

9. Abandonment, Rubbish Disposal and ‘Special’ Deposits at Newstead

by S. Clarke

Introduction

Recent excavations* within the Roman Fort and attendant annexes at Newstead in southern Scotland have allowed the radical re-interpretation of an exceptional finds collection recovered from deep pits and wells by James Curle in the early twentieth century. The assemblage, ranging from parade helmets and other military equipment to everyday items such as shoes and tent pegs, has provided a vivid picture of almost every aspect of the settlement’s life. However, in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, very little comment has been made about the context of the assemblage or of the formation processes that produced it. This paper offers new explanations for the Newstead pits and their contents which blur the distinction between symbolic and simply functional. This in turn, has implications for the interpretation of finds on a wide range of both military and civilian sites in Britain and on the continent, throughout the Roman period.

There have essentially been three distinct theories for how the pit assemblages came to include so many exceptional items. The earliest, advocated by Curle himself (Curle 1911:113), and more recently by Frere (1987:136), was that Newstead’s garrison had suffered a disastrous military encounter with a native force, which had either overrun the site or forced a hasty withdrawal. In either event, the recently slain and their valuable possessions were cast into open pits and wells. Ross in contrast, views the bulk of the pits as having been ritual shafts, their contents offerings to Celtic gods of the underworld (Ross 1967; Ross & Fenham 1976). Finally, Manning takes an opposing view to both Curle and Ross, arguing that by and large the deposits were normal for Roman period sites, representing the simple disposal of rubbish (Manning 1972).

The Physical Character of the Pits

Ranging in depth from just 91 cm to 11 metres (see figure 1) and including examples of every conceivable shape, lined and unlined, the so called deep pits would appear at first sight to have been a disparate group. Certainly, as originally defined by Curle, their classification owes more to the method of discovery than any shared function or form.

This method consisted of cutting parallel trenches every 1.5 to 3 m down through the archaeology to natural geology. When a workman disappeared from view, a ‘pit’ had been discovered and a larger area was cleared of overburden to expose the entire feature. However, this apparent variability masked a single unifying characteristic. At least ninety percent of pits would have penetrated

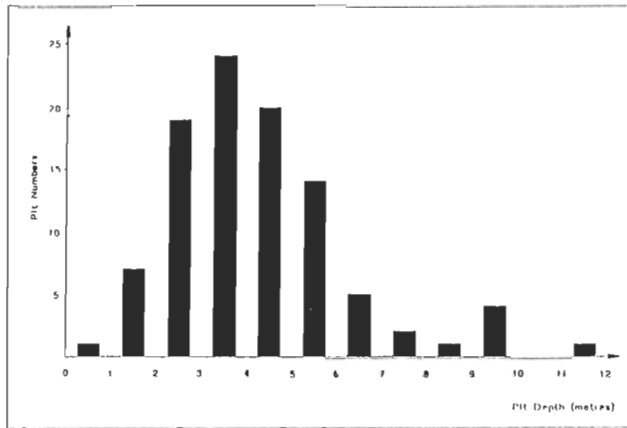


Figure 1. Pit Depth

the water table even in summer. Given the extreme difficulty of excavation below the water table this fact can hardly be coincidental. The depth of the pits thus rules out a primary function for rubbish disposal. Curle himself noted that all the pits contained standing water and that many had a layer of clay silting at their base implying that they had been open for some time (Curle 1911:108). Most of these features *could* have functioned effectively as wells. The recently excavated Pit A, clearly a well with its rough stone lining, evidently had an adequate flow of water in spite of its relatively shallow depth (2.40 m). The absence of linings in all but thirteen pits excavated by Curle need not contradict this. Recent excavation has shown the drift geology in most cases to have been surprisingly stable. Linings, where they existed, were often manifestly weak. In five cases the well linings had been constructed of river cobbles. One was even constructed of stakes behind which heather had been packed! In addition linings often only 'supported' the lower part of the shaft (Curle 1911:107-8). The primary function of the linings seems to have been as a filter for water percolating into the well bottom rather than as effective shoring. Of course, the unsupported sides of such shafts would eventually become unstable. The large number of wells in the South Annexe can probably be explained by the inherent danger of entering a collapsing shaft and the relative ease with which a new one could be dug. Other possible functions involving standing water can also be envisaged, for example tanning. The main point is that in the vast majority of cases these shafts had stood open for some time and were primarily practical in character. Whatever the cause of deposition in these features, it was a secondary activity.

The Abandonment / Catastrophe Theory

Curle's belief that the fort suffered a calamity, in which valuables and unburied dead were put beyond the reach of hostile natives, can no longer be accepted, even as a possibility. Most importantly the recent survey and excavation programme has found no evidence for widespread destruction horizons. Whilst there is evidence of the destruction by fire of individual buildings, for example the Commandant's house, these events seem to have been highly localised. Particularly conclusive have

been the investigations in the South Annexe, where the highest proportion of pits occur. Excavation over four seasons has shown that the area was heavily built up during Newstead's heyday. In the mid-second century perhaps eighty to one-hundred buildings lined the network of roads. But geo-physical survey has revealed only three buildings as magnetic anomalies characteristic of wood and daub buildings burning down. Such evidence seems entirely consistent with occasional accidental fires rather than the conflagration envisaged by Curle.

Nor does the assemblage from the pits support the disaster theory. Though rich, the collection represents only a tiny proportion of what would have been in circulation at any one time. There were only five complete or near complete swords, but the fort could accommodate up to one thousand troops. Weapons it might be argued were a special case, but the same dearth applies to such common items as cooking equipment. The discovery of human remains from a number of pits and ditches are also unlikely to be the result of a simple massacre, as in all but two cases, only the skull or parts of the skull and jaw were found.

Even the orderly abandonment and levelling of the complex cannot account for deposition in pits. With the exception of the masonry-filled pit in the *principia*, nothing at Newstead has been found comparable to the hundreds of thousands of used nails recovered from a pit at Inchtuthil (Pitts & St. Joseph 1985:109–12). Rather, the settlement's abandonment appears to have been achieved in stages. The suburb associated with the most important group of pits, the South Annexe, can now be shown to have been mostly abandoned substantially before the final occupation of the fort. Therefore Newstead's pit fills cannot have been generated by a single extraordinary event, but must have been part of some ongoing process or processes.

Ritual Deposition

In the absence of some compelling physical threat, the most likely reason for the deliberate destruction of valuable items would seem to be as part of some sort of religious activity. Certainly a great deal of the material from Newstead's pits has what might be called 'symbolic potential'. Human remains and complete animal carcasses are unlikely to have been considered simply as rubbish, at least when deposited within the settlement area. Skulls in particular have an obvious symbolic significance in both the Celtic and Roman worlds. The head was considered the residence of the soul or spirit, while in more general terms this highly recognisable body component could represent the whole person or animal. Artefacts too could have symbolic significance. Helmets, especially elaborate ones with face masks like those in pits 22 and 57, could represent a head or the complete man. Vessels or containers carry implications of plenty, while wheels frequently symbolise the sun in both Classical and Celtic art. Rotary querns will perhaps have carried similar solar connotations, in addition to their association with the successful harvest. While a significant number of items deposited in pits were complete, even damaged or fragmentary artefacts may have served as offerings. In considering a large number of religious sites in southern Britain, Woodward has noted that votive deposits frequently included high proportions of forged coins and badly made or non-functioning items (Woodward 1992:69). It must therefore be concluded that an object's symbolic value need not be reflected in its practical use or economic value. Furthermore the destruction of items prior to their deposition is a well known feature of Bronze and Iron Age ritual activity throughout Britain. The bent swords from pits 57 and 58 are particularly suggestive of ritual destruction of wealth. If we are to accept such a wide range of objects as potentially symbolic, the problem becomes not identifying ritual deposits, but identifying ones which were common rubbish!

Rubbish Disposal

If one is prepared to recognise the Roman complex at Newstead, and the South Annexe in particular, as the largest religious complex in the Celtic world, the ubiquity of religious deposits presents no problem. Most, however, would call into question the 'specialness' of deposits which turned up wherever one looked. Manning in particular, has been forceful in asserting that very few of the one hundred and seven pits excavated by Curle contained more than the kind of rubbish which might have been expected in any Roman pit (Manning 1972:234). Certainly Newstead's deposits were quite unlike votive collections at accepted temple sites (cf. Woodward 1992: figure 58). While individual finds at Newstead would certainly have made acceptable religious offerings, it is what is absent from the assemblage that is most telling. Coins and jewellery, which are usually common at sacred sites, are extremely rare within the pits, although well represented within other deposits at Newstead (Clarke 1995). Purpose made religious artefacts such as *exvoto* and curses are also absent. It is therefore unlikely that the pits represent cult activity in the conventional sense. So were the Newstead pits simply a case of unusually large-scale excavation and particularly favourable preservation conditions? Almost certainly not, for there are some very marked patterns in the selection of material for deposition and in its distribution both within and between the pits.

Looking first at skeletal material, it is notable that the potentially most symbolic species are biased toward the deeper pits. Human bone was on average deposited in deeper pits than horse skulls, followed by other horse components, followed by dog and so on. A similar pattern is observed in artefact deposition. Whole artefacts on average seem to be deposited in deeper pits, and nearer to the bottom of those pits than fragmentary items. Similarly, groups of objects, whole or broken, seem to have been deposited in more significant locations than individual pieces.

Deliberate selection for deposition is also apparent from the types of artefacts represented. For example, four helmets were recovered from Newstead's pits but only one was a standard issue, fighting man's helmet. The other three were parade helmets, which would have been owned by only a tiny minority of troops. Bradley has noted similar biases in ritual deposits of Bronze and Iron Age

Type of Bone	Average Pit Depth (m)	Average Position Within Pit (% of full pit depth)	Number of Pits
Human Bone	7.94	66	5
Horse Skulls	7.12	63	9
Horse (all)	6.71	63	11
Dog	6.17	72	7
Cattle Skulls	7.35	55	7
Cattle (all)	5.99	53	14
Deer antler	5.43	66	10
Shellfish	5.25	no data	9
Wild fowl	4.8	no data	2
Sheep	4.5	no data	2
Pigs	3.08	no data	2

Table 1. Deposition of Human and Unworked Animal Bone in Curle's Deep Pits

Type of Artefacts	Average Pit Depth (m)	Average Position Within Pit (% of full pit depth)	Number of Pits
Quern (whole)	7.01	81	4
Quern (fragments)	6.03	74	10
Wheel (whole)	6.63	72	2
Wheel (part)	6.12	83	5
Linch Pin	6.20	91	3
Specialist votive object	6.08	71	4
Iron Tools (all)	6.23	91	20
Two or more items	7.74	92	6
Single Items	5.54	72	14
Military Equipment (all)	5.51	81	17
Two or more items	6.70	80	9
Single Items	4.18	92	8
Equestrian Equipment (all)	5.37	87	12
Two or more items	5.81	88	3
Single Items	5.20	83	9
Lamps (whole)	5.79	85	2
Lamps (part)	2.4	25	1
Bronze Vessel (whole)	5.23	86	7
Bronze Vessel (part)	3.97	62	2
Unbroken ceramic vessel	4.37	85	3
Near complete pot	3.46	72	13
Bucket (whole or part)	7.03	87	4
Other wooden vessel	4.12	94	2
Leather (all) types	5.20	no data	25
Coins	5.20	53	12
Jewellery	4.70	37	11

Note: Finds of coins and jewellery are classes of artefact which probably represent casual loss rather than deliberate deposition. Their 'centre of gravity', close to half way down the pits, contrasts markedly with the distribution of the other items listed, which are heavily biased towards the bottom of pits.

Table 2. Artefact Deposition in Curle's Deep Pits

weapons. Using the evidence of bronze moulds, he noted that whole classes of unadorned weapons, though regularly manufactured, were not represented in the artefact record (Bradley 1990:21,23). Manning was forced to take the view that assemblages from a small group of pits (No. 1, 14, 16, 17, 22, 23, 56, 57 and 66) containing human remains, large numbers of animal carcasses and/or large artefact groups could not be adequately explained without invoking ritual, probably at the level of the military unit (Manning 1972:244). It is now apparent that deposition of even small groups of artefacts and skeletal material, which have previously been dismissed as simple rubbish, involved significant symbolism. The largest deposits which Manning accepted as religious in character differ from the rest only in scale. Both groups are dominated by exactly the same sorts of material: ordinary domestic animals and practical household, industrial and military equipment, either whole or fragmentary. The difference is not between sacred and profane, but between offerings of differ-

ent scales, those at the level of the whole community and those at the level of the household. If this is accepted, ritual deposition probably occurred in *at least* a quarter of the pits. Given the incomplete nature of Curle's record, and the probability that some deposits have left no trace, the actual percentage of pits receiving ritual attention could be far higher. Possibly, as Cunliffe has suggested for Danebury (1992:75), all pits underwent ritual procedures, only the most blatant of which have been detected.

Spatial Distribution

Although Curle's excavation has left us with very little indication of the pits' relationship to surrounding archaeological features, a great deal can be made of their distribution. A useful approach in the study of prehistoric 'special deposits' has been the comparison between deposits of the settlement interior and those relating to defences or boundaries (Hingley 1990; Hill 1992). A similar approach is valid at Newstead. Elsewhere I have suggested that a significant minority of

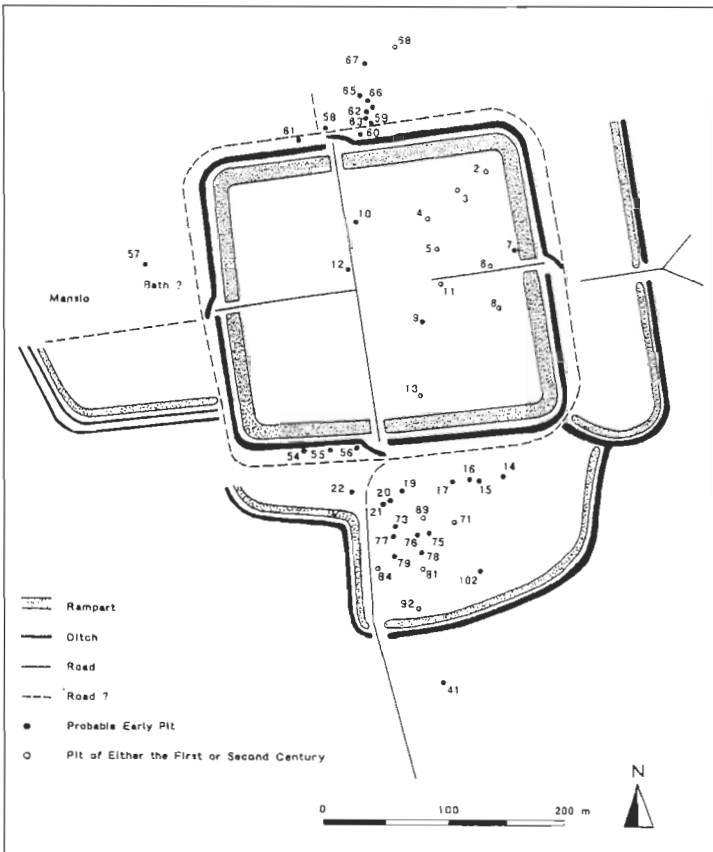


Figure 2. Early pits in relation to Phase Two complex

Newstead's pits were associated with the complex's ditches and ramparts, representing deliberately cut features intended to commemorate the creation or erasing of important social boundaries (Clarke & Jones 1996). This may still be the case for the East Annexe pit, partially excavated by the modern research project in 1990. It was dug in the second century, close to the terminus of the still visible early East Annexe ditch, perhaps marking its replacement with the much larger second century East Annexe enclosure. However, almost all the remaining pits can be seen to relate to the complex's interior. The sequence of Newstead's defences is now much more fully understood and most of the pits can be attributed with some confidence to either the first or second century occupation (see figures 2 and 3).

If Curle's pits have to be understood in terms of interior occupation, this still leaves a large question mark over the nature of the occupation. Even the most conservative identification of which pits should be considered ritual would create a distribution ranging across the entire complex. It is therefore unlikely that the deposits are associated with a specialist religious quarter. Two of the richest pits, 1 and 57, were associated with public buildings (the *principia* and bath house respectively). In contrast, within the South Annexe, geophysics and modern excavation suggest that the pits were located within dense concentrations of ordinary domestic and industrial strip buildings. An explanation for the pits must therefore be sought in terms of the everyday life of the complex.

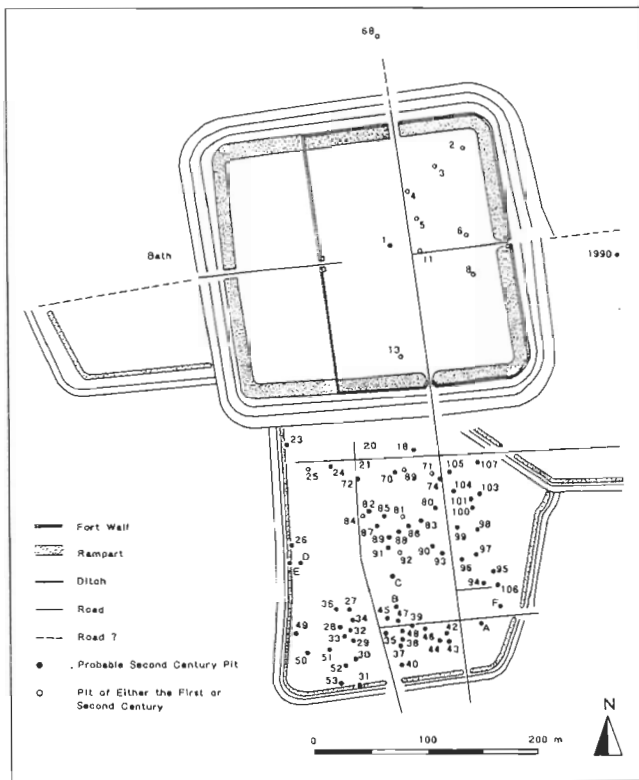


Figure 3. Second century pits in relation to the Phase Five complex

Ritual in a Secular Context

Rather than being ritual shafts, Newstead's deep pits would appear for the most part to have been working features. However, any deep shaft, dug for whatever reason, was likely to have been regarded as an opening into the underworld (Brunaux 1988:29–30). The closing of such a feature would have represented a highly significant event, especially if it coincided with the creation of a new well. It should therefore, be no surprise that symbolically significant objects occur in the fill of at least twenty-five percent of cases. Many other cases may have gone unrecognised, so that such 'rituals of termination' may have been the norm. The objects in these 'special deposits' were, as with the pits themselves, not specially made (contra Poulton & Scott 1993:130), but were mainly items which had everyday uses. Nor was all material deposited intended as an offering. The essentially secular nature of the setting is emphasised by the topping up of the features with whatever debris was to hand, including kitchen waste and very probably excrement. 'Probably ritual' is a epitaph usually assigned to all the bits we do not understand or to those for which we cannot think of a rational explanation. But in the ancient world religion invaded every aspect of life, and every action and event had a symbolic meaning. Ferguson notes that in the Classical Roman belief system, ordinary tasks were associated with particular minor spirits or 'numina'. In the agricultural cycle, for example, there was First Plougher, Second Plougher, Harrower, Sower, Top Dresser, Hoer, Raker, Harvester etc. (Ferguson 1987:752). In such a society the creation or backfilling of a well, slaughtering of animals and the manufacture, use and disposal of artefacts were all accompanied by rituals, which existed in a complex symbiosis with the 'practical' side of everyday existence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Newstead's pits probably represent the continued development of a widespread prehistoric ritual activity. Although Iron Age wells are extremely rare, a close parallel is provided by special deposits in disused grain storage pits, the best documented group being at Danebury hillfort (Cunliffe 1992). Ritual pit deposits of Roman date are by no means unique to Newstead, although there is a deep reluctance amongst Roman period archaeologists to recognise them. Parallels range from the largest military sites to minor villas. Extraordinary well or pit deposits at these sites have, like Newstead, often been ascribed to 'enemy action'. For example, at Brislington Villa (Avon) a twelve metre-deep well, containing human remains, whole pots, pewter vessels, the carcasses of at least twelve cattle and a demolished high-status building has been attributed to the 'Barbarian Conspiracy' of AD 367 (Branigan 1976:95). This reluctance to consider the symbolic aspects of deposits is most marked amongst the excavators of military sites. The full publication of the Corbridge hoard, which ran to 117 pages (Alison-Jones & Bishop 1988), failed even to consider the possibility of ritual deposition. A similar level of intellectual complacency was displayed recently by many of the contributors to the Roman Military Equipment Conference at Leiden, in spite of the fact that it was specifically intended to address the issue of deposit context. Proper consideration of site formation processes on Roman sites is lagging significantly behind analysis in the prehistoric period. The recognition of this pattern of ritual disposal at Newstead, therefore, has important implications for the future study of finds assemblages and Roman period society in general. Firstly, though dominated by practical rather than overtly religious artefacts, these assemblages cannot be assumed to have been a representative sample of everyday life. The most complete artefacts to have survived may have been carefully selected for their symbolic value. This would lead to over-rep-

resentation of some types, particularly high status or more highly decorated examples. Conversely there will have been serious under-representation or complete absence of other less symbolically charged artefacts. The second major point is that this picture of a symbiosis between economic and symbolic activity, contradicts the normal image of Roman period religion conducted by priests at temples or shrines. Clearly a false impression of religion as segregated from secular life has been created and a large part of the ancient belief system ignored.

Note

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