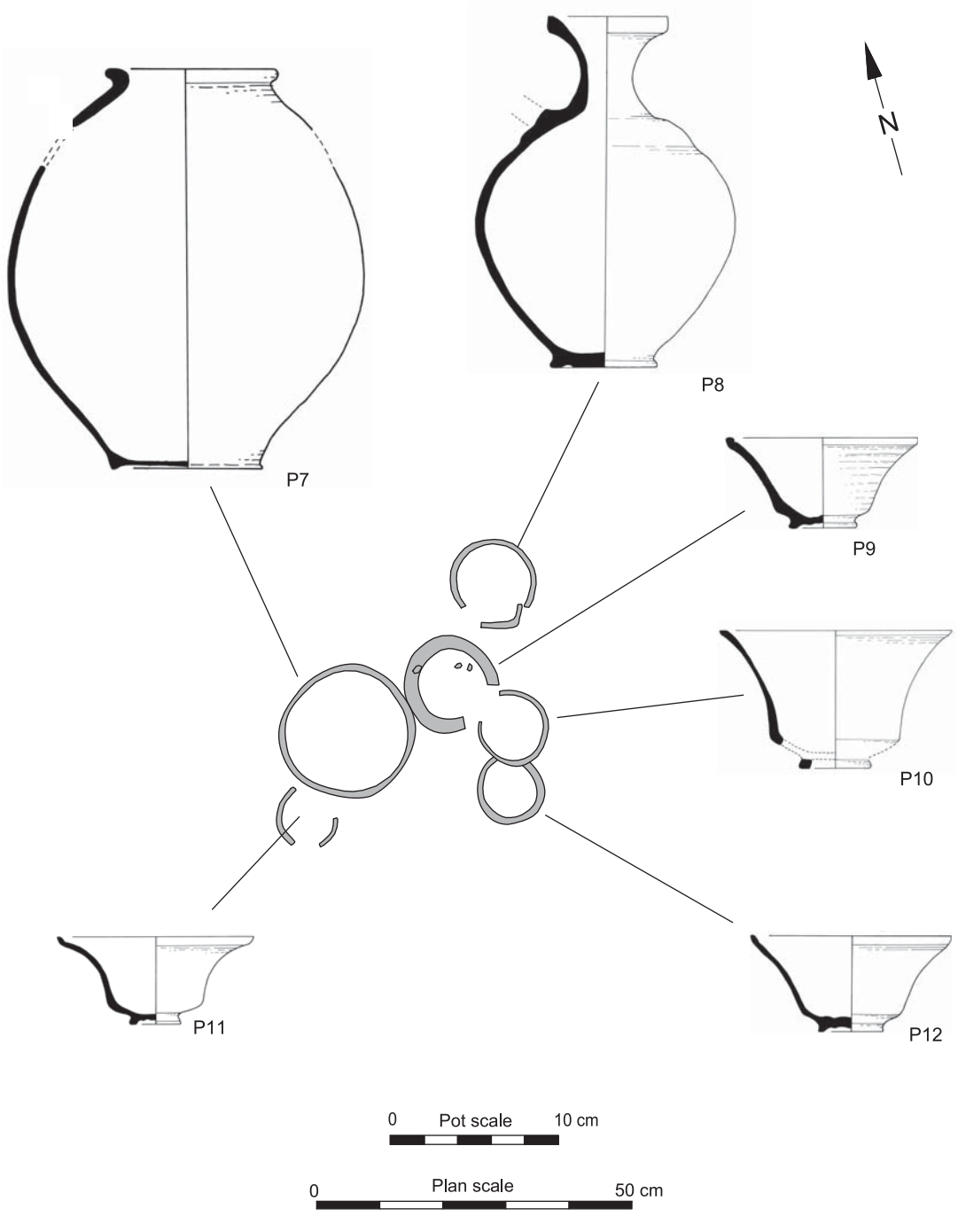

Fig. 4. Group II.

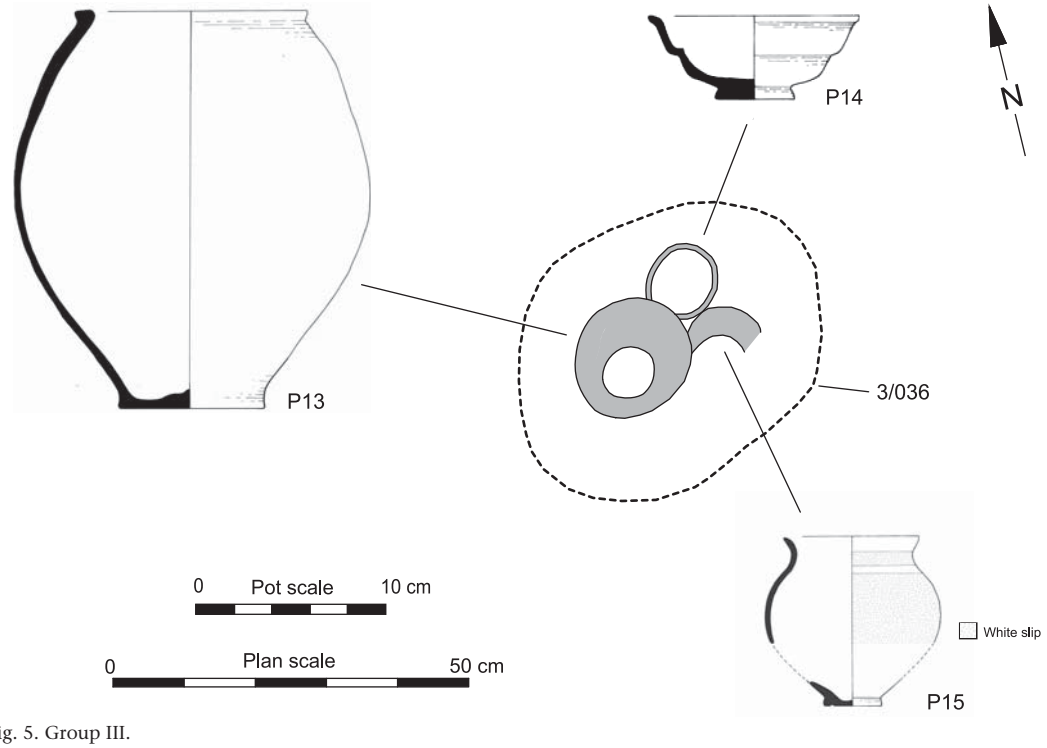

Fig. 5. Group III.

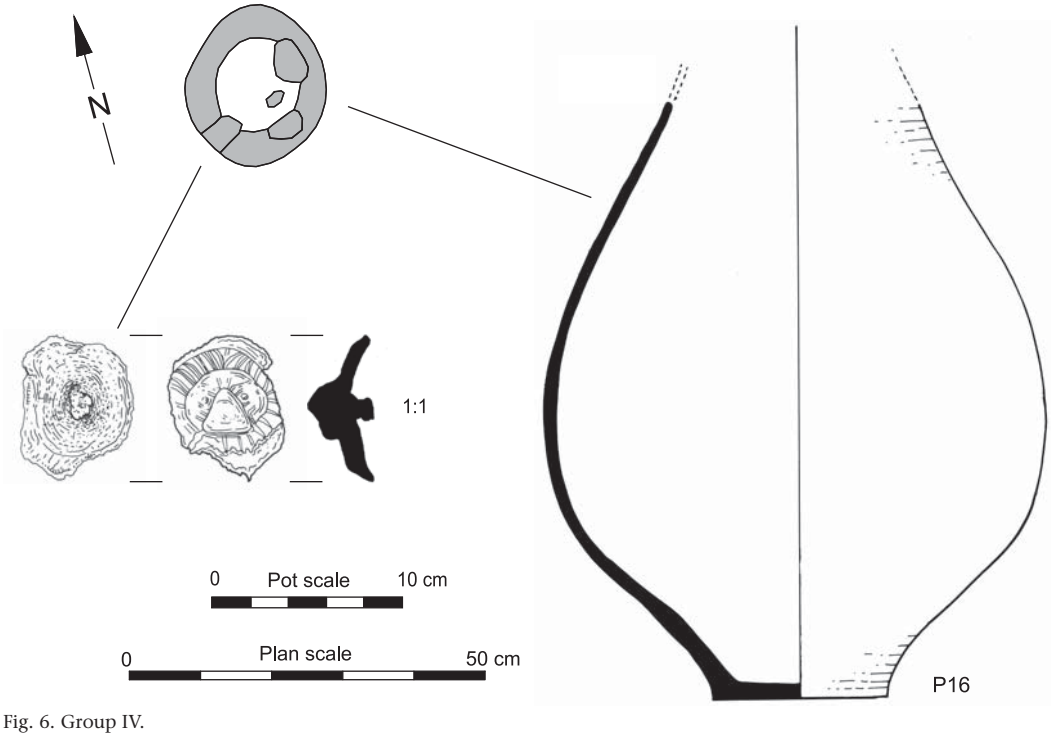

Fig. 6. Group IV.

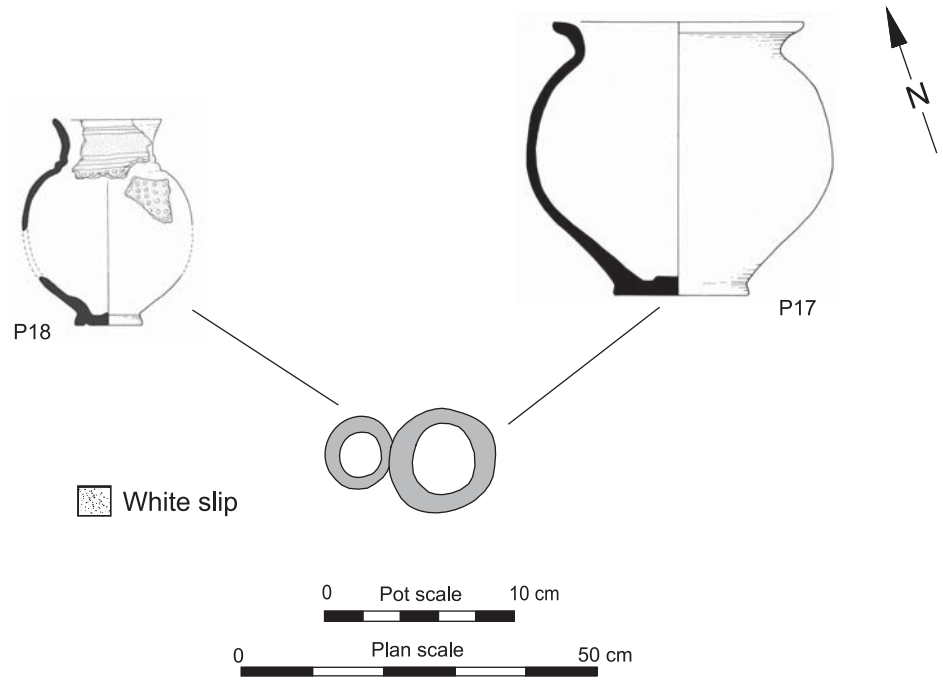

Fig. 7. Group V.

fragmented. The most complete mount has a minimum diameter of *c.* 15 mm. The nose and part of the incised mane are still distinguishable. The corroded remains of an iron attachment spike are visible in the hollow reverse. The reverse of one other 'nose' fragment shows that the iron spike is enclosed and soldered within an integrally cast copper-alloy setting. It is thought likely that all three mounts and the iron plate originate from the same casket.

GROUP V (Figs 2 & 7)

Group V comprised a locally produced greyware jar, P17, containing the cremated bone alongside a poppy-head beaker, P18, in Highgate C ware. The production date-range for the pottery in Groups III and V is slightly earlier than that for the other groups (*c.* AD 100/120–160). However, given their physical proximity to the other cremations, it seems very likely that they were deposited towards the end of this range or even slightly beyond it, since samian 'heirloom' survivals are well attested in burial contexts (Biddulph 2005, 38).

The only other possible archaeological feature revealed during the excavations was an irregular and amorphous feature located to the south of the cemetery. This feature was sub-circular in plan and approximately six metres in diameter (Fig. 2, 3/004). It was shallow (maximum 300 mm deep), with irregular and undulating edges. The feature contained frequent flint nodules and pebbles, occasional fragments of Iron Age and Roman pottery, fire-cracked flint, worked flint and small fragments of undiagnostic fired clay. It had been considered that this feature may in some way be related to pyre activity. However, the lack of substantial amounts of charcoal or other signs of burning appears to preclude this, although the feature did contain some tiny fragments of burnt bone. However, these tiny fragments are thought to be intrusive and to have resulted from rooting disturbance to the nearby cremation vessels. Environmental samples have indicated substantial modern environmental intrusion within the fill of the feature.

THE POTTERY

by Anna Doherty and Charlotte Thompson

In one regard, none of the pottery groups are very similar, as the number of vessels they contain ranges from one to six in each burial; some groups contain samian or samian-type vessels and flagons, whereas

Table 1. Summary of cremation groups.

	Urn only	1 accessory vessel	2 accessory vessels	4 accessory vessels	2 urns, 4 accessory vessels
Group	IV	V	III	II	I

	Jar(s)	Bowls	Cup(s)	Flagon(s)	Beaker
Group(s)	I, II, III, IV, V	I	I, II, III	I, II	III, V

others contain beakers and no flagons. However, the cremation is always contained within a locally-produced greyware jar: a pattern widely seen in Romano-British cremation groups, including those from Westhampnett and St Pancras (Mepham 1997, 262–3). As in many cremation groups, the function of the accessory vessels is chiefly linked to the pouring and drinking of liquids. This may be because the vessels were used for libations during the funerary rite. However, Willis (2004, 9.8) has emphasized the fact that funerary assemblages tend to comprise vessels suitable for individual rather than communal eating and drinking, possibly suggesting that accessory vessels were intended to accompany the deceased into the after-life.

The main similarities and differences in the groups are summarized in Table 1. Overall, groups I and II stand out as the most comparable, both having four accessory vessels and containing both flagons and samian or imitation samian cups. At St Pancras cemetery, Chichester, it was noted that a number of graves contained pairs of vessels and a similar trend is noticeable in Groups I and II: the former contained a pair of flagons and a pair of samian dishes and the latter, four cups imitating the same samian form, including one with a slightly wider diameter than the others. It has been suggested that similar vessels of slightly different sizes were stacked, in order to be fitted into wooden box burials at St Pancras (Down 1971, 71); however, the Group-II vessels were not placed in this manner. In Group I, the pairing may relate to the interment of two individuals, but this is not the case with Group II and has not been noted in the paired accessory groups at St Pancras.

Two flagons in Group I are truncated at the join of neck and body. Although flagons often break at this point, Down notes that truncated flagons were common at St Pancras and suggests that flagon mouths may have been left exposed as part of the burial rite (Down 1971, 72). External sooting on the cremation vessel in Group V, is also notable, possibly suggesting that it had been used as a cooking-vessel prior to deposition. This could indicate that the vessels were selected from among the domestic possessions of the dead. This is one of three models for the supply of funerary vessels, the others being the purchase by families of new pottery especially for the purpose of burial, and supply by burial societies (Biddulph 2005, 37).

Although it seems logical to conclude that number and/or type of accessory vessels has some relationship to status, it may also reflect availability and individual choice. Whether Group III with two accessory vessels, including samian, should be seen as being of higher status than Group II, which has five accessory vessels including four Romano-British samian imitations, is therefore difficult to determine, especially as samian was probably in shorter supply by the turn of the 3rd century, when Group II may have been deposited (Willis 1994, 9.2). A synthetic study in Essex has suggested that cups, which occur in three of the groups, are more common on villa sites, whereas beakers, which occur in two groups, are more characteristic of urban and low-status rural burials (Biddulph 2005, 27–32). However, we can probably assume that there is some regional and chronological variation in such patterns. Both burials containing beakers may be a generation or more earlier than two of the burials containing cups, and the number of groups in this cemetery is probably too small to draw meaningful conclusions on status from the types of vessel selected.

At both St Pancras and Westhampnett, cremations lacking accessory vessels, or with only one, are most common and, in general, become less common with each additional vessel (Mepham 1997, 263); groups containing five or more vessels are fairly uncommon. This could lead us to conclude that Groups I and II are of fairly high status. However, it has been argued that the number of vessels is a poor indicator of status when measured against glass, metal or other high-status

objects (Biddulph 2005, 34). At St Pancras, for example, 14 per cent of the graves contained lamps or lamp-holders (Drewett *et al.* 1988, 235).

As well as arguably having less easy access to traded goods, including pottery, small rural communities may have developed funerary practices slightly differing from those in urban settings, a factor which could be reflected in different types of material culture. A study of the occurrence of samian in grave groups has concluded that burials including samian are actually proportionately more common in rural settlements than in large urban cemeteries, where samian would have been much more common in domestic assemblages (Willis 1994, 9.4).

THE CREMATED BONE by Lucy Sibun

Introduction

Burnt human bone was recovered from a total of six Romano-British cremation burials all contained within vessels. These burials were located within five distinct groups: Group I (P1 and P2), Group II (P7), Group III, (P13), Group IV (P16), Group V, (P17).

Methods

Recording and analysis of the bone followed the procedures outlined by McKinley (2004). Age estimations were carried out with reference to Bass (1987), Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994). Age estimations were only possible as adult (A). Sex was estimated from the sexually dimorphic traits of the skeleton (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994).

Results

The results of analysis are summarized in Table 2. Full details are in the archive.

Disturbance and burial type

Table 2. Summary of results from analysis of cremated bone.

Vessel no.	Group no.	Bone weight (g)	Age/Sex	Pathology
P2	I	182	Adult	
P1	I	311	Adult	
P7	II	861	Adult	Y
P13	III	456	Adult	
P16	IV	1128	Adult possible female	Y
P17	V	357	Adult	

All cremation burials were contained within ceramic vessels, but the degree of disturbance and consequent condition of the vessels varied from slight truncation (P7, P17) to cracked and fragmentary (P2, P13) or both (P16, P1).

It seems possible that the disturbance to the vessel has not had a great impact on the quantity of bone collected. Whilst the smallest quantity was collected from a fragmentary vessel (P2), the largest quantity was collected from a vessel both badly fragmented and truncated (P16). However, all disturbance can result in pressure damage to bone and reduce the size of bone fragments (McKinley forthcoming).

The acidic nature of the underlying natural Brickearth on this site may have had a negative impact on bone survival and although some trabecular bone was present, this was only in small quantities.

All burials appeared to contain single silty clay fills. Additional materials indicative of re-deposited pyre debris were found in all burials but with the exception of P1 and P16, not in significant quantities. Burial P1 contained at least 15 iron nail fragments, charcoal and fire-cracked flint, P16 contained iron nail fragments, burnt clay, fire-cracked flint and pottery fragments. In both cases the finds were randomly dispersed throughout the matrix rather than in concentrated areas.

Demographic and pathological data

All burials appeared to contain the remains of single, adult individuals. Unfortunately, it was not possible to estimate age more accurately. Burial P13 contained the only sexually diagnostic fragment and this indicates that this individual is a possible female.

Only two bone fragments displayed any pathological changes; the first metatarsal from P7 had mild osteophytic growths around the distal margins and an intermediate and distal phalange from P16 were fused.

Spatial distribution

All vessels were removed from site for off-site excavation. This was undertaken in spits with plans drawn and photographs taken at each stage, enabling the spatial distribution of bone within the burial to be examined.

Burial P2 contained the smallest quantity of bone, only 182 g. There was a slight increase in the concentration of bone towards the base of the

vessel, but it was relatively sparse throughout. The bone in burial P1 (311 g) increased steadily from less than 1 per cent in the uppermost spits to 85 per cent at the base of the vessel. This burial did appear to contain some re-deposited pyre debris and this appeared to be randomly dispersed throughout the vessel. The remaining burials revealed a similar bone dispersal pattern with bone constituting 85–90 per cent of the fill towards the base of vessels P13 and P16. Only burial P17 showed any other patterns of deposition, with a definite concentration of bone on one side of the pot.

Pyre technology and cremation ritual

The majority of the cremated bone fragments were white in colour indicative of an effective cremation process. However, with the exception of burial P13, all burials also included a few fragments that displayed a blue-grey colour, suggesting some degree of variation. Further variation and less oxidization was indicated by the charred black colouration of a tarsal fragment in burial P16 and one undiagnostic fragment in both burials P16 and P13.

The weight of bone recovered from the burials ranges from 182 g to 1128 g with a mean of 549 g. Despite the disturbance to all vessels, the quantity of bone recovered is not thought to have been greatly affected by this, with truncation to the rims of vessels and in most cases, bone clearly concentrated towards the base. The largest cremated assemblage (1128 g from burial P16) represents approximately 70 per cent of the expected weight of cremated bone produced by an adult (McKinley 1993).

It is likely that the disturbance to burials has had a detrimental affect on bone fragmentation within the vessels. There is a trend for the majority of the bone recovered to be in the 5–10 mm (18–50 per cent) and 10–20 mm (29–35 per cent) fractions. However, in the two largest cremated bone assemblages, P7 and P16, the majority was recovered from the greater than 30 mm range (34 per cent and 33 per cent respectively).

Approximately 20 per cent of the bone was identifiable to skeletal element. All parts of the skeleton were represented in all burials. The axial skeleton was least abundant but this probably results from the acidic nature of the soil. There is no strong evidence to suggest that particular elements were being selected for burial or deposited in a particular way. However, in burial P1, dominated by skull and upper limb fragments, skull fragments appear to be concentrated in the centre of the deposit.

It is thought that the recovery of smaller elements, for example tooth roots and small bones of the hands and feet, may reflect the method used to recover the bone from the pyre debris (McKinley forthcoming) and that their presence would indicate a recovery *en masse* rather than hand collection of individual fragments. These elements were recovered from burials P1, P16 and P17. The presence of re-deposited pyre debris in two of these burials (P1 and P16) would support the idea of *en-masse* collection.

Cremated animal bone was recovered in single fragments from burials P2, P7, P16 and P17. Unfortunately, the only identifiable fragment was a cattle molar from P7.

DISCUSSION

The assemblage indicates a small cemetery dating to the mid-second to mid-third century containing the remains of five, possibly six, people. No ditches, field systems or other evidence of settlement were identified within the excavation area. This may suggest that the cemetery was placed some way from the focus of settlement, possibly out in the fields or adjacent to a long-vanished trackway. However, HER information does record several occupation sites within the vicinity and it is within this context of rural Romano-British agricultural settlement on the coastal plain that the Offington Lane cemetery should be considered.

The burials all respect each other and are located in a close group, suggesting that the graves may have been contemporary, or that the cemetery developed over a short time span. As no features indicative of cemetery markers were identified during the excavation, it is possible that the graves had surface markers such as small mounds, gravestones or kerbs. No potential pyre sites were identified within the excavation area either. This may suggest that the cremation process occurred elsewhere, with the funerary vessels brought on to the site for the final act of burial. However, pyre sites of this date are generally thought to have been located near or within cemeteries and may have left only an ephemeral (if any) archaeological trace (Fitzpatrick 1997, 244; McKinley 2000, 39).

The funerary urns had accompanying accessory vessels, perhaps representing the personal

possessions of the deceased, or comprising gifts from the mourners. Grave goods associated with food and drink are amongst the commonest artefacts found within Roman burials, and it is thought that they may have held (or represented) food and drink to accompany the deceased on the journey to the after-life. It is also possible that these offerings were designed to placate the spirit and to deter it from returning to haunt the living (Parker Pearson 2003, 7).

A single urn was accompanied by, or may have been placed within, a box or casket decorated with lion-head mounts (Group IV). The lion-head motif is associated with Roman cremation burials and was considered symbolic of the powers of death (Partridge 1981, 315). Several similar mounts are known from Sussex, including sites in Chichester (Clark 1939, figs 9.2 & 9.3; Down 1974, fig. 8.16.27).

The practice of cremation burial in Sussex during the Roman period is well represented, particularly in the Chichester area (Rudling 2008, 102). By the fourth century, inhumation was replacing cremation as the dominant rite. The nature of Romano-British religious beliefs is not well understood and Rudling concludes that evidence from Roman Sussex includes examples of both native and imported faiths. He suggests that evidence for the worship of traditional Roman gods as found in the Chichester/Fishbourne area is sparse in the countryside and at some sites 'discovery of "special deposits"' hints at much more deeply seated and long-established local beliefs (Rudling, 2008, 131).

The degree to which rites of funerary passage as described in classical texts are relevant to Romano-British traditions is open to much debate. Classical writers indicate that during a formal burial ceremony the corpse was carried to the cemetery by friends and relatives. Following the cremation and burial of the deceased, a funeral meal (the *silicernium*) was eaten at the graveside. A second meal (the *cena novendialis*) marked the end of the prescribed period of mourning of nine days. The grave would then be visited on the birthday of the deceased and during festivals, particularly the *Parentalia* and the *Lemuria*. At this time relatives would sometimes bring gifts, and eat a meal at the graveside (Toynbee 1971, 51; Fitzpatrick 1997, 280). It is possible that some elements of these practices may have developed within Romano-British burial customs. Feasting appears to have been a central theme which seems to be reflected in the use of domestic vessels as containers for and accompaniments to cremation burial. It is interesting to note the remains of burnt animal bone contained within several of the funerary urns. It has not been possible to identify whether these fragments were burnt from cooking or if they had been cremated with the deceased.

In an urban context Roman burial is known to have occurred usually outside the town gates in bounded, ordered cemeteries. However, burial practice at smaller settlements, villas and individual farmsteads is not so well understood. A range of burial types is thought possible, from small formal cemeteries through to isolated backland burials in field corners, boundary ditches and small enclosures. In these cases Esmonde Cleary (2000, 137) suggests we may be witnessing a blurring of distinction between the traditional Roman domains of the living and the dead.

Perhaps lacking the monumentality and visibility of the urban cemeteries, this small plot is likely to have been visited and remembered by friends and family. The site may be representative of a pattern also noted by Esmonde Cleary (2000, 137), who suggests that burial practice in small towns and rural sites often seemed to retain more of their family or individual identity than the uniform anonymity of cemeteries associated with large settlements.

It is proposed to offer the archive to Worthing Museum.

Acknowledgements

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Author: Alice Thorne, Archaeology South-East, Units 1 & 2, 2 Chapel Place, Portslade, East Sussex, BN41 1DR.

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