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REPRESENTATIONS AND REALITIES: CEMETERIES AS EVIDENCE FOR WOMEN IN ROMAN BRITAIN

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SUMMARY

The article considers how burial evidence might contribute to the undestarnding of gender, i.e. the socio-cultural construction of sexual difference, as a dynamic aspect of identity in a Roman province, with a particular focus on women. This subject has hitherto received limited attention and its potential is too great to explore fully in a short paper. Given this costraint, the article indicates possibilities and problems rather than to offer definitive conclusions. Its emphasis lies on Roman Britain, but similar questions could be applied to other parts of the Roman world.

Introduction

In this article I consider how burial evidence might contribute to the understanding of gender, i.e. the socio-cultural construction of sexual difference, as a dynamic aspect of identity in a Roman province, with a particular focus on women. This subject has hitherto received limited attention and its potential is too great to explore fully in a short paper. Given this constraint, I aim to indicate possibilities and problems rather than to offer definitive conclusions. I hope this will also excuse the broad-brush characterisations of other work on the archaeology of gender which I present as the context in which to set the study of burial. My emphasis lies on Roman Britain, since I am more familiar

Key words: Roman women - Burial practices - Gender construction

with data from this province, but as similar questions apply to other parts of the Roman world, this case study may have wider relevance. Students of the classical world have reproached their discipline for the lateness with which gender has been developed as a subject of study[1] but provincial Roman archaeologists have been slower than colleagues in ancient history and classical art history (and certainly prehistoric and early medieval archaeology) in paying it extensive attention. In the study of social identity the issue of cultural affiliation, in particular the 'Romanization' problem, has dominated the field. A recent paper by Martin Pitts[2] demonstrates this obsession of (English-writing) Roman archaeologists: of recent publications concerned with the archaeology of identity in a Roman context, only 10% of his sample (64 papers) considered gender at any length. Yet gender relations and ideologies are likely to have experienced significant changes from the late first millennium BC to the mid first millennium AD. *Longue durée* processes over this period, such as population growth, urbanisation, agricultural innovation and craft specialization, as well as conquest and incorporation within the Roman empire will almost certainly have had significant consequences for the roles played by men and women, from their participation in political or religious life to the organisation of the household economy, and the cultural valuation put upon those roles and activities. These consequences have yet to be extensively modelled. Archaeologists have often divided gender archaeology into three strands, a critique of androcentrism in interpretations of the past and in disciplinary structures[3], an effort to balance this by finding evidence for women in the specific periods and places studied, and the reintegration of gender within the broader study of historical change: within the latter the construction of masculinity as well as of female identities and roles is becoming of equal interest[4]. Of these strands, much work in the Roman provinces so far has focused on 'finding women', i.e. reconstructing the lives of provincial women. The quantity of archaeological (and textual) evidence

from individual provinces now permits us to rely less on argument by analogy from literary sources from Rome and to explore provincial experience in its own right: recent examples include studies by Allason-Jones[5] of Britain or Rémy and Mathieu[6] for Gaul. The reinvigorated study of Roman military communities has also prompted work on both 'finding' women inside forts and re-thinking their roles (references below). Although this work on the 'women of the camp' has found its way into broader syntheses of provincial societies, gender as an aspect of identity in town and country away from the frontier has received less scrutiny[7].

I therefore begin by briefly drawing attention to the non-funerary evidence from Britain: as will become apparent, a wide range of archaeological and textual evidence is available. Different source materials require their own particular treatment and my focus lies on funerary evidence. I first briefly discuss commemorative monuments, tombstones bearing texts and image dedicated to or by women. I then survey the larger body of evidence for funerary rituals, especially the provision of grave goods for men and women, as documented by cemetery excavations. As well as assessing the degree to which burial provides a basis for the sexing of particular artefacts or activities, I also propose an alternative approach, i.e. that the ephemeral presentation of the dead at the funeral can be studied as a form of 'self-representation', an assertion of achievements and values by the commemorators with respect to the norms of a group. This approach is much more familiar in the study of Roman funerary monuments, which combines analysis of tomb structure, text and especially portraiture to illuminate ideologies and values held beyond the elite male sphere. I also give some consideration to the very different kinds of insights into human experience that can be derived from skeletal remains, now available in substantial samples. I briefly indicate the significance of some recent studies and data for the lives of provincial women and men, but also emphasise methodological problems.

Non-funerary sources

Before turning to the dead it is important to note the availability of other sources, including documentary evidence. I do not have in mind here the descriptions of women in Greco-Roman literary sources, most famously Boudicca, the British queen whose rebellion against Rome is reported by Tacitus and Cassius Dio, whose image has had a long afterlife as imperial icon and counter-cultural emblem[8] (Fig. 1). Though sometimes used to argue for the ability of women to exercise political authority in Iron Age Europe, these queens reveal much more of Roman constructions of the barbarian 'Other' than of protohistoric realities[9].

Fig. 1 - The statue of Boudicca on the embankment by Westminster Bridge, London (1902), the imperial context reinforced by the quotation on the plinth from the 'Ode to Boadicea by William Cowper (1782): 'Reasons Caesar never knew / thy posterity shall sway'.

On the other hand an increasing body of textual evidence is available from Britain itself. More Latin documents created as ephemeral writing in the context of daily life have been found in Britain in the last 40 years than in any other western province. The most famous are the Vindolanda writing tablets, postcard-sized ink-written wooden documents from (primarily) Flavian to Hadrianic phases of occupation at this auxiliary fort just south of Hadrian's Wall, during periods of occupation by units recruited in northern Gaul[10]. The anaerobic conditions which apply at the base of the stratigraphic sequence have preserved abundant organic material, including fragments of several hundred writing tablets. This medium probably served as a local substitute for papyrus or ostraka (*tabulae ceratae* are also found, though in smaller numbers and have not yet been read). The letters, accounts and reports illuminate the Roman army as a social and economic as well as military entity and include documents written by and / or referring to women. The birthday invitation issued to Lepidina, the wife of a *praefectus* by Severa, the wife of another *praefectus* at an unknown garrison is widely cited, not only for its content but also because the closing sentence, in a different hand, may be written by Severa herself[11]. If so, it is among the earliest known female handwriting in Latin. In other letters, connected to the officer class and other ranks, women feature as correspondents or the subjects of good wishes[12]. One tablet intriguing fragment refers to the reader required by the illiterate recipient, probably female, to know the content of the message[13]:

> *.... which I present as a gift (? munus) to the domina. But you (?) will have to take care that the person who reads my letter to you does not indicate that in any way to the domina. (Back) Greet from me both Dioscurides (?) and... Farewell my dearest sister (?).*

As well as providing information on social networks and hospitality, such texts provide significant evidence for female literacy and participation in document use.

Single texts from other sites also give anecdotal glimpses into the biographies of individual women: a stylus tablet from excavations at no. 1 Poultry, London documents the sale of a female slave of Gallic origin[14]:

> *Vegetus, assistant slave of Montanus the imperial slave…, has bought and received by* mancipium *the girl Fortunata, or by whatever name she is known, a Diablintan [i.e. the* civitas *centred on Jublains, département of Mayenne] from Albicianus…for 600 denarii.*

The very different medium of curse tablets from the spring sanctuary at *Aquae Sulis*/Bath (and elsewhere in southern Britain) supplies an impression of use of documents by women from a larger sample. Men are more frequently attested as petitioners of *dea Sulis* but women like Arminia and Lovernisca, victims respectively of the theft of two silver coin and a cape[15] are amongst those who sought reparation.

With the exceptions of funerary sculpture (see below), female representations from Roman-Britain, principally on mosaics, are usually of divinities and mythological beings. These can be used for insights into the ideological construction of gender relations, in particular of women as 'Other'[16], but do not provide insights into lived experience. Artefact distributions have also been explored as evidence for the 'gendering' of space, with particular reference to the Roman army. Analysis of shoe sizes in assemblages of leather footwear suggests that women and children were living within the fort at Vindolanda (and other sites) in the early principate: the conditions which preserved the writing tablets have also ensured that other organic material, including leather, survives in abundance[17]. Allison[18] has used distributions of categories of artefacts argued to be associated with women, specifically some ornament types and materials related to female labour (especially textile-working), to plot the spatial distribution of women within military bases in Roman Germany.

If the associations between gender and artefact are accepted, the evidence points to a more numerically more significant presence than would be accounted for by the family of high-ranking officers. It also suggests wider roles than the stereotypical camp follower. Van Driel-Murray[19] points to the garrisons stationed in Dutch armies as possible analogies for soldiers' concubines living in barracks.
As Allison acknowledges, and as a key earlier paper emphasises[20], the gender attribution (or 'sexing') of individual artefacts or behaviours is problematic. Funerary evidence is often exploited as a source for establishing the gender association of artefact types or activities and it is this that I now consider.

Commemorative monuments

The number of inscribed and carved stone monuments found in Britain is small in comparison to other areas of the empire and their distribution is uneven: the majority have been found in cemeteries associated with the Roman army, either military communities or, to a lesser extent, veteran colonies, especially York (*Eboracum*), site of a legionary fortress and *colonia*. Elsewhere commemorative monuments occur much more rarely, even in the cemeteries of major cities such as London: scarcely any funerary portraits of women from southern Britain survive. The following comments therefore apply primarily to the cemeteries of the military garrison and the northernmost *colonia* at York. With occasional exceptions, individuals of modest status predominate amongst the dead and those who commemorated them, including lower ranking legionary and auxiliary soldiers, other men of uncertain status, some of whom may also be soldiers, and women and children. Many women and children are probably the families of soldiers, though this is rarely indicated explicitly. A recent analysis of epitaphs from Britain which record age at death illustrates the overall bias to males in this sample, only 74 of the 222 examples commemorating women[21].

Valerie Hope's study[22] delineates the major characteristics of commemoration for and by women, which are more frequently attested in the second and third centuries AD. In only a few instances does the epitaph explicitly indicate a relationship to soldiers, but the findspots (see above) make such an association likely in many cases: other women formed part of the extensive *vicus* communities dependent on the forts[23]. In their epitaphs the epithets applied to these women, whether as wives, in which capacity women are most frequently attested, mothers, daughters and sisters, *karissima*, *piissima* or *pientissima*, for example, are entirely conventional: a selection of individual examples is supplied by Mattingly[24]. A minority of memorials carry portraits, the largest clusters being of relief-carved *stelae* at Chester (*Deva*, a legionary fortress) and York. The representations of women are very similar to those found in the Rhineland, from where the types are probably drawn, though the repertoire is narrower[25]. Standing or seated figures and *Totenmahl* scenes are the most common. Most women are dressed in north-western provincial style, i.e. with a long tunic (the so-called 'Gallic coat') beneath a cloak and sometimes over another tunic. The tombs of Flavia Augustina and Julia Brica from York or the fragmentary stele from Murrell Hill, Carlisle, illustrate dress style and other attributes of the portrait figures: for example some women hold objects in their hands including food, drinking vessels, or a bird or animal[26]. The highly schematized, non-naturalistic, figures on some tombs, for example a funerary relief from Vindolanda[27] suggest limited access to stone carving skills and a privileging of key attributes, for example hair style, tunic and objects held in the hands, presumably as a response to the demands of commissioners.

The iconographically richest monument is that of Regina, a freedwoman commemorated in the cemetery serving the garrison at South Shields, a fort at the eastern end of the northern British frontier[28] (Fig. 2). Her *origo* is the Catuvellauni, a *civitas* in southern Britain. Her bilingual epitaph in Palmyrene and Latin is dedicated by her husband and former

owner, the Palmyrene Barates. The anomalous Latinity of the inscription may indicate that its composer was more competent in Greek, typical for a Palmyrene[29]. The representation of Regina, whose face is missing, draws on Palmyrene and western sculptural traditions to depict a hybridised provincial matron. The attributes, a jewellery box (?) open by her right hand, spindle and distaff in her left, a basket of wool by her left foot and her dress and high-backed wicker chair emphasise prosperity and domestic virtue, the allusion to wool-working a visual counterpart of *lanam fecit*.

Fig. 2a - The funerary monument of Regina, wife of Barates, Arbeia Romana Fort and Museum, South Shields (By kind permission of Tyne and WearArchives and Museums)

The limited repertoire of Romano-British funerary portraiture has sometimes disappointed, but it is this conventional character that is most important. The emphasis on marital affection and respect in many epithets and portraits can be read in some cases as an assertion of the legitimacy of marital relationships between women and soldiers, perhaps accepted by local custom but not legal for serving soldiers until the Severan period[30]. In a frontier setting this style of commemoration also strongly differentiated the community of forts and vici from the local populations: outside their cemeteries sculpted memorials with Latin epitaphs are never to be met in northern and western Britain. This difference in funerary culture is part of a global distinction between garrison communities and local populations, expressed materially in house forms and material culture, for example ceramic assemblages and small finds[31].

Fig. 2b - Deatil from the funerary monument of Regina, wife of Barates, Arbeia Romana Fort and Museum, South Shields (By kind permission of Tyne and WearArchives and Museums)

Funerary rituals

Whereas the number of funerary monuments is small, a much larger sample of well-excavated data exists from excavations of cemeteries dated from the later Iron Age (first century BC) to the early fifth century AD, perhaps roughly 10,000 burials excavated since the 1960s. This is one of the largest samples available from a Roman province, though not all cemeteries are published. The majority of burials have been excavated from Roman urban cemeteries in southern Britain, especially London, Winchester and Dorchester. The burial practices of the province resemble those of other parts of north-west Europe, i.e. a mosaic of rituals in the late Iron Age is replaced by a general though not exclusive preference for cremation in the early Roman period, which is itself displaced by a shift to inhumation as the major-

ity ritual during the third century AD. In the Late Iron Age and early Roman period grave goods are abundant in south-east Britain and less commonly deposited elsewhere, but decrease in frequency in the later Roman period. There are also many more burials of late Roman date and their distribution is wider than in the preceding period, especially in the countryside. This may indicate the very gradual spread over several centuries of an archaeologically visible burial form[32].

As two major syntheses have demonstrated, in those rituals that leave an archaeologically-detectable trace, there is only limited correlation between burial practice and gender in these burial traditions[33]. There is insufficient space here to address the complex mosaic of mid to late Iron Age regional mortuary traditions: the difference to which gender is differentiated in funerary treatment varies[34]. The best documented is the Aylesford-Swarling tradition, named after type sites in Kent, of which examples occur across south-east Britain from the early first century BC onwards. The fundamentals of the tradition, predominantly cremation and grave furnishing that includes ceramics, burnt or unburnt joints of meat, and dress ornaments, in particular bow brooches, are very similar to contemporary practice in northern Gaul. The most lavishly furnished burials, sometimes distinguished by the use of timber mortuary chambers and burial beneath a mound and/or within an enclosure, typically also contain Italian wine amphorae, metal vessels for serving and drinking liquids and hearth furniture. Though sometimes labelled as 'kingly' or 'princely', in scarcely any cases, including the famous examples from Stanway (Colchester) and Folly Lane (St Albans) has it been possible to establish the sex of the person buried in these tombs[35]. The c. 470 cremation burials of the largest cemetery of the Aylesford-Swarling type, King Harry Lane cemetery, in use from the late first century BC to and beyond the Roman conquest in AD 43 illustrates the general lack of gender-related differentiation in this tradition. In the minority of burials which could be osteologically sexed significant differences

in rituals for men and women could not be demonstrated. In particular the expectations of gender associations for artefact types, such as fibulae, cosmetic sets or mirrors, were not realised[36].

For the early Roman period the lack of substantial published cemeteries which include study of cremated human bone obstructs analysis of the association between gender and burial practice: the East London cemetery is one of the few exceptions[37]. Nonetheless the evidence so far available shows that both in ritual practice and in grave furnishing, in particular in the deposition of ceramics, by far the commonest accompaniment of burial, the treatment of men and women differs little. This characterisation also applies to those individuals placed in the most elaborately furnished burials which may be associated with elite, as discussed below[38].

In the late Roman period the shift to inhumation, usually in a wooden coffin, as the majority rite, is associated with a decline in the frequency of deposition of grave goods and in the number of artefacts deposited[39]. The extensively excavated cemetery at Poundbury, Dorset, is typical of many, comprising east-west oriented inhumation burials, laid out in rows and rarely if ever associated with grave goods: the most commonly occurring artefacts are the nails which are all that usually survives of the coffin[40]. There is also little evidence for gender being associated with other variant aspects of late Roman burial rituals, for example burial in a stone or lead-lined coffin, the coating of the dead with plaster, gypsum or chalk, or burial in non-standard position, for example prone or having undergone post-mortem decapitation: the latter, which often characterises up to five or occasionally ten percent of burials in individual cemeteries is a characteristic much more frequent in Britain than in other provinces[41].

Some exceptions to this homogeneity must be signalled. One is a cemetery-specific association between particular grave good types and gender. For example in a late Iron Age- mid Roman cemetery serving the small town at Baldock (Wallington Road), colour-coat-

ed ceramic beakers were exclusively associated with female burials. Glass and metal vessels also show gender-specific associations in the 3rd century AD cremation cemetery of a community attached to the auxiliary fort at Brougham, Cumbria[42]. More such associations are likely to emerge as the corpus of large cemetery samples increases. The other exception is the association between gender and individual artefact types, particularly artefacts related to dress and appearance. For example the mirrors dated to the first century BC and first century AD and found in a small number of graves across southern Britain, with complex decorative schemes derived from the repertoire of La Tène art, are generally associated with female burials only, though in fact sex has been reliably established with reference to skeletal material only in a minority of instances. In the Roman period too mirrors are generally associated with female burials, though they are also occur in grave good assemblages with male burials at King Harry Lane (see above). With one exception (see below) they are never found with the weapon burials, which are usually taken as male. An association between ornaments and gender is at its strongest in the late Roman period: some female burials contain personal ornaments, in particular multiple bracelets, and also strings of beads, hair ornaments such as pins and combs and ear rings, which are only very rarely found in male graves[43]. These assemblages are particularly associated with the burials of older children and younger women: grave goods associated with older women are much less gender specific[44]. Male-specific ornaments or dress items are much scarcer, crossbow brooches being an exception.

Jewellery and dress ornaments are usually made of copper alloy, glass and bone, though jet, ivory and silver also occur. The gold necklace, finger-ring and snake-headed bracelets of third century AD with a child burial from Southfleet (Kent) is the only example of a burial deposit of multiple items of gold jewellery, a lavish burial treatment applied to a handful of female and child burials across the

Roman north and beyond[45]. In occasional cases preservation of organic material has given a fuller impression of the presentation of the dead, in particular their dress, than is otherwise possible. Adjacent to the child burial at Southfleet was a second century AD cremation burial accompanied by leather shoes decorated with gold thread. A young woman, buried in a lead-lined stone coffin in the early fourth century AD in Spitalfields, London, was dressed for death in silk and woollen clothes (or a shroud) into which gold thread was woven. Her burial accompanied by a long glass unguent bottle with a jet rod long enough to remove perfumed oils from it, as well as other jet items[46]. A central burial within a square enclosure at the largest cemetery at Boscombe Down, Amesbury (Wiltshire), contained a stone coffin, within which were the remains of a female adult and a child. The footwear of both had been preserved: the child wore laced calfskin shoes and the adult a pair of shoes with cork soles, perhaps lined with deerskin[47]. Beyond the sphere of dress and appearance gender associations are very limited: male burials are more likely than female to contain knives, while the reverse is true of textile equipment, but in both cases numbers of burials are very small.

In some cases gender-associations are confounded, either by the association of items usually associated with one sex in a burial osteologically identified as belonging to the other, or the mixing of 'gender-specific' objects. For instance a first century BC inhumation tomb at Bryher on the isles of Scilly, contained both a weapon (a sword) and a decorated bronze mirror: the bones were too poorly preserved to establish sex[48]. At Brougham (Cumbria), two female burials included military equipment (scabbard slides), as well as complete or substantial parts of horses, in a cemetery where rituals echo contemporary practice in central Europe and the lands north of the Black Sea more strongly than those of northern Britain. A fourth century burial of a young adult male at Bainesse Farm, Catterick (North Yorkshire), was dressed with ornaments that are usually as-

sociated with young women, including a jet necklace, jet and shale bracelets and a twisted anklet. The combination of female ornaments and two stones found in the mouth have suggested the interpretation of this deposit as the burial of a eunuch priest of Cybele[49].

In summary differences associated with gender, as currently established, characterise only a small minority of burials, usually restricted to a particular period or place, and concern only part of the funerary process. This must be a provisional conclusion, since samples of osteologically sexed burials are small, especially for the early Roman period and some older analyses of inhumations can be challenged (see below). The invisibility of key stages of ritual, in particular the appearance of the body prior to cremation on the pyre or in the grave before organic items have rotted, means that significant aspects of potential difference, especially in dress, elude our analysis. That we cannot distinguish a consistent suite of 'male' or 'female' associated artefacts to use in our analysis of the living does not mean that objects, and the activies with which they were associated or the roles they symbolised, did not have a significant gender dimension. Rather at this stage of their 'biography', i.e. when buried with the dead, many objects did not necessarily carry specific gender associations.

An exclusive focus on the gender associations of individual artefacts however ignores the overall treatment of the dead. On analogy with funerary monuments (see above), the tableau of the burial deposit displayed in the grave, the combination of grave goods and human remains, can be read as an ephemeral form of 'self-representation', in which identities for the deceased were fixed in the minds of onlookers. This 'fixing' is effected in part by the artefacts presented with the body, a *mise-en-scène* which provides visual cues for reading an identity for the dead: as signifiers these objects prompt associations derived from other areas of social life for the participants in the ceremony. This is a cumulative process, the reading of 'indi-

vidual' objects being conditioned by the presences of others in the burial assemblage. Here I give an outline of an argument which is discussed in my doctoral thesis and is currently being prepared for publication[50]: it can be illustrated by reference to some early Roman burial assemblages from south-east England which are distinguished by the quantity, diversity and quality of their grave goods and by association, in some instances, with tumuli or other monuments. These may be the tombs of the elite landowning and decurional class, but in no case is this confirmed by an epitaph.

The most obvious characteristic of these burials is the large numbers of ceramic, glass and metal vessels, for serving, eating and drinking. Among the ceramics terra sigillata is the commonest type, often found in sets of multiple vessels of the same form. The metal vessels are typically jugs and handled pans, used for hand washing and perhaps the pouring of libations: wine strainers are also present. Glass vessels include forms for serving and drinking liquids. The diversity of vessel forms suggests a highly elaborate dining etiquette. Sometime animal bones, occasionally comprising several different species, have been documented in association with these vessel assemblages. Equipment is also found for other activities, for the manipulation of appearance (e.g. for use at the bath house, the removal of hair and the application of cosmetics and perfumes) and for activities including writing, gaming and, occasionally, hunting. Very few such burials have been osteologically sexed, either because of the date of the excavation or the poor preservation of cremated remains, so in most cases the sex of the occupant is unknown, but it seems certain that both men and women were buried in this style. An example of a female grave is provided by one of the two cremation burials of Flavian date excavated c. 1.5 km south of the *civitas* capital of Venta Belgarum/*Winchester*[51]. The cremated bone of an immature female (the identification is probable, not certain) was found heaped on a shale tray on the base of the grave pit. The abundant grave goods include a ceramic flagon, beaker, and thirteen terra sigil-

lata vessels (from Southern Gaul), including a larger form 18R dish, four form 18 dishes, four larger and four smaller form 27 cups: among the other artefacts were a glass and a metal jug, shale tray, a copper alloy spoon, two iron knives, a copper alloy pin, copper alloy and iron finger-rings, a seal box lid and two iron styli, glass gaming pieces, a bell, melon beads, a fossil and pig and bird bones. The sexing of the Grange Road cremated bone as female was rejected by the excavator, who argued that writing equipment (seal box and stylus) could not be countenanced in a female burial, but evidence from Vindolanda for female literacy has already been presented (Fig. 3a and 3b).

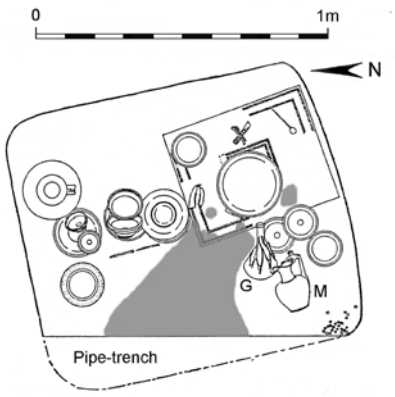

Fig. 3a - Plan of a Flavian period cremation burial (2) from Winchester Grange Road. The shaded area indicates the location of the cremated bone (after Biddle 1967, 232, Fig. %: G = glass vessel, M = metal vessel). For assemblage see text.

Fig. 3b - Reconstruction of Winchester Grange Road burial 2. The cremated bone was found beside and on the shale tray. Gaming pieces and other small items were placed in the south-west corner of the grave (bottom left) (Winchester Museum).

None of the other burials in this Winchester cluster sexed as female or possibly female are quite so artefactually rich but their assemblages are similar in their general composition. Intriguing too are the pair of second century AD burials from Wheathampstead, just outside the *municipium* of Verulamium (St Albans), one a probable female (20-45), the other almost certainly an older adult female, as reported in an interim publication[52]. Both burials had a substantial assemblage of ceramic, glass and metal vessels and the first also contained tools and weapons, namely four iron wood-working planes and groups of arrowheads.
These richer grave good assemblages do not show substantial differences in their composition from equally rich male burials and, in the latter case, contain artefacts with traditionally male associations. When the different aspects of burial furnishing are considered together, the objects demonstrate an emphasis on *savoir-faire* associated with dining, the consumption of food and drink, recreation (gaming, bathing, and hunting) and perhaps literary or literate cultivation (perhaps letter-writing). These are all aspects of behaviour and self-presentation which might be grouped under the heading of *otium*. These burials illuminate the adoption of Roman cultural style in a provincial setting and echo in several respects the social lives of the prefects and their families that can be reconstructed from the Vindolanda tablets[53]. The dead exemplify the normative expectations for elites, male and female, and those norms are themselves reinforced by their representation as part of this rite of passage. Especially interesting for the purposes of this discussion is the very similar presentation of men and women as cultivated participants in a hospitality culture. The argument can be supported from the observation of very similar treatment for female burials in neighbouring provinces[54].

Palaeopathology and demography

So far this discussion has focused on gender as represented through monument or rituals. In this final section I briefly consider the evi-

dence for differences in the experience of men and women as revealed by osteological evidence. In theory one might hope for insights into key aspects of ancient demography or health status as they relate to gender, and quite large data samples are potentially available: the important synthesis of Romano-British demography by Roberts and Cox[55], to the best of my knowledge the largest osteologically-based synthesis yet attempted for a Roman period population, used a maximum of 5716 Roman period skeletons. The general difficulties of documenting and interpreting human skeletal remains and translating statistics derived from skeletal populations into the characteristics of living populations are well rehearsed by others much better qualified to do so[56]. I wish only to note some difficulties in synthesising this particular dataset, before drawing attention to some interesting indications from recent work. The domination of the Romano-British sample by late Roman urban cemeteries from the south of the province has already been mentioned: the corpus of prehistoric skeletal material to which Roman period data can be compared is very much smaller (Fig. 4). The Roman data, both published and unpublished data are also very uneven in quality. Many reports from previous decades use criteria for determining age and sex which might not now be accepted or do not specify their methods, either in general or as they apply to individual identifications. Many analyses were also undertaken prior to the demonstration of systematic under-ageing of skeletal samples. In some cases too sex was attributed from general skeletal robusticity rather than pelvic or cranial morphology[57]. As for pathological evidence, again the adoption of different standards by different workers to identify or document pathological indicators in earlier publications impedes comparison between or even within samples: a case in point is the East London cemetery, from which skeletal remains were catalogued by several osteologists using different methods of observation and documentation[58]. Mode of publication also often makes it impossible

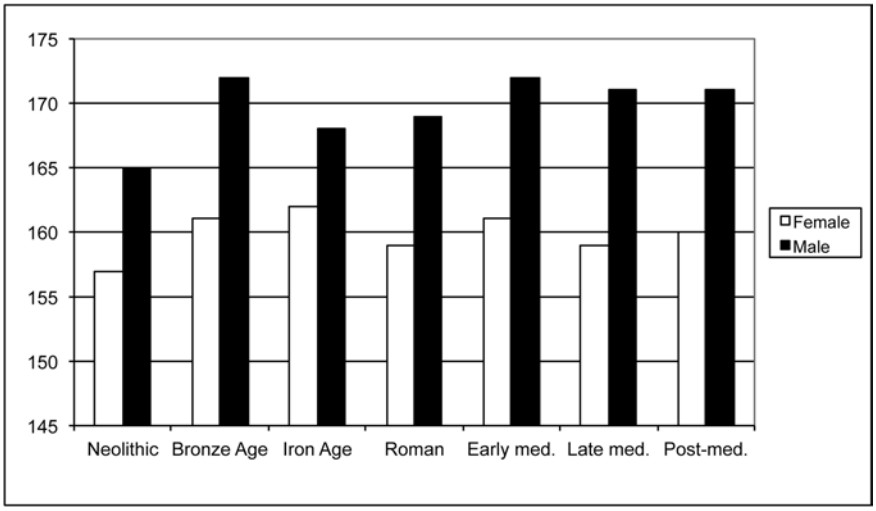

Fig. 4 - The number of skeletons from different periods available from Great Britain for the analysis of long term demography and health by Roberts and Cox (2003). The very small size of the Iron Age sample should be emphasised, 591 burials for an 800 year period (c. 750 BC to c. AD 50).

to establish the true prevalence rate of a particular characteristic. For example Roberts and Cox's synthesis is often obliged to examine crude prevalence rates for pathological indicators, based on the occurrence of a characteristic within an entire cemetery population, rather than only in that part of a sample where skeletal survival allowed its presence or absence to be observed. Dependence on crude rather than true prevalence rates will lead to underestimation of the frequency in a population of the characteristics studied. Where true prevalence rates are discussed, it is on the basis of much smaller samples which may give unrepresentative results.

Given these caveats any characterisations can only be offered tentatively. The most striking characteristic of the Romano-British sample is the odd sex ratio that has now been observed in many different late Roman urban cemeteries. It varies widely but in many

samples is strongly skewed towards males: Davison's[59] examination of cemetery reports published up to the mid 1990s shows that 62% of adult burials were identified as male and 38% female. In a normal population the sex ratio is expected to be 1.06:1 at birth and 1:1 at adulthood[60]. This anomalous characteristic is one of the few aspects of gender associated with burial to have drawn wider attention[61]. Davison's sample includes some cemeteries where sexing techniques would not now be employed, but this phenomenon is also noted in more recently analysed cemetery samples: Redfern[62] notes that her sample of skeletons from Roman Dorset comprised a much larger proportion of male (61.9%) than female (38.1%) subjects.

Uncertainty about the status of these data makes it unwise to speculate extensively on this discrepancy. Female infanticide may play a very limited role, but the figures are too different from contemporary populations where this is known to be practised for this to be convincing and identifications of infanticide in Roman Britain are disputed[63]. Since the sample is dominated by urban cemeteries, differential migration to towns by men and women may have some impact, but the converse (i.e. higher female representation in rural cemeteries) has not yet been documented. Men and women may have sometimes been buried in different areas in urban cemeteries, but so many sites have now been excavated that the general sample should not be significantly skewed by this factor.

Turning to health indicators, the survey by Roberts and Cox[64] suggests that the aggregate quality of life deteriorated from the Iron Age to the Roman period, though with very substantial inter-cemetery variation. These include a higher frequency of stress indicators such as periostitis, poorer dental health, cribra orbitalia and enamel hypoplasia, and, in a smaller number of cases, rickets. Joint disease is also more frequently documented, though this can also be a function of obesity. There is also a higher incidence of evidence for infectious disease, including tuberculosis and leprosy. Where soft tissues are preserved

external and internal parasite infestations are revealed. Their survey did not globally analyse variability between men and women but they record the occurrence for some pathological characteristics in relation to gender. These are reported as numbers rather than as percentages of men and women studied, but as men predominate in the overall sample, where the numbers of women are similar to those of men we may cautiously infer that the characteristic occurs more frequently in the female sample. For example almost as many women as men were affected by cribra orbitalia (M 161: F 144) and enamel hypoplasia (M 129: F 110). More women than men were also affected by rickets (6 vs 4), while all the (23) cases of DISH (diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis), a possible indication of a higher protein diet, were male. More significantly, perhaps, average female stature declined from the Iron Age while male stature increased (Fig. 5).

Redfern's[65] examination of a much smaller sample of data from Iron Age and Roman Dorset enjoys the advantage of a single observer using currently accepted standards of documentation and analysis. Her study explored various aspects of skeletal evidence, including age at death, dental health (including enamel hypoplasia), stature and infectious disease and compared the Iron Age and Roman periods and men and women. Within her sample there was again evidence of increased health stress in the Roman period, as revealed across these frequency rates for stress indicators, an increased incidence of evidence of infectious disease, and a shift towards an earlier age at death, but not all these trends were at a statistically significant level. Some stress indicators were more frequently associated with women: in particular female stature declined to a statistically significant degree. The increase in the frequency of enamel hypoplasia was greater among women, though not statistically significant. Little difference was found in dental health or the incidence of infectious disease and the shift towards an earlier age at death seems to have characterized more men.

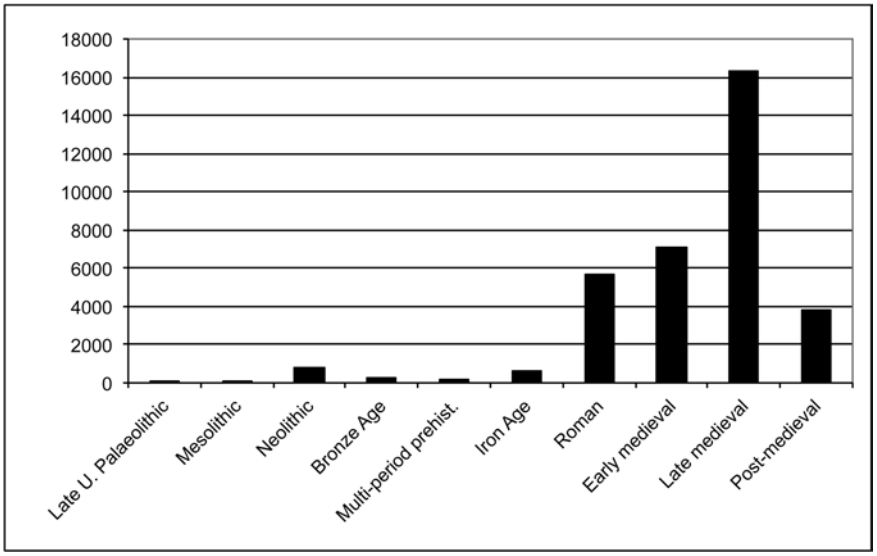

Fig. 5 - Average male and female stature over time: data from tabulations of skeletal samples by Roberts and Cox (2003)

One technique with considerable potential promise for the study of women's lives, both migration patterns and diet, is that of stable isotope analysis. Studies published so far have focused on status and geographical origin rather than gender, but the diverse origins of the women of Roman Winchester and York suggested by recent analyses within the Diaspora project of strontium and oxygen isotopes from fourth century AD skeletons, complemented in the latter case by re-examination of cranial morphology as an index of population affiliation, indicate the potential of this technique[66].

Conclusion

This study has addressed three different aspects of burial data, monuments, funerary rituals and skeletal remains. Different aspects of the experience of women have emerged from the study of each. Women

associated with the Roman army in northern Britain were identified as advertising the legitimacy for marriages and families through their tomb monuments to those arriving at and leaving garrisons. Higher status funerary rituals of early Roman southern Britain were read as an instance of 'self-representation' women as well as men being the embodiment of cultivated participation in Roman-style hospitality culture. Skeletal evidence, by contrast, suggested that a general deterioration in the quality of life in the Roman period, especially in and around late Roman towns, was perhaps in some aspects experienced by women more strongly than men.

All of these conclusions must immediately be qualified. The brevity of this paper means that only some general characteristics of the evidence have been discussed: it has only been possible to make the briefest of reference to non-funerary evidence and a much more extended treatment is necessary to exploit fully the potential of cemetery data for addressing gender as an aspect of Roman provincial identity. The small number of sexed burials, as well as the probable rather than certain attribution of sex to human remains in many key cases, means that assessment of patterning in the treatment of men and women must await the accumulation of larger samples. Those samples must be more representative of the provincial population and the study of human remains, as well as other aspects of burial, would be significantly enhanced by the making available of fuller datasets digitally in formats which can be more easily manipulated than in printed summary statistics. The data produced by Paola Catalano and her colleagues in Rome or the Wellcome Trust funded record of human skeletal material from London, respectively on CD and online, are examples of attempts to address this. The study of gender should also not be isolated from that of other dimensions of identity. As Gowland[67] has demonstrated, variation in burial practice related to gender can be much better understood when assessed in conjunction with

age as part of a life-course approach. The results of stable isotope analysis, especially as established by the Diaspora project, show too that the women of Roman Britain derived from very different geographical origins and indicate that gender cannot be assessed in isolation from their cultural identity. Nonetheless, that the capacity exists to nuance the characterisation of gender relations by reference to other forms of archaeological information serves, I hope, to reinforce the assertion with which this paper began, namely that material evidence can contribute extensively and independently to the analysis of gender in the Roman world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES

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Abbrevations

CSIR – Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani (Great)

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