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The Dispersed Dead: preliminary observations on burial and settlement space in rural Roman Britain

by John Pearce

Introduction

Large scale excavation of Roman rural sites in Britain often reveals individual or small groups of burials dispersed across settlements, suggesting a recurring encounter of the living with the dead. The same is true of Roman Gaul (Ferdière 1993). Yet with occasional exceptions rural burials in Britain have remained relatively invisible in terms of the proportion of archaeological analysis devoted to them (Collis 1977; Esmonde-Cleary 1992; Philpott & Reece 1993). The subject is largely absent from general investigations of the Romano-British countryside (e.g. Hingley 1989; Millett 1990; Smith 1997) and in the rejuvenated study of rural Roman settlement space, burial and other depositional practice remain the poor relations of architecture, while students of mortuary practice are perhaps deterred by the small sample sizes and the frequent lack of large grave good assemblages to which detailed statistical analysis may be applied. The most explicit and influential model for the study of rural burial in Britain remains Collis' (1977) characterisation in terms of social status of the differences in burial type, furniture and location at Owslebury, Hampshire. In this scheme the individual or small groups of burials, not situated in a discrete cemetery area, and scattered across settlement sites, often within or close to other features, represent the lower echelons of the social hierarchy. It is the aim of this paper to re-evaluate this assumption that burial in such locations is an indicator of low social status within a Romano-British rural context.

The paper begins with a description of the sample area, Hampshire, and an assessment of the degree to which it is representative of other rural areas of Roman Britain. Rural sites are defined broadly as those at a lower level of the settlement hierarchy than 'local centres' or village sites (Hingley 1989), although in practice the Hampshire evidence is monopolised by a particular site type. The furnishing of these individual or small groups of burials is compared to those in urban cemeteries. The relationship of burial to its immediate archaeologically known environment is then examined in greater detail and recurring associations with particular settlement features proposed (to avoid repetition sites referred to more than once in the text are referenced in Appendix 1). The broader topographical context of burial (e.g. height, visibility, relation to slope), is not considered here although it will undoubtedly be a worthwhile area of future study (cf. Parker Pearson 1993). An alternative characterisation of the relationship of rural burials to settlement space is then offered.

The sample

Hampshire was chosen as a sample area not only to compare Owslebury to its regional context but also because the county possesses one of the largest sample of burials excavated in association with settlements from Roman Britain, although how small this sample is should be remembered. Approximately 150 burials are known from rural Hampshire, compared to over 1100 from Winchester (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992). Over 60 of the rural burials derive from one site, Owslebury. This low ratio of rural to urban burials characterises most other areas of southern England. The closest approximation to total recovery of burials from a rural site in the study area was achieved at Owslebury, but even there the expected burial population was not recovered from all periods of the site's use. The small size of other groups may sometimes be attributed to disturbance or small-scale excavation (e.g. Middle Wallop, Oakridge). However

when conditions have been more propitious, large numbers of burials have not always been recovered (e.g. Burntwood Farm, Odiham, Snell's Corner), although there are occasional indications of larger rural cemeteries, for example at Itchen Abbas (Hampshire County Council 1992). Preferences in the location of burials around settlements will therefore be established as an aggregate derived from different sites, of which the quality and extent of excavation are highly diverse.

The evidence is largely derived from sites on the chalk downlands of northern and central Hampshire. For all periods recent archaeological activity, modern development and preservation environments have conspired to produce a bias in knowledge of the archaeological record of the county to this area (Cunliffe 1993). One particular site type also monopolises our knowledge of burial practice; large downland settlements, occupied, not necessarily continuously, from the early Iron Age into the Roman period, bounded at certain periods of their history by large enclosures ditches which make them highly archaeologically visible (Hughes 1994). Although knowledge of villa sites within the county is fairly extensive, save for infant burials and occasional post-Roman burials, the burial practice of their occupants remains largely unknown, even in the late Roman period when villa complexes are at their most extensive (Cunliffe 1993:255; Johnston 1978).

Although the best known Roman period burial groups from Hampshire, Owslebury and the various sites of the East Hampshire tradition (Millett 1987) are Late Pre-Roman Iron Age (LPRIA) and early Roman in date, the corpus of burial evidence is biased to the late Roman period by a ratio of over 2:1. This imbalance, which also characterises other counties (see below) is likely to be a complex product of mortuary ritual, taphonomy and recovery biases which requires further attention but cannot be considered in detail here. The dependency on grave goods for dating otherwise isolated rural burials is likely to exaggerate the proportion of burials furnished. The higher proportion of furnished burials at Owslebury is probably more typical. Given the known post-Roman practice of burial on Roman settlements (Esmonde Cleary 1989:185), Roman and post-Roman period burials are particularly difficult to distinguish.

The Hampshire sample is therefore the product of particular circumstances, but in some respects is currently representative of rural burial practice in counties from central southern England north to Lincolnshire and East Yorkshire. In these the available burial evidence is also biased to the late Roman period and derives substantially from non-villa settlements (Pearce in prep.). Initial examination also suggests that burials in other counties have been recovered in similar associations. In the description of burial location most attention is given to patterns which also characterise other counties, although particularities of the Hampshire sample will be signalled.

Principal trends in burial

For the majority of the Iron Age the visible burial practice in Hampshire comprised the deposition of fragments of bone, individual body parts, articulated limbs and whole corpses in a variety of depositional contexts around settlements (Wait 1985; Whimster 1981). The occasional deposition of individual body parts or skeletal fragments in non-grave deposits continued throughout the Roman period, for example adult skulls and skull fragments in late Roman settlement contexts at Owslebury, Cowdery's Down and Balksbury. In the late Iron Age the deposition of complete rather than part bodies formed an increasing part of the skeletal record and from the first century AD, the vast majority of archaeologically visible bodies were buried within separate graves (Wait 1985:116; Whimster 1981:191).

From the mid-first to early third centuries AD cremation was the dominant burial form and was superseded by extended inhumation in the late third or early fourth centuries. Early Roman burials were deposited most often in ceramic vessels and furnished with ceramics and more rarely other accessories. Most late Roman rural burials were deposited in wooden coffins, although more elaborate grave forms or containers have occasionally been recovered, for

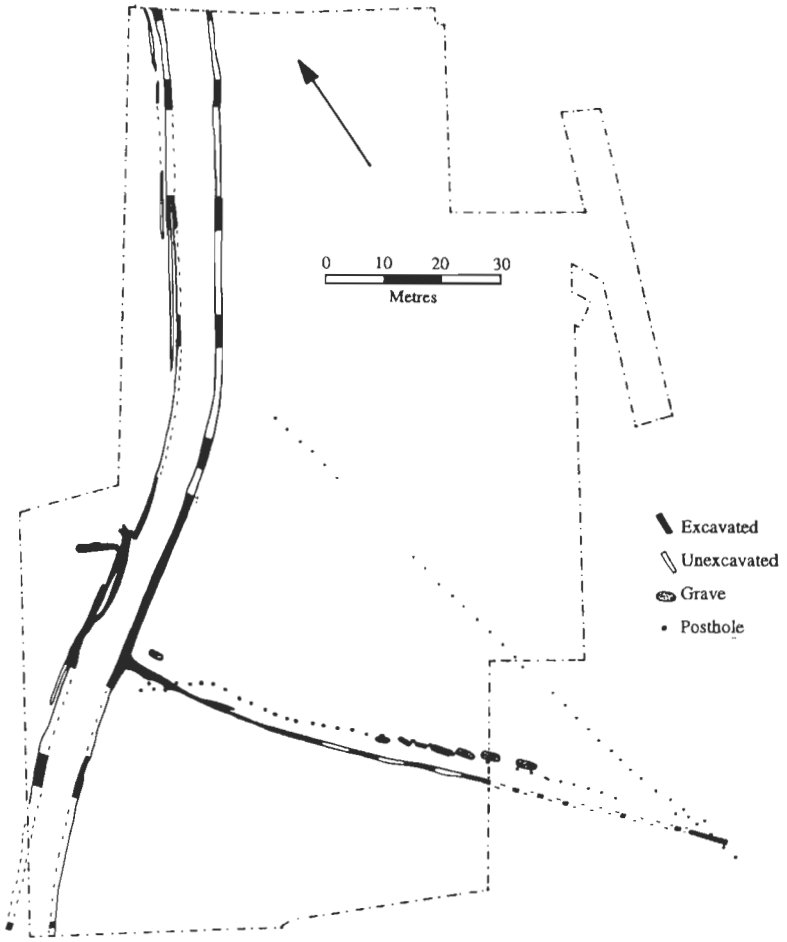

Figure 1. Burials and settlement features on Site P, Owslebury, Hampshire (after Collis 1968)

example the massive grave cuts with elaborate wooden coffins at Burntwood Farm and coffins of lead at Petersfield (Moray-Williams 1908) and stone at Binsted (Millett 1974). The commonest grave good categories of early and late Roman rural burials, respectively ceramics with the former and hobnails and ceramics with the latter, were the same as those of Winchester's cemeteries and throughout the proportion of furnished burials and the furnishing of the 'average' burial was equal to or higher than that from Winchester's cemeteries (Pearce in prep.), although the proportion of furnished burials in the rural sample is exaggerated by the dependency on grave goods for dating.

The spatial associations of rural burial

The concentration of LPRIA and early Roman cremation burials at Owslebury in a single enclosure is currently atypical of the Hampshire corpus. The majority of interments were recovered as single or small groups of burials in association with boundary features, usually the ditches and gullies which defined settlement and other enclosures, but also field boundaries and occasionally landscape features of greater antiquity. This association took several forms that are now illustrated.

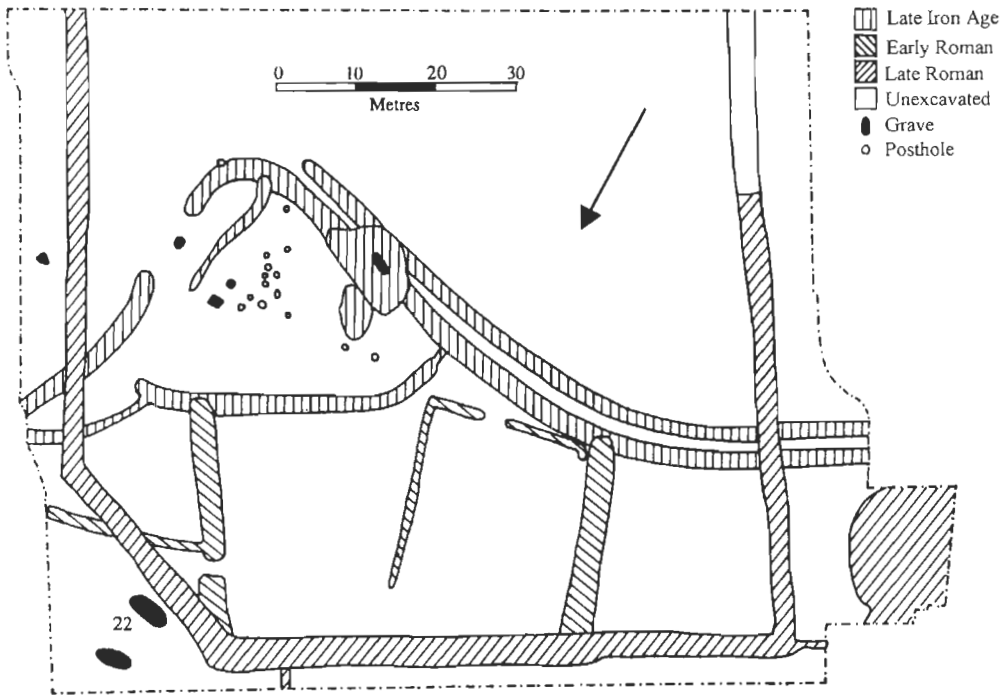

Figure 2. Burials and boundary features at Burntwood Farm, Itchen Valley, Hampshire (after Fasham 1980).

In some cases burials were located beyond the settlement boundary; the required distance seems to have varied from only a few metres at Ructstalls or Owslebury to 70m at Old Down Farm (Andover). The maintenance of distance is well illustrated on site P at Owslebury (Figure 1) where the northern corner of the large third century rectangular enclosure is cut off, seemingly to avoid disturbing burials 22 and 23 and in order that they remained outside the boundary feature. The unwillingness to excavate large areas outside enclosures is undoubtedly responsible for an under-representation of burials from this area. It is surely no accident that many such burials have been discovered beyond the limits of formal excavation (e.g. Cowdery's Down, Oakridge). The graves associated with the probable field boundary at Burntwood Farm represents the only occurrence within this sample of what is also likely to have been a frequent location for burial.

It is a commonplace that Roman burials at rural or small settlements were located within or close to enclosure ditches at the rear of settlements (Leech 1982; Philpott & Reece 1993; Smith 1987: 115–8). The front and rear of enclosures are not always easily established on these multi-period sites, but although some burials were placed to the rear of sites (e.g. Winnall Down), within the sample as a whole no preference for the latter was detected. In fact deposition in or close to entrances can be more commonly observed. On site P at Owslebury burial 24 was deposited at the entrance to a pre-Roman enclosure and burials 22 and 23 lay just beyond the entrance to the first century AD enclosure (Figure 1). During the brief salvage work at Old Down Farm (East Meon) single cremation burials were recovered from different entrances to the site. At Martin's Down a child burial was deposited at the enclosure entrance in the ditch terminal. Burials were also placed at internal entrances within settlements. A cremation in a mortared cist was deposited beneath the eastern doorway of the possible villa at Finkley, and the

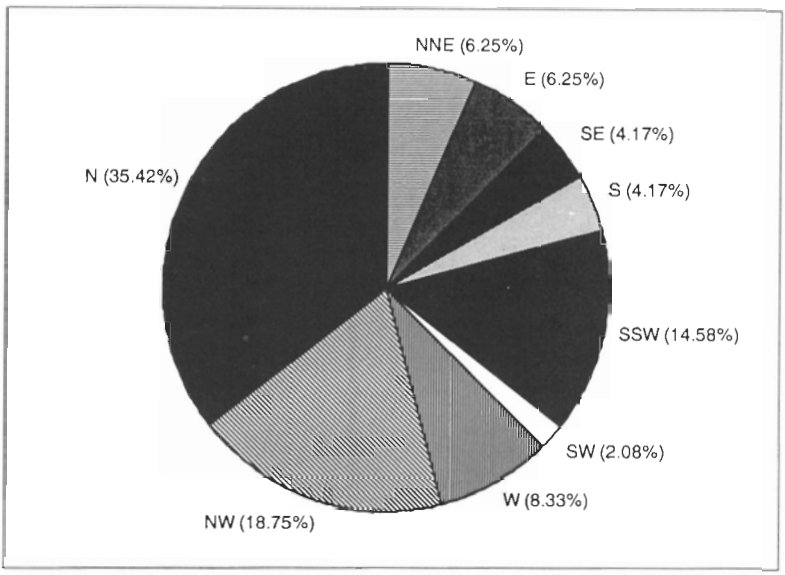

Figure 3.The Orientation of late Roman burials in Hampshire (head end); (N=48)

two cremation burials from Daneshill were located in the space between two enclosure ditches (3 & 4), possibly the entrance to a rear portion of the enclosure. A possibly analogous location for burial is at junctions of features, for example burial 54 at the junction of field boundary and trackway ditch at Burntwood Farm (Figure 2). The preferences for burial at points of access and in boundary features were united in the placing of burials in or alongside trackway and droveway ditches (Figure 2; Burntwood Farm). This is less well illustrated in Hampshire than elsewhere, for example Roden Downs (Berkshire) (Hood & Walton 1948) or Each End, Ash (Kent) (Bennett & Panton 1993).

The location of burials also appears to have been influenced by other features commonly occurring on settlement margins. Corn driers (the term is used here as shorthand for installations the function of which is most recently assessed by van der Veen (1989)) were sometimes associated not only with infant (Scott 1991) but also adult burials. Two adult inhumation burials were aligned on the north wall of the corn drier at Choseley Farm. Whether the burial was made while the corn drier was still in use is not possible to determine, but at Rockbourne the inhumation which cut the wall of the corn drier must have post-dated its use. A more spectacular example is the charred inhumation which had been placed head first in the flue of a drier at Welton Wold (East Yorkshire) (Wilson 1973: 282).

Infant burials comprise the most frequent exception to burial on settlement boundaries. From the late Iron Age to the late Roman period infants are more likely to have been buried in settlement interiors. However this interior/exterior distinction is by no means absolute, as others have noted (Struck 1993: 315). At Winnall Down and Cowdery's Down infant burials were located respectively beyond and within site enclosure ditches. Some examples of non-infant intrusion on site interiors have been noted above. The most spectacular is the deposition at Oakridge of a minimum of 24 adults and 3 children in several episodes in a well infill sequence from the late third to seventh centuries, although the nature and degree of contemporaneous occupation on the site is poorly understood. The excavator suggested that the human burials and many animal carcasses represented the hasty disposal of plague victims. However the bodies were deposited on several occasions and the skeletal sample did not represent a 'normal' population but, like other burial groups considered here, lacked infants, the age group most potentially susceptible to plague. The associations with complete pots and complete animals,

sometimes in very large numbers, suggest that like the fill of other Roman period wells (Wait 1985) this deposit was carefully structured.

The spatial organisation of burial seems to be affected by gender as well as age. On all rural sites from Hampshire with four or more burials the sample is biased to either male or female burials (Table 1) although because of sample size the statistical significance of such patterns is not easily evaluated. No difference was noted in the relationship of burials of different gender to particular settlement features. Initial examination of other published rural samples from Britain has not so far found extensive parallels to this gender distinction.

The close relationship of burials to, and their alignment on, other features has implications for orientation. Figure 3 depicts the preferences for the end at which the head is placed in late Roman child and adult (but not infant) inhumations in Hampshire. The high degree of variability is best explained by the influence on orientation of features in the immediate locality of burials. Nevertheless general preferences can be identified for placing the head to the north or north-north-west end of the burial. This distinguishes this rural sample both from the preference for north and east of Iron Age crouched inhumations in the same region (Whimster 1981:12) and the predominant west-east orientation in Winchester's late Roman cemeteries (Clarke 1979: 131–2).

Site	*Male burials*	*Female burials*	*Unknown*
Burntwood Farm	2	5	1 (juvenile)
Balksbury	0	2	2 (juvenile)
Odiham	5	1	0
Owslebury (LPRIA & early Roman)	13	3	16
Owslebury (late Roman)	4	1	0
Snell's Corner	0	3	3 (adult)
Winnall	5	0	0

Table 1: Number of male and female burials at cemeteries in Hampshire with 4 or more graves.

It is important to note that burial represents one event in longer site and feature sequences. Burials could be integral to boundaries that were active in a very practical sense. The sequence at Burntwood Farm illustrates this well (Figure 2). The roadway and field boundaries, which divided up the landscape with little reference to their Iron Age predecessors, were probably in use throughout most of the Roman period. The fourth century graves were cut parallel to, and 3–5m to the north of, Feature 8, a ditched boundary. A late or sub-Roman period line of post-holes (Line 2) was later established later along the line of the graves rather than the earlier boundary. This line of postholes continued to respect the roadway to the west. Site P at Owslebury provides a further example of the influence of burial on settlement features (see above).

However burial was also commonly associated with 'deceased' features of differing degrees of antiquity. In some cases, for example at Welton Wold, such features had only recently gone out of use. At other times burials were placed alongside or within the fills of earlier Roman (e.g. Balksbury, Owslebury) or Iron Age enclosure ditches (Old Down Farm, (Andover)) although regrettably few reports record the stage during the formation of the fill at which the burials were placed. Phased site plans can obscure this relationship with the 'relict' landscape, as they omit older features that might influence the siting of burials, as for example at Balksbury. The dead were also interred on sites or parts of sites from which the main focus of activity had shifted away (e.g. Lain's Farm, Micheldever Wood), or occasionally placed within features of a much greater antiquity, for example in prehistoric barrows at South Wonston and in a Bronze Age boundary feature at Odiham, an association attested elsewhere in Britain (Williams 1998). The distinction between the choice of features one or two centuries old or one or two millennia should not perhaps be over-emphasised. The relative dating of different features in the

palimpsest of surrounding landscapes must have become indistinct. The evidence assembled here suggests however that post-Roman burial on earlier settlements (e.g. Thruxton) continues a long-standing practice of placing the dead in close relation to 'antique' features.

Interpretation

Collis' characterisation of the differences in burial at Owslebury in terms of social hierarchy is echoed in more recent explanatory models. Philpott & Reece (1993) have proposed a tenurial as well as social distinction on the basis of rural burial evidence in Britain. They argue that landowners maintained a formal burial space to legitimate their right to property, while tenants, slaves and workers had no formal cemetery on land to which they lacked a long-term attachment. The apparent minimal effort expended on burial by using existing features has prompted an interpretation of individuals buried at such locations as outcasts:

> the substantial group of burials in disused features such as ditches, corn-drying ovens, pottery kilns or wells may be the result of indifference or laziness on the part of the grave-diggers, violent or illicit death, or disapprobation on the part of the family or community.
>
> (Philpott 1991:232).

It is tempting to link this model to social change extrapolated from the study of settlement space. The Hampshire burials might be argued to be those of the variously characterised subordinate groups, slaves, workers, or 'degraded kin', which emerged in an increasingly hierarchical rural Romano-British society (Hingley 1989:155).

However while it is possible to identify a hierarchy of burial practice based on numbers of grave goods and / or burial containers in the early and late Roman period within this rural sample, the majority of burials on settlement margins were as often contained or coffined and provided with grave goods as contemporary burials in urban cemeteries. The repeated favouring of certain locations for burial and the regularities in orientation, influenced but not determined by the relationship to local features, have been outlined above. To explain these burials as the product of indifference does not take sufficient account of these characteristics.

An alternative analysis of these burials is suggested by recent approaches to settlement space. Of these the basic principle is that the organisation of space is not the static product of social relationships, but is also an active medium through which experience and social relationships are created and re-negotiated (Parker Pearson & Richards 1994a). Students of Iron Age settlement have used both evidence of architecture and depositional practice to identify principles behind the structure of settlement space (Hill 1995; Fitzpatrick 1997). Similar studies in a Romano-British rural context have been based on the analysis of villa art and architecture to a much greater extent than depositional practice (Hingley 1990; Rippengal 1993; Scott 1990; Scott 1994). Here the organisation of settlement space of non-villa sites, in particular the structure of settlement space through time, is explored through burial as a component of depositional practice.

When beginning this study it was assumed that the distribution of burial favoured the rear of settlement sites (see above), but in this sample a more satisfactory characterisation of the relationship of burial to settlement space is as a 'concentric' ordering (cf. Hingley 1990:143; Parker Pearson & Richards 1994b). Innermost were infant burials, closer to the interior of settlement space and within structures. Adult and older child burials on the settlement boundaries and at more distant locations were the outer rings of this concentric arrangement. On these outer rings a possible difference in male and female burial locations was identified, but further samples must be examined to establish this differentiation with greater confidence.

The locations identified provide a classic illustration of liminality (van Gennep 1960). The ambiguous object, the corpse or cremated bone, was distanced from the living by its deposition in locations on the limits of the domestic sphere, boundaries, entrances, and trackways. The location of burial on abandoned or prehistoric sites distanced the dead in time as well as space.

Burial sometimes appears to be the final act in a sequence of deposits like other 'rites of termination' identified by Merrifield (1987). However graves and by implication the dead also impinged on the experience of a settlement. Their influence on the siting of other features around them implies that graves were marked and visible for some time after burial. Their impact was also realised through the obviousness of the larger features like boundary ditches with which burials were associated. Rural burial in the Roman world has been associated with the marking of property boundaries (e.g. Miles 1985: 40), but more complex relationships between burial, personal and group identity and landscape can be proposed.

The ceremony of burial and the grave can be argued to have integrated the lifecycle of bodies and persons within a variety of temporal rhythms (cf. Bloch & Parry 1982). Burial close to corn driers, or in field boundaries could have been linked to the promotion or control of fertility and to cycles of social and agricultural reproduction. The placing of burials on parts of the site, either recently disused, or related to a more distant past, connected the dead to long-term or ancestral occupation. Some burial groups of this period whether or not aligned along ditches or other features, possess a head to toe linear layout (e.g. Burntwood Farm, Odiham and Snell's Corner). These physical arrangements were powerful metaphors for lineages that allowed the living to define their own genealogical position. To those inhabiting the settlement, graves demarcated an area with which a particular group were affiliated from spaces of a different quality. The memory of a ceremony or physical marker of an interment could also have conditioned the experience of the 'outsider' arriving or passing through by alerting them that the space they were entering or traversing was differentiated from that whence they had come.

This intimate connection of burial to settlement was not a timeless constant, but within the Hampshire sample and other parts of southern and central England, may have characterised the late Roman period to a greater degree than the earlier. Given the complexity of factors that may make later Roman burial more visible and the need for further research to establish this trend more securely, potential avenues of approach are simply indicated here. The late Roman period in Britain was characterised by changes in exchange relationships and by agricultural innovation within an increasingly dis-embedded economy (Scott 1990; Millett 1990). The functions of urban public spaces were also increasingly usurped by villas (Scott 1994). These processes have been argued to be reflected in the increased architectural and artistic elaboration of villa space in the fourth century, through which the encounters of inhabitants and strangers were structured. The greater frequency of visible burial, emphasising settlement boundaries, in the fourth century may be one component of an analogous elaboration of the space of non-villa sites. In other contexts similar changes at a macro-level have been argued to have transformed gender roles within the organisation of household production (Hasdorf 1991). The gender distinction noted in the Hampshire burials may therefore relate to broader changes in engendered space on settlement sites which reflected such transformations, although attempts (e.g. Hingley 1989:43–5) to identify gender-based activity patterning in Romano-British rural space are not convincing. The Owslebury data also suggests that spatial divisions in burial based on gender did not characterise the late Roman period alone.

Conclusions

Recurring locations have been identified in the placing of burials on rural settlement sites in Hampshire. The importance of site boundaries for the location of burial has been confirmed and a number of further preferences proposed, both for the rear of, and the entrances to, settlements and fields, close to 'corn driers', by or in the ditches of roads and trackways, and in abandoned and prehistoric sites. Within the small number of sites it is difficult to evaluate the strength of different associations. It is suggested here that the significance of the rear of settlement enclosures have been hitherto exaggerated. Burials outside the settlement area are likely to be under-represented in the currently available sample, as such areas are rarely privileged in excavation, especially under rescue conditions. That burial in these various locations signified

lower status within the hierarchy of rural burial has been challenged. An alternative characterisation has been offered which places burial within the evolving structure of settlement space and suggests its influence on contemporary perceptions of the landscape. This characterisation provides a further challenge to the hypothesis that formal bounded cemetery areas alone connect groups to resources and property (cf. Morris 1991).

The provisional nature of conclusions must however be emphasised. Publication of large-scale recent excavations (e.g. Frocester Court, Stanwick, Stansted) will undoubtedly enhance our understanding of rural Roman burial practice and will hopefully prompt the future collection of larger and better samples. With such information regional and chronological differences which are suggested by currently available information will be more satisfactorily characterised; in Cambridgeshire for example individual burials associated with field boundaries or entrances seem to be more typical than in Hampshire (J. Taylor pers. comm.) whilst excavations in Somerset and the Thames Valley have revealed late Roman cemeteries with several tens or hundreds of burials which possibly acted as the communal cemetery for a number of settlements (Philpott & Reece 1993). Regular scientific dating of small groups of burials without grave goods should facilitate the distinction between late and post-Roman burials. In this analysis burial has also been isolated from the broader context of deposition. Hill (1995) has demonstrated the value for the interpretation of Iron Age settlement space of the comparison of the deposition of human remains with other types of deposit. Although unlike the Iron Age the Roman period is largely characterised by the discrete deposition of whole bodies, a change which Hill has set within a broader context of the increasing separation of ritual from settlement space, the study of burial within the context of general depositional practice remains an area of unexploited value. Nevertheless, while there is much potential for further work, this paper has shown that burial on settlement boundaries, a commonplace of Romano-British archaeology, can sustain re-investigation and suggests a further dimension to a different rather than over-familiar Roman Britain.

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Appendix 1

Site	*Reference*	*Site*	*Reference*
Alton	Millett 1986	Old Down Farm, Andover	Davies 1981
Balksbury	Wainwright & Davies 1995	Old Down, East Meon	Whinney & Walker 1980
Burntwood Farm	Fasham 1980	Owslebury	Collis 1968, 1970, 1977
Choseley Farm	Morris 1986	Rockbourne	Sumner 1914
Cowdery's Down	Millett & James 1983	Ructstalls Hill	Oliver & Applin 1979
Finkley	Stevens 1872	Snell's Corner	Knocker 1956
Lain's Farm	Bellamy 1992	South Wonston	Whinney 1987
Micheldever Wood	Fasham 1987	Thruxton	Colt Hoare 1829
Middle Wallop	Piggott 1949	Winnall	Collis 1978
Oakridge	Oliver 1992	Winnall Down	Fasham 1985
Odiham	Jenkins 1990		

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