

A. McWhirr, L. Viner and C. Wells, *Cirencester Excavations 2. Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester*. Cirencester Excavations Committee 1982. 220 pages, 5 microfiche.

To the west of the town defences of Roman Cirencester the scene is dominated by the earthen seating banks of the amphitheatre. The name of the area 'The Querns' is derived from an Old English word for quarries, and there have been casual finds of burials in this century and the last. When in the late 1960s a relief road was planned cutting through the area, excavation was undertaken to examine the cemetery and quarries; it also turned up information about the Fosse Way and an adjacent extra-mural building.

To the south-west of Cirencester the line of Fosse Way underlies the modern Tetbury Road. This road runs straight on to the line of the north-western quadrant of the defences and it has long been considered that Fosse Way did likewise. One of the surprises of these excavations was the demonstration that, in the third and fourth centuries at least, Fosse Way departed from the Tetbury Road line near the town to run in past the amphitheatre. A gate in this position has long been postulated to serve the amphitheatre, but excavations in 1974 showed that it was in fact the site of the main western (Bath) gate of *Corinium*. The straight alignment of Tetbury Road and the presence in its vicinity of first- and second-century burials lead to the suggestion that it represents the line of an earlier Fosse Way entry to the town. There would appear to the archaeologist to be three major phases for the Cirencester/Fosse Way interchange. The first is in the period of military occupation with the forts described in *Cirencester Excavations 1* under the centre of the later town. The second is the period of the undefended town. The third is the period of the defended town. In this last phase we now know that Fosse Way deviated south to the Bath Gate. Some such alignment would make sense in the first phase also to serve the forts. In the second phase a road on this southern approach would enter the town at the end of the 'decumanus' running past the forum, and later emphasised at the western end of the town by the axially sited bulk of the amphitheatre. The Tetbury alignment runs up to an apparently unexceptional area of the town, not even on the line of an internal street. Given the behaviour of Fosse Way to the east of the town, and at towns such as Bath, deviations close to the town seem rather the norm than something unusual! The Tetbury Road line has the attraction of apparent simplicity, but needs further thought and excavation. It is a testimony to the contrary nature of archaeological evidence that the long stretch of roadway excavated can only be said to have been there before about A.D. 280.

Besides the length of Fosse Way exposed, a number of less permanent tracks were encountered, presumably service roads for the quarries. These quarries were, not surprisingly, the earliest surviving features. Exploiting beds of the Great Oolite outcropping immediately to the west of the town they yielded evidence of the quarrying techniques employed in the form of marks left by the wedges used to split off the stone. Because of the varying thickness of the beds of suitable limestone the worked-out quarries had floors of differing depths.

Into the hollows left by these operations were dumped large quantities of refuse, resulting in the build-up of a thick dark earth containing a variety of objects and other remains. It would have been interesting to have a discussion of this rubbish, since the detailed evidence, particularly of the pottery, throws up some interesting points. Some of the pottery in the garbage deposits is unrepresentative of that from within the town, or else within the town is found in very restricted contexts. Fuller consideration of this evidence, and similar work for other classes of evidence within and without the town might be a useful future line of research. This is the more so as it is becoming clearer that waste-disposal in Roman Britain was organised differently to that in mediaeval England, and further information on the former is needed. Reconstruction of the stratigraphy and finds is possible, but made difficult by the physical limitations of crosschecking information on microfiche sheets.

In the later third century a rectangular stone building with one internal partition was constructed to the north of Fosse Way. Even in the quarry area of a town richly supplied with good freestone the building incorporated timber structural elements, a feature since observed at Admiral's Walk in the centre of the town, and of course known from surviving mediaeval and later buildings of Cirencester. The building contained a stone-built furnace, and other evidence for light industrial activity, a common function of such buildings lying outside the defences of a large town.

This building was short-lived, having passed out of use and been dismantled and a cobbled spread laid over its site before A. D. 300. At about this date the area was taken over by burial. This formed part of a much larger cemetery, on both sides of the Fosse Way, which seems to have developed at about this time. The lack of previous burial activity, and the general contemporaneity of the earliest burials would seem to indicate some official control over the use of the land, and its release for use as a cemetery. The graves were dug into the mixed dark earth of the rubbish dumps, and backfilled with the same material. In consequence the outlines of grave pits were virtually undetectable, their intersections even more so. Therefore the only means of establishing sequence were by the disturbance of an earlier burial by a later, or by a shallower later burial lying above a deeper earlier one. Nevertheless broad outlines for the lay-out and chronology of burial could be established.

Distribution of burials within the excavated areas was patchy. South of Fosse Way there was a noticeable concentration in CS Trench 8 with, curiously enough, burials thinning out to the north as they approached Fosse Way. Other, lesser, concentrations can be detected north and south of Fosse Way, and other areas of sparser burial. In this the Bath Gate, Cirencester cemetery contrasts with the more regular use of space evident at Lankhills, Winchester; Poundbury, Dorchester; or Butt Road, Colchester. Apart from the concentrations of single burials there are also multiple burials of up to four individuals together, though these are not accorded separate consideration. One pre-existing topographical feature seems to have had a limited influence on the lay-out of the cemetery. A V-profile ditch of the quarry period, and silting up in the later third century, had a strip devoid of burials along both sides for most of the fourth century, until the ditch was almost fully silted. It does not, though, seem to have acted as a ditch delimiting the extent of the cemetery as did similar features at Lankhills and Poundbury. The dominant orientation of graves in the cemetery is along the north-south axis (with heads to south or north). Of the graves whose orientation could still be determined the ratio was three to one in favour of the north-south axis over the east-west. The lack of discernible grave-pits rendered impractical any attempt at more refined analysis of orientation, and its relation to physical, astronomical or other determinants. The position of the bodies within the graves is studied (p. 76 ff.). In general the skeletons were extended and supine. A minority was buried prone or on one or other side. The positions of arms, legs and skulls were also noted, though the last can of course vary considerably from the position at burial due to decomposition and post-interment earth movement. No chronological or locational significance could be detected in the aspects of body positioning, though some of the prone burials were unusual in other respects too. The analysis of the dating evidence used to construct the cemetery chronology (p. 101 ff.) is rather inspissated; a diagram on the lines of the so-called Harris-Winchester matrix might have made the relationships easier to comprehend. Many burials had no evidence for any sort of coffin. A number yielded the nails from wooden coffins, one with iron hinges. There were five stone coffins, roughly finished, one (of a child) containing an inner lead coffin. Twenty-seven graves had stone packing around the corpse or the coffin. A similar phenomenon was observed at Lankhills, where it was a feature of the later fourth century. At Cirencester the dating was equivocal. There were two cremations, one in a pot, the other in a grave-like pit, again a feature encountered at Lankhills. Six of the inhumations had been decapitated, but the skull was in the expected position in the grave, rather than at the feet or between the legs as has been noted at other cemeteries of this date.

This cemetery contained very few burials with grave goods, the richest being a child burial. Such goods as there are are paralleled in other cemeteries, coins, bracelets, combs, rings and other items of personal adornment. The suggestion that the comb (fig. 80) bears a stylised representation of an owl would seem to owe more to the cartoon owl in the film 'The Sword in the Stone' than to artistic perception in pre-Arthurian Roman Britain.

Approximately one third of the volume consists of a specialist report on the skeletal material by the late Calvin Wells, doyen of British palaeopathologists. The work is exhaustive and detailed, but makes few concessions to the non-specialist. Even having looked up 'tapeinocranial', 'metriocranial' and 'akrocranial' this

reviewer is none too sure of what this would have meant to the living person with such characteristics, nor to the modern clinician, nor whether it matters. This extends also to details of the irregularities; one now knows what a Schmorl's node is, but has little idea of its effect (if any) on the (?) sufferer. More attention, however, is given to possible causes of the abnormalities observed, and certain general themes emerge. The population of the Bath Gate cemetery seems on the whole to have led a physically demanding, not to say stakhanovite, life. Arthrosis (arthritis) and developments due to persistent wear and tear on the physique are commonplace. Some of the considerable number of fractures can also plausibly be attributed to such a regime. Others, though, seem more likely to be the results of violence, and there is also osteological evidence of wounds, both cut-marks and depressed fractures from blows (cf. p. 168 ff.).

A feature of the physical examination of the skeletons which has excited considerable interest is the high incidence of lead in many of the bones examined. Two points on the report as it stands (pp. 203–4) need to be made. First of all in only a small minority of the cases would the dosage of lead in the bones be enough to have caused serious illness or death. Secondly, even in those burials with a high lead content, the lead could have been absorbed over many decades (bone is the tissue in which excess lead in the body is safely stored) and need not have caused even sub-clinical manifestations of lead-poisoning. Sources for the lead are seen to be a problem, given that there is no evidence for lead waterpipes despite extensive sampling of the town, and there is a lack of evidence either way for leaden utensils. But since the publication of this volume Waldron, who wrote the section on the lead levels, has published a further paper (H. A. Waldron, On the Post-Mortem Accumulation of Lead by Skeletal Tissues. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 10, 1, 1983, 35–40). Here he demonstrates that the actual location of lead in the teeth of the ancient skeletons differs radically from that in modern teeth, its presence in the surface areas of the teeth suggesting that the lead is accumulated post-mortem, despite the alkaline ground conditions at Cirencester.

The lack of synthesis in the bone report is echoed in the main body of the report, where little consideration is given to the place of the Bath Gate cemetery population within fourth-century Corinium. One may perhaps attempt to tease out some comments. In general the skeletal and material evidence seem to point to a burial ground of the less-well-off members of society. The skeletal evidence points unequivocally to people engaged in strenuous manual labour. There is an absence of grave goods. This can always be explained away in religious terms, though this is to invoke considerations not present in the evidence. The north-south alignment of the majority of burials would render it extremely unlikely that this is a Christian cemetery. Even the stone coffins are rough, and in such an area would not be expensive. There are two other possible pointers to poverty. One is the absence of any form of marker or tombstone, the more surprising in a cemetery next to a major through-road; a perfect place for displays of familial piety and expenditure. The second is the pre-cemetery nature of the area. The giving-over of areas of rough land, of not much use for anything else, for poor burials is a feature which may be discerned at Chichester, Winchester and elsewhere.

Another suggestion that might be advanced relates to some of the injuries present on the skeletons. These include cut and blow marks and decapitation. The cemetery is adjacent to the amphitheatre; would it be too fanciful to advance the idea that some of the skeletons are those of unfortunates who have lost out in the arena? Possibly, but it is an idea that could be borne in mind for support or refutation in the examination of comparable material from other cemeteries in Cirencester or elsewhere. Though late in its life the amphitheatre was converted to other uses, it may well still have been unaltered in the fourth century. A priority for future work must be the exploration of an area of one of the other town cemeteries for comparison with this one. The southern cemetery has yielded a number of tombstones, and may perhaps offer a relatively wealthy burial-ground to set beside the Bath Gate cemetery.

Inevitably the publication of this Cirencester cemetery, following close after the massive report on the comparable cemetery at Lankhills, Winchester (Winchester Studies Vol. 3 Part 2) will provoke comparisons between these cemeteries and their publications. Such comparisons are indeed instructive. Both are fourth-century inhumation cemeteries outside a civitas-capital, but at Lankhills there are two crucial differences from Bath Gate. The first is that the grave outlines and intersections can be traced; the second is that many graves contained grave goods. Thus differing burial practices, their relative chronology, and their absolute date-brackets could be worked out. As we have seen this was not feasible at Bath Gate. But the presence of the grave goods at Lankhills leads to an almost total divergence of interpretative methodology between that cemetery and Bath Gate. At Lankhills phenomena are defined and interpreted in terms of the objects in the

grave, their placing, and their relationships to those in other graves. In Bath Gate, lacking these aids, interpretation is based almost entirely on the positioning and pathology of the skeletons. At Lankhills presentation and consideration of osteological evidence is almost entirely lacking, at Bath Gate it seems that we can go too far down the road of pathological determinism, as with the suggestions in the penultimate paragraph on p. 91. Neither approach is, of course, any better or worse than the other. One just looks forward to a publication that can fuse the evidence of these two very revealing modes of analysis.

There are one or two errors in the presentation: a form of dittography on p. 113; an apparently self-contradictory sentence at the end of the first paragraph on p. 108 in the section on gnawed bones. There are some syntactical infelicities such as split infinitives. The use in the animal bone report of the term 'ox' to subsume all bovines, whilst zoologically permissible, is not to be encouraged. The primary meaning of 'ox' is a castrate bull. 'Cattle' avoids possible confusion.

McWhirr, Viner and Wells have produced a report of great value to all interested in cemeteries and in late-Roman Britain. Its publication helps establish such research as integral to and necessary for Romano-British archaeology. The comments offered in this review are intended not so much as criticism but as contributions to further work, either on cemeteries or on Cirencester, to both of which the present volume makes a distinguished contribution.

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