



# **In Search of a Different Roman Period: The Finds Assemblage at the Newstead Military Complex**

by Simon Clarke

## *Introduction*

The investigation of artefacts and animal remains from Roman period sites has consistently taken a rationalist view of the data. Researchers' primary concern has overwhelmingly been to identify technological and economic implications from patterning. For example, the original aims of the Newstead Research Project made no reference to the investigation of belief systems through the study of artefacts and ecofacts (Jones 1990: 105-6). Many continue to believe that only these lowest rungs on the "ladder of inference" are normally accessible (Hawkes 1954). The understanding of ideology and belief systems is usually regarded as too esoteric to attempt. Over the last decade however, a number of prehistorians have suggested that ritual was fundamental to everyday life in a way which is difficult for us to comprehend today. To separate it from questions of economy or social organisation would be to impose a modern mind set on the data. By examining the military complex at Newstead (see figure 1), this paper will show that a high proportion of Roman period site finds were not the result of casual discard or accidental loss, but were the product of deliberate choices in which symbolism and ritual were key considerations. This has implications for the way students of the Roman period should approach material culture and also what we mean by ritual activity.

## *The Newstead's Pits*

The key instance at Newstead of symbolic or ritual behaviour having a significant impact on the make-up of an artefact assemblage derives from the fills of a series of deep pits and wells. The largest group, 107, were excavated between 1905 and 1911 by agricultural labourers under the direction of James Curle (Curle 1911: 104-139). The greatest concentration, 80 pits, were discovered in the South Annexe. Intensive trenching of this area by Curle suggests that virtually no pits have escaped detection, although he recovered little indication of associated buildings. The South Annexe can now be seen to have been a heavily built-up suburb, with an estimated one hundred timber strip-buildings (Jones *et al* 1989-93). The pits' contents included extraordinary quantities of animal bones, human remains, organic waste and manufactured goods. The latter were mostly in a fragmentary condition, but included a surprisingly large number, which had evidently entered the ground in a serviceable condition. Recent excavations also recovered evidence for six additional pits in the old railway cutting sides when the Melrose bypass was constructed (Clarke and Jones 1994).

In spite of Curle's major contribution to the understanding of fort and annexe layouts these complete and near complete objects may reasonably be regarded as his most enduring contribution to Roman archaeology. They illustrate almost every aspect of ceremonial, military, industrial and domestic life at a frontier base and have become the core of the National Museums of Scotland's Roman display collection. They were initially regarded as a more or less randomly selected sample of everyday life preserved as the result of an extraordinary

event. Curle envisaged that the site had been hastily abandoned or overrun by a hostile force and thus valuable resources, and perhaps fallen comrades, were put beyond human reach to stop them falling into enemy hands (Curle 1911: 113-115). Others imagined a variant of this scenario in which victorious natives placed a proportion of their spoils down pits and wells in thanks to the gods who had given them victory. More recently, extensive excavation and geophysical survey in the fort and annexe interiors has consistently failed to find evidence for a site wide disaster, which could account for these deposits (Jones and Gillings 1987, Jones *et al* 1989-93). In fact the pits with significant artefact assemblages can be shown to have belonged to at least two phases (Clarke 1996: 78-9, figures 2 and 3), but probably far more. If deposition in pits was spread throughout the Roman occupation, a really exceptional pit deposit would have been created on average perhaps every five years. A more typical pit deposit must have happened virtually every year. An explanation for their contents must therefore be sought amongst relatively everyday social processes.

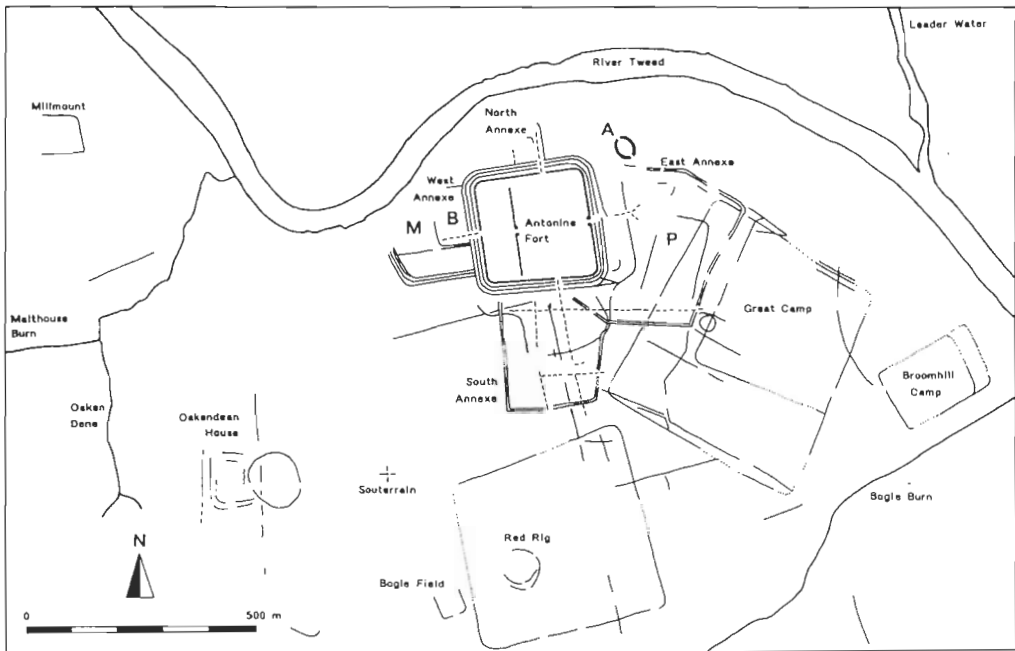


Figure 1 The Newstead Complex

#### *Romanists and the Identification of Ritual*

Initially, interpreters of the assemblage were reluctant to attribute “illogical / non-functional” ritual activity to a Roman population (c.f. Manning 1972). Until very recently relatively few have been prepared to accept that the deliberate deposition of economically valuable items, without hope of recovery, could have occurred regularly outside of a specifically religious context such as a temple. Those taking a contrary view such as Anne Ross (Ross 1968, Ross and Fenham 1976) have often been treated with scorn. Millett has suggested that the terms of English treasure-trove law (now repealed) have in the past conditioned archaeologists to reject the possibility that hoards of precious material were not intended for recovery (Millett 1995)<sup>1</sup>. Representatives of the British Museum have vigorously denied this intellectual dishonesty (Johns 1995), and there is no evidence that field archaeologists have avoided rocking the legal

boat for the sake of their museum colleagues. The truth is probably more prosaic. On the whole Romanists admire Roman civilisation and identify with the Roman population (Hingley 1995) in a way that I don't think is true for students of other periods. Many Romanists are still loath to take the ritual option seriously. One senior professional archaeologist, a regular attendee at TRAC, recently commented that there must be a better explanation than ritual for the Newstead pits. Several contributors to the Military Equipment in Context Conference in Leiden 1994 (published as Volume 5 of the *Journal of Roman Military Equipment Studies*, 1996) expressed interest in my Newstead observations. At the same time they firmly asserted that nothing like that was happening at their sites, even though the character and circumstances of the assemblages seemed very similar! There remains a widespread feeling that we already know all about the Romans - that they were just like us. There is an irrational belief that while prehistoric types might have stooped to that sort mumbo jumbo, the Romans had more sense. This common sense approach to archaeology, the belief that past human behaviour can be readily understood solely in terms of simple functional activities with which all human societies are familiar, has been fairly comprehensively rubbished amongst prehistorians (c.f. Rowlands 1986, Champion 1987). Of particular interest are Richard Bradley's (1990) "The Passage of Arms" and J.D. Hill's (1992) "Can We Recognise a Different European Past?" There is no valid reason why the interpretation of Roman period behaviour should proceed under different rules to that of Europe's prehistory. Newstead's population, both military and civilian, was ethnically Germanic and Celtic, only lightly Romanized. Hence the question implied in the title - can we identify a different Roman Period, one that is not simply a reflection of our own mind set, as Hill (1992 and 1995) has attempted to do for the Iron Age of Southern Britain?

### *Symbolic Potential*

Certainly it is possible to draw strong parallels between the Newstead pits and prehistoric structured deposits. Some of the material seems to have been "ritually killed", for example a sword bent in two was recovered from pit 57 (Curle 1911: 129, plate 34). Many of the items have what we might call symbolic potential. In the ancient world even the humble shoe was often loaded down with divine symbols. Its inclusion in burial and ritual deposits implied sophisticated theological ideas about spiritual journeys (Van Driel-Murray 1999). Similarly complete vessels<sup>ii</sup> carry connotations of plenty. Wheels<sup>iii</sup> and rotary querns<sup>iv</sup> might represent the sun or the circle of life. Beehive querns like the one recovered from Pit 1 have a shape said to represent the glands of the penis (Cheetham pers. com.). Antlers<sup>v</sup> also carry associations with fertility and a plaque made of this material was carved with a phallic device<sup>vi</sup>. Helmets<sup>vii</sup>, especially elaborate parade helmets with face masks, strongly recall the Celtic cult of the head. Furthermore a number of the pits contained human skulls or even complete skeletons<sup>viii</sup>, which clearly cannot be thought of as simple rubbish, even if Isserlin (1997) is probably over stepping the mark in suggesting human sacrifice. The range of material in native ritual deposits in northern Britain was very similar. Tools, weapons, food (or food containers) and dining equipment were amongst the most common offerings. The majority of items had a practical everyday use rather than a specialist religious function (Hunter 1997). The archaeological contexts were also comparable in some ways. Newstead's pits, though anthropogenic rather than natural, were not unlike the watery contexts frequently chosen for prehistoric sacrifice. Almost all contained standing water (Curle 1911: 108) and some were quite obviously wells. However, most Romanists will require more than this sort of anecdotal evidence to be convinced of the ritual character of deposition.

### *The Identification of "Ritual" Deposits*

Curle's excavations were not recorded in the kind of detail that we would require today. Nevertheless they were relatively complete for their time and on a scale which probably couldn't be attempted now. In two previous papers (Clarke and Jones 1996, Clarke 1997) this has allowed me to use simple statistics to investigate associations between different types of material and between the position of different classes of material within the shaft. From these it can be seen that deposition was strongly patterned, with the most obviously significant materials concentrated together and in the bottom quarter of the deepest pits. Statistical analysis suggested that at Newstead, the most significant artefacts types were specialist religious equipment, weapons and armour, tools, equestrian equipment, bronze and ceramic vessels and querns. Groups of material were generally more significant than single items and whole items more significant than incomplete fragments. The most significant skeletal remains were found to be human, dog, horse cattle and deer. Skulls of all species appear to have been more significant than other bones.

The ritual character of some large groups of animal bones and artefacts is virtually inescapable. Even Manning, who argued that the majority of pit finds were routine build-ups of rubbish (Manning 1972: 234-243), was forced to concede that Pits 1, 14, 16, 17, 22, 56 and 57 must have been created by extraordinary events, perhaps involving ritual (Manning 1972: 244). However there is no clear cut-off point between obviously ritual and obviously non-ritual deposits. Hill (1992) and Cunliffe (1992) discussing Danebury and other late Iron Age sites have interpreted this as evidence that all, or nearly all, pits originally contained offerings, only the most blatant of which have been detected by archaeologists. This may be explained by offerings having entirely perished. There may have been libations of milk or blood, objects of wood or leather or bolts of cloth. At Newstead only the lowest part of pits were waterlogged and in some cases the water table had been significantly altered by the creation of the railway cutting in the mid-nineteenth century. Perishable items could not therefore be considered in the statistical approach of my 1996 and 1997 papers, which assumed an equal chance of survival regardless of the depth of deposition. In addition, particularly in the case of Newstead, archaeological recording may simply have been too coarse for some of the more subtle patterns to be recognised. For example Curle has left only a crude break down of animal bones present. For each pit he usually named the species, but gave only the vaguest idea of quantity and except in the case of skulls did not go into details about which body parts were present (Curle 1911: 104-139). Age, sex, seasonality, and evidence for articulation of bones and their butchery, are now usually routinely recorded, but were barely touched upon by Curle's report. The specialist animal report at the end of Curle's book (Ewart 1911) entirely divorces the remains from their context.

### *"Non-Ritual" Deposits*

In spite of the short-comings of much of the data from Newstead, by combining Curle's evidence with that from the more recent excavations it is possible to go further and suggest that the selection of material for deposition in pits has distorted the assemblage of other contexts. Comparison between pits' assemblages and finds from the occupation spreads, which built-up on the Roman period ground surface, reveals some startling differences. For example quern fragments, which were relatively common from pits and wells (Curle 1911: 145, plate 17), were almost completely absent from occupation deposits<sup>x</sup>. The Niedermendig lava stone, from which the majority were made, is extremely distinctive so that even small, abraded fragments should have been identifiable. In other words, this is a real pattern, not a question of survival and



archaeological visibility. Similarly almost all of the iron objects recovered from surface build-ups were nails or nail fragments. Personal objects, weapons or tools, or even unidentifiable fragments which could have resulted from their disintegration, were extremely rare. The pattern in pits was almost the exact opposite, with nails almost entirely absent, while tools, weapons and personal objects were relatively common (Curle 1911: 104-139). In a sense both occupation spreads and pit fills are the result of ritual behaviour. In the case of pits it caused significant items to be concentrated at their bases. In the case of occupation spreads the effect was negative. Contexts were sanitised; symbolically charged items were deliberately sought out for removal and safe deposited elsewhere.

#### *Attitudes to the Disposal of Rubbish*

Even without this patterning of finds distribution across Newstead there would be strong grounds for suspecting that the disposal of "rubbish" was governed by highly ritualistic rules. Newstead's midden-like surface deposits, rich in fragments of pottery and small personal objects of glass and bronze, have almost invariably been regarded as accidental loss and deliberate discard. The throw-away nature of Roman society is one of the things we identify with most closely. But viewed against a hinterland of incredibly clean native sites in the Scottish Borders rubbish disposal can be seen to have been intimately bound up with culture specific ideas of clean and unclean (Clarke 1999). It is possible to argue that native society in Roman Iron Age southern Scotland was largely aceramic and carefully husbanded its metal resources. But where is the charcoal, the fuel ash slag, the organic residues and the bone fragments on sites like Whitrighill? The main house at this site had an internal diameter of 10m and 2m thick walls stone walls. The enclosure ditch is even more impressive about 270m in length, 6.5m across and 3m deep (Jones *et al* 1992). Clearly this was a society capable of mobilising considerable resources. The absence of the kind of debris present on Roman military and *vicus* sites can only be accounted for by a completely different depositional regime.

#### *Ritual and the Archaeological Record*

The implication that Hill and others have drawn from the identification of widespread ritual deposition is that ritual played a very important part in the survival of some of the largest artefact groups and of the best, most completely intact individual items (Hill 1992). This clearly has important implications for the way archaeologists interpret ancient material culture. The old adage that the spade does not lie, that archaeology provides a more honest view of society than a written text, because it represents random survivals, can be seen to be false. Even without the pernicious influence of middle aged, middle class, white, male archaeologists forcing their interpretation on the data set there is a need to deconstruct the meaning of archaeological remains, which is every bit as pressing as the need to contextualize literary texts to reveal biases and hidden agendas. The artefacts cannot be left to speak for themselves in a common sense manner because what we have been left with in the archaeological record is a view of ancient society through the distorting prism of that society's ritual behaviour. Sometimes this is fairly obvious. For example ritual activity will often preserve the ceremonial over the work-a-day, the highly decorated over the plain. Hence Newstead has produced only one example of an ordinary soldier's helmet, but three parade helmets (Curle 1911: 164-72, plates 26-30). Other biases we have perhaps overlooked. Is the preponderance of military and equestrian equipment, and metal and wood working tools really a reflection of the objects in everyday circulation? It is a vision of a man's world that has been easy for us to accept at a military base, but have we

been deceived? Were items that might more readily be associated with women, such as jewellery<sup>x</sup> or the tools of textile production, rejected by a male dominated selection process?

#### *Ritual as Part of a Non-Scientific World View*

The recognition of the symbolic aspect to the disposal of material culture clearly has enormous implications for the interpretation of Roman period sites. This is by no means a phenomenon confined to Newstead<sup>xi</sup>. Comparable pit deposits have been recognised throughout Roman Britain on a variety of site types (c.f. Wait 1985). The problem with Hill's approach to structured deposition is that, aware that all human behaviour is intrinsically symbolic (according to conventional anthropological doctrine), he has stressed that the deposits that he has identified had more than merely symbolic significance - they represent "ritual" activity. What Hill seems to mean by this is that the primary objective of the behaviour was geared to the manipulation of the supernatural. But I would argue that what we would call the supernatural does not exist in the ancient world. Gods and spirits were *not* para-normal activity as far as Newstead's population was concerned. They were part of the natural world, invisible perhaps, but as real to them as weather fronts, economic cycles and magnetic fields are to us. In a modern context to identify a lightning conductor as evidence for a belief in a scientific worldview would be ludicrous. Only actresses in shampoo adverts talk about "the science bit" as if it were completely separate from everyday life. The identification of ritual in the ancient world is similarly absurd. The irony is that in rejecting modern common sense interpretations and seeking to identify virtually universal ritual activity in the archaeological record, Hill has himself imposed a scheme of classification largely founded on the modern mind set. When we talk about ritual what we usually mean is activities we cannot explain by references to "normal" social, economic and technological forces. "Probably ritual" still means we don't really understand what is going on! To return to Hawkes' "ladder of inference", Hill has not fully abandoned the idea that ritual is a separate rung. Perhaps we should think about a rope of inference, in which notions such as social organisation, technology and belief systems are woven together. Only the combined strength of all the strands can support the weight of our interpretations.

#### *Conclusion*

Perhaps for the benefit of some Romanists it is still necessary to labour the point that what we call ritual activity was widespread in the ancient world, invading areas of life which in our own experience appear wholly secular. Deposition on Iron Age and Roman period sites was controlled in large part by behaviour patterns that to our mind were illogical responses to superstition or religious belief. But it only really stands out as outlandishly ritualistic from the standpoint of the outsider. To members of that society it was perfectly rational behaviour, which supported a sense of social identity, was integrated with the economic system and meshed perfectly with technological understanding. We need to move beyond the mere identification of ritual. We should be able to take that as read. What is required is a completely new set of questions about Roman period society, into which consideration of the belief system is fully integrated.

*Endnotes*

- i Until a few years ago English Treasure Trove applied only to objects with a significant gold or silver content which had been hidden with the intention of recovering them. This was originally a medieval law intended to prevent tax dodging.
- ii A complete ceramic vessel was recovered from Curle Pit 76. Broken but complete or near complete examples are recorded from the 1994 stone lined well BY53 and Curle Pits 9, 11, 12, 15, 28, 39, 42, 72, 75 and 76. Bronze vessels were recovered from one of the railway cutting pits in 1846 and Curle Pits 2, 10, 14, 26, 57, 58 and 99.
- iii Complete wheels were recovered from Curle pits 23 and 70 with fragments of tires or hubs from many more.
- iv Complete quern stone pairs, still with their iron spindles were recovered from Curle pits 10, 19, 22 and 61.
- v Deer antlers were present in Curle pits 23, 27, 28, 66, 80, 88, 95, 97 and 98 and well BY53 excavated in 1994.
- vi Recovered from Pit 59 (Curle 1911: 314, plate 84).
- vii Curle pits 22 and 57.
- viii Skeletons were recovered from a pit discovered in the railway cutting in 1846, Curle Pits 1 and 18. Skulls or skull fragments were recovered from Curle Pits 1, 16, 23 and 57.
- ix This statement is based on a detailed examination of all the finds from the recent excavations.
- x Although an impressive collection of jewellery has been recovered from Newstead, those that can be attributed to specific contexts almost always come from occupation or midden deposits. Items of jewellery along with coins are almost completely absent from pits and wells at Newstead.
- xi Contra Phil Freedman's comments as discussant for the military session at TRAC 99.

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