

Neil Holbrook, Jamie Wright, E.R. McSloy and Jonny Geber, *The Western Cemetery of Roman Cirencester: excavations at the former Bridges Garage, Old Tetbury Road, Cirencester, 2001-2015* Cirencester Excavations VII (Cirencester, Cotswold Archaeology 2017). xvi+158pp., 162 figs., 31 tabs. Hardback, £19.95 [ISBN:9780993454530]. **Reviewed 03.2018**

While excavation within Romano-British towns such as Cirencester gives us information about the 'use' of structures such as the forum or town houses, the cemeteries help us to learn more about the 'users', their values, economic standing and perhaps even about the surrounding area. This handsome volume is concerned with excavations in the Western Cemetery of Cirencester outside the town walls, and along the now Tetbury Road. The project was undertaken due to the building of offices on the site of a former garage, which had yielded human remains during its construction in 1960. It was expected that with the considerable works undertaken when the garage was constructed, petrol storage tanks etc., most of the surviving evidence would have been cut into or sliced off. Happily, this proved to be only in parts of the site and the outcomes two series of archaeological excavation in 2011 and 2015 exceeded all expectations.

The cemetery developed alongside a road or track and opposite Grismond's Tower, a mound which may have been a prehistoric or Roman feature, either giving a certain status in terms of identity, status and 'heritage' to those interred across from it. The burial ground was used between the late 1st and the late 3rd or 4th centuries, and during these investigations 118 inhumations and 8 cremations were retrieved (to which might be added 80 more inhumations and 8 cremations from the 1960s observations). The most significant feature was a walled enclosure, too extensive to be a roofed mausoleum, of the late 1st to early 3rd centuries, and which contained in excess of nine inhumations. Tantalisingly, the walled cemetery was one area where later disturbance by the garage construction had caused problems of interpretation, and although it was clear that the centre of the feature had a focus such as a monument or tree, there was no evidence as to exactly what it might consist. In the backfills of the walled cemetery graves evidence of pottery indicated the rituals connected incense or some other sacred material, all smashed and incorporated in the grave fill. As in the graves from in the walled cemetery, those immediately outside it contained inhumations with wooden coffins, hob-nailed boots and generally demonstrated a high degree of wealth and status. The long use of this part of the cemetery indicates a continuity of interment for some (ancestral?) group, especially as the graves must have been marked, as there was no intercutting of grave cuts, however this is a significant feature of the whole burial ground.

The grave catalogue is a model of accessibility, welcoming both professional and interested individuals. Each set of human remains is in a numbered sequence, continuing on from the Bath Road cemetery, with an individual colour-coded plan showing grave cut, skeletal remains, and the position of grave goods, which are illustrated by adjacent photographs. In the adjoining text these details are expanded with measurements, gender, description of grave goods, and proposed date of burial indicated by specific evidence from the grave. The designation of each grave is included separately in the index allowing reference to other citations in the text. This integration of the characteristics of each grave is invaluable is

setting the context for the discussion of artefacts, human remains and environmental information.

The two artefacts that caught the popular imagination were a tombstone and a small enamelled cockerel. The tombstone was dedicated to Bodicacia, 27 years old at death, which was re-used face-downwards and placed over the grave of a 45-58 year old male. This probably ensured it was left by later grave/stone robbers. It was a 'blank' of local stone and a product of the Cotswold school of sculptors, with the face of god Oceanus, crab claws springing for either side of his head, and seaweed from his mouth ('a masterly work of art' according to the specialist, Martin Henig). Representations of Oceanus are a very rare find, the sea being a long way from Gloucestershire and his appearance in mosaics at the villas of Withington and Woodchester may well be of local and wider significance that is worth further research. Unfortunately, the inscription was carved later with clumsy off-set words among other things. It has been appeared to have been later defaced, possibly by Christians. The side and rear of the gravestone were very crudely dressed and beg the question of whether it was to be positioned into a wall rather than being free-standing, and whether this was in any way connected to the empty space at the centre of the walled cemetery. The lack of mention of the name of Bodicacia's spouse, even though we know she had one from the inscription, suggests that a memorial to him was placed nearby and also suggests a specific monument. The second noteworthy artefact was a small copper-alloy enamelled cockerel, possibly a votive offering, buried with a child along with a pottery tettine (a feeder bottle). It seems that the object might have some connection with the god Mercury, the messenger of the gods and announcer of dawn, both of which might have had significance to the parents of the child for a safe journey into the afterlife and a re-awakening.

While the cockerel and tombstone are inevitably the most attractive objects, for the reviewer equally as moving is the grave of a six year old that died possibly of scurvy, trauma or tuberculosis and was buried with 3 bracelets, one of glass, and five strings of beads, the longest being of 153 individual pieces. Each seems to have been buried on the child as though it was wearing them. Secondly, the grave of a female of 19-24 years old buried with copper-alloy, bone and shale bracelets, and an armlets one of 40 beads of bone, green, clear and blue glass or glass paste, These were probably in a purse or bag, leading to micro-excavation after being lifted as a block. These indicate a vibrant, youthful young woman.

There is a question of access to the cemetery. There is no indication of a major gate in the town walls at this point, but there is a suggestion that this might have been the original route of the Fosse Way before the town's plan was fixed, in which case the monuments would be seen by many passers-by, and perhaps villa owners, who may have had town houses, might have preferred to have been buried here than in their own isolated rural properties. If there was a postern with a track to reach this cemetery, then privacy and exclusivity is suggested. On a wider scale, the Western Cemetery was very different from that at the Bath Gate where there were few grave goods or coffins, little overall planning or marking of graves indicated by the inter-cutting of grave-pits. This indicates the different social status of contrasting burial grounds.

Two aspects of the report are unusual, and both indicate the professionals realising the importance of communicating the importance, and thrill of the moment, in archaeology to the general public. Firstly, the lifting of the Bodicacia stone was planned so that the event could

be broadcast on local radio in real time, and also filmed for inclusion in a regional evening television programme. The object also made the cover of a British popular archaeology magazine, *Current Archaeology* and the American, (and international) *National Geographic*. Secondly, a poem acts as a preface to the report. The piece, by Dan Simpson, was commissioned by Corinium Museum, concerns the cockerel, its young deceased owner (here a girl although in reality an unsexed pre-pubescent child) and the wishes of her parents for it to ease her journey. It might be argued that all archaeological outcomes involve 'informed imagination' using evidence from a site to translate the findings for particular audiences. The conclusion to the report is objectively argued and certainly for the professional, but could be accessed by interested individuals. However, the poem is at the other end of the scale, the emotional. This reviewer found the interpretation of the site enhanced by both.

This is an important and satisfying volume. It is well presented, and lavishly produced, being published just two years after the project ended. It demonstrates the deservedly professional high status of Cotswold Archaeology, and confirms its mission to share work on a wide scale in an accessible form with a wide community of people. It is pleasing also to see the volume dedicated to Richard Reece, who recorded the site as the garage was being built in 1960, has remained a vital force in the development of Roman archaeology in Cirencester, county-wide and indeed has influenced approaches to study of the Roman period nationally, and beyond.

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