

ROMANO-BRITISH BURIALS WITHIN WINCHESTER'S NORTHERN EXTRA-MURAL CEMETERY AT VICTORIA HOUSE, VICTORIA ROAD, WINCHESTER

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In 2015 and 2016 Pre-Construct Archaeology (PCA) carried out a programme of archaeological investigations at Victoria House, Victoria Road, Winchester, Hampshire (SU 4797 2998). This work, which was commissioned by Winchester City Council, included an open area excavation followed by targeted archaeological monitoring (watching brief); this was undertaken ahead of the redevelopment of the site for housing.

The full results of the investigations are included within the archive report (PCA 2018), whilst a summary of those findings are detailed here, alongside the results of additional analysis work carried out since the completion of that report, including a limited programme of radiocarbon dating.

The site is located within an area known to include the northern extra-mural cemetery of Roman Winchester (*Venta Belgarum*). The development area has been the subject of several previous excavations, these being undertaken in the period between 1972 and 1976, prior to the construction of Victoria House (Ottaway *et al.* 2012, 97–118). A total of 112 inhumations, six of which had been buried in a prone state (face down), were uncovered during this earlier work, with burials recorded, dating from the later 3rd century through to the very late 4th or early 5th century AD. The excavators divided the periods of burial activity on the site into three distinct phases, Phase 1 being dated to AD 270–320, Phase 2 dated to AD 340–390 and Phase 3 dated to AD 390–400.

The Victoria Road site was located within the south-western quarter of the previously investigated area (PCA 2013) and whilst elements of two previously excavated inhumations were identified along the eastern edge of the stripped area, there was

no further evidence of previous archaeological intervention.

As well as those previously excavated, a total of 14 additional grave cuts were exposed by PCA, 12 of which contained *in situ* human remains and two of which were empty (Fig. 1). All but one of the graves was orientated on an east/west alignment, with any articulated remains supine and extended. The exception was a grave on a north-east/south-west alignment, [015], which contained a prone burial, Skeleton 014; this was laid within a poorly cut and shallow grave and is likely an example of a so called 'deviant' burial (Taylor 2008, 107–110). Although the meaning of prone burial practice in Romano-British society is not understood, graves of this type are often believed to be those of criminals or other social outcasts. It is however, by no means certain that the purpose of prone burial would have been understood consistently in the same way across Britain and throughout the Roman period (Philpott 1991, 75).

Although no grave goods were recovered, a coin of Valentinian dating to the mid to late 4th century (AD 367–375), was found in the backfill of grave [041]. This date is, however, at odds with the evidence provided by the radiocarbon date from the skeleton recovered from this feature (Skeleton 040) and given the substantial amount of disturbance that is known to have occurred on the site, it seems likely that this item is intrusive within this deposit.

The two empty graves were fully excavated and found not to contain human skeletal remains. Bone generally survives well in the natural chalk into which these graves were cut and so it is unlikely that the remains had fully decomposed *in situ*. There was no evidence that these features had been disturbed and



Fig. 1 Site location

whilst their purpose is unclear it is possible that these graves represent some form of cenotaph. The phenomenon of empty graves has been identified in other Romano-British cemetery sites, including the nearby site of Lankhills, Winchester (Clarke 1979, 16; Booth *et al.* 2010, 17).

Bone samples for radiocarbon dating were taken from three individuals from three separate graves. The analysis was undertaken at the Radiocarbon Accelerator Mass Spectrometry Facility (BRAMS), located at the University of Bristol. The results are as follows:

Skeleton 007 (grave cut [008]) was dated to between AD127–252 (at 94.6% confidence 1819±25 bp; BRAMS-2812)

Skeleton 014 (grave cut [015]) was dated to between AD211–348 (at 92.5% confidence 1766±25 bp; BRAMS 2811)

Skeleton 040 (grave cut [041]) was dated to between AD 132–258 (at 83.4% confidence 1801±25 bp; BRAMS 2810).

Whilst all of the samples produced broad date ranges, Skeletons 007 and 040 can be seen to be of a broadly consistent 2nd to mid 3rd century date, whereas Skeleton 014 may be later. Even taking into account the mid 3rd century upper date ranges assigned to Skeletons 007 and 040, these burials would appear to pre-date the start of the first phase identified during the earlier cemetery excavations (Phase 1 – AD 270–320), by several years, with the earliest of these skeletons apparently buried at least 18 years prior to the start of Phase 1. This indicates either an earlier period of burial on the site, or that the date range for Phase 1 burials here, should be extended back to at least AD 252. The date range provided for Skeleton [014] covers both Phase 1 and Phase 2, making it difficult to attribute to either, although of the six prone skeletons excavated during the earlier excavations in the 1970s, which were found in similarly carelessly dug graves, all but one was interpreted as belonging to burial Phase 3, with the addition grave assigned to Phase 2 (Ottaway *et al.* 2012, 347).

A ditch was identified close to the western boundary of the Site, [043]/[047], which

contained a small amount of late Roman pottery. All of the burials were located to the east of this ditch, and this may have been an internal boundary or division within the cemetery. Although this ditch cannot be directly correlated with any other found during previous work on or near the site, ditches of a similar form were noted both during excavations on an area of the cemetery undertaken at Eagle Hotel, Andover Road, located immediately to the south-west of the study site and during the 1970s excavations undertaken prior to the construction of Victoria House (Ottaway *et al.* 2012, 121).

The results of the 2015/2016 excavations at Victoria House demonstrate that there is still more to be understood of the extra-mural Roman cemeteries of Winchester. The radiocarbon dates allow us to question the original phase chronology, indicating an earlier start for inhumation burial at this site than previously envisaged. A programme of scientific dating on the remains recovered from the 1970s excavations is likely to help to clarify the issue, should such an opportunity to undertake this work arise.

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