

A Romano-British
Cremation Burial,
Near Witchurch,
Aylesbury Vale,
Buckinghamshire



**Archaeological
Excavation Report**

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A Romano-British Cremation Burial from Whitchurch, Aylesbury Vale, Buckinghamshire

Archaeological Excavation Report

In October 2014 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Buckinghamshire County Council to undertake an archaeological excavation at Whitchurch, Aylesbury Vale, Buckinghamshire (centred on NGR SP 80943 22258). The work was undertaken to investigate a potential burial assemblage that was identified during a metal detecting rally. The findspot is located adjacent to a suspected Roman villa within an arable field that has previously produced a concentration of Roman finds.

*The excavation revealed a Roman (late 2nd century AD) wooden box burial (1.10m long by 0.70m width) with a rich assemblage of grave goods including two samian ware cups, two samian ware dishes, a pottery flagon, two glass vessels, a bronze jug with decorated handle, bronze patera, iron open or lamp holder, two unidentified lead objects and a cremation urn which contained an intaglio (a rare find in such a context) and remains of nailed shoes as well as the burnt human remains. The remains of the wooden box were identified as an outline of iron nails and organic deposits within the burial pit. The pit was backfilled with the excavated boulder clay natural and then later sealed by modern ploughsoil. The grave goods were found *in-situ* but have been disturbed by ploughing and partly crushed by the use of heavy farm machinery.*

The burial lies at the western edge of the distribution of a group of relatively rare cremation burials found across south-eastern Britain which contain glass and bronze vessels and lighting equipment. Amongst these the present burial is one of only a handful with a 2nd century date, and is therefore an important addition to this body of evidence, containing a characteristic combination of object types, of which the decorated jug is individually the most significant, with its religious scene depicting human figures worshipping in front of an altar. Because of the apparently unique detail of this decoration it is a piece of national importance, enhanced by association with a securely dated burial context.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 The burial was initially located in October 2014 during a metal detecting rally undertaken by a group called the Weekend Wanderers at a site near Whitchurch, Aylesbury Vale, Buckinghamshire. The find was made by Mr John Steele, an American from Colorado, who dug a hole to investigate a signal, revealed parts of iron and copper alloy objects. The hole also revealed a series of samian ware vessels that indicated that the finds might have represented part of an *in-situ* burial assemblage. At this point excavation ceased and the detectorists contacted Ros Tyrell (PAS Finds Liaison Officer for Buckinghamshire) who in turn notified Eliza Alqassar, Archaeological Officer for Buckinghamshire County Council.



- 1.1.2 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was subsequently commissioned by Buckinghamshire County Council to investigate and record the nature of the findspot. The project was funded by Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Forum Emergency Recording Fund and the conservation work is to be funded by Buckinghamshire County Museum Trust. The finds were rapidly confirmed as indicating a rich grave. As work progressed the increasing complexity of the remains (exacerbated in particular by the very difficult soil conditions) meant that excavation and recording took place over several days, OA staff being assisted by the detectorists and landowners.
- 1.1.3 The following report presents a brief summary of the contents of the burial and a preliminary assessment of its context and importance. All work was undertaken in accordance with the Institute for Archaeologists' '*Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Excavation*' (IfA revised 2008) and local and national planning policies. This is the second, updated version of the summary report, which takes account of the laboratory excavation of the cremation urn and examination of its artefactual, osteological and environmental contents.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is located in an arable field of c 1.2 hectares near Whitchurch, Aylesbury Vale, Buckinghamshire, c 7km north of Aylesbury (Centred on SP 80943 22258: Figure 1). It lies in undulating countryside part way down a south-facing slope. Towards the top of the slope, to the north-east, the presence of a Roman villa is suspected, mainly on the basis of metal-detected finds (Figure 2).
- 1.2.2 The underlying geology is mapped by the British Geological Society as Kimmeridgian Mudstone (BGS 1976, 1:50,000), upon which lies a stiff boulder clay forming the subsoil of the site, the material into which the grave was cut (109) and with which it was filled (fill 103).
- 1.2.3 The excavation area was small – just large enough to encompass the extent of the burial pit, the edges of which were not easily identified. Apart from the intrusion by the detectorists' excavation, it is clear that in many aspects the grave was not in particularly good condition. Some of the objects within it were completely crushed (for example the glass vessels) and parts of others appear to have been disturbed and (in some cases) distributed beyond the original edge of the grave, presumably by relatively recent agricultural activity. The same activity has therefore resulted in truncation of some of the objects, so that a number of them are incomplete, while others are so fragmented as to make interpretation difficult at this stage.

2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims of the excavation

- 2.1.1 The aims and objectives of the excavation were:
- (i) To determine the general nature of the findspot and remains present.
 - (ii) To determine or confirm the approximate date or date range of any remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence.
 - (iii) To place the finds and remains within their wider archaeological context and landscape setting.
 - (iv) To record and secure the burial remains and grave goods.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 Hand cleaning and excavation were undertaken following a chance metal detector find of potential grave assemblage at the site (Plates 1 and 2). The initial exploratory hole was first cleaned to help characterise the findspot, recorded and then excavated. Where possible the more delicate vessels like the remains of the bronze jug and cremation vessel, were bulk lifted (Plate 3).
- 2.2.2 Digital photos and black-and-white negative photographs were taken of finds and deposits and generally throughout the excavation.
- 2.2.3 Plans were drawn at a scale of 1:20 using a planning frame (Plate 4). Section drawings of features and 1m wide sample sections of stratigraphy were drawn at a scale of 1:10. All section drawings were located on the appropriate plan/s. The absolute height (m. OD) of all principal strata and features are indicated on the drawings.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Introduction and presentation of results

- 3.1.1 The results of the excavation are presented below, beginning with a summary of the stratigraphic description of the burial pit. An index of all contexts is presented in Appendix A.

3.2 General soils and ground conditions

- 3.2.1 The excavation was undertaken in predominantly dry weather conditions, but frequent downpours of heavy rain did hinder progress at times.
- 3.2.2 The soils encountered in the excavation consisted of an organic rich loamy topsoil that varied in thickness from 0.2-0.35m. At the base of the slope this sealed subsoil, which was a mid yellow silty clay. These deposits overlay the fill of the burial pit which had been backfilled with redeposited boulder clay (through which the pit was cut) above the organic remains of the wooden box.
- 3.2.3 The natural geology was composed of boulder clay at depths between 0.40m and 0.60m.

3.3 Contents of the grave

- 3.3.1 The grave pit (102) was very difficult to define as it was cut into and mostly backfilled with the same material. It appears to have been slightly sub-rectangular in plan (Figure 3), with maximum dimensions of c 1.10m (NE-SSW) by c 0.70m (WNW-ESE). The corners of the pit may have been slightly rounded, but this is not certain; the sides were more or less vertical and the base flat. The maximum surviving depth of the pit was c 0.38m, but as indicated above it had clearly been truncated by ploughing. The principal grave fill (103) consisted of redeposited natural boulder clay. Localised deposits of mid and dark brown silty clay (104, 105 and 108), probably representing decayed organic material, were interleaved within (103) or, in the case of (105), lay within the patera SF 17.
- 3.3.2 Almost all the finds were recorded as coming from fill deposit (103). This main fill was overlain by a ploughsoil/subsoil (101) 0.10m thick beneath the modern ploughsoil (100) which was up to 0.24m thick. One of the clearest indications of the size of the grave was provided by the distribution of iron nails, which were concentrated at the narrow ends of the feature and around the north-west corner. These suggest that the burial



may have been contained within a wooden box or small chamber, but it is not possible to be certain that all the nails belonged to a single structure.

- 3.3.3 In total 21 nails and nail fragments (SFs 1-3, 20-22, 27-33, 35-41 and an unnumbered fragment) were recovered from the main fill of the grave pit (103), while two nail tip fragments were recovered from context 106, associated with the body of the bronze jug and two further nails (SF. 43-44) were recovered from the fill of the cremation urn but may originally have been associated with the box containing the burial. Two further nails from the overlying topsoil (100) were of similar character to those from the burial and may possibly have derived from it. Dark organic fills recovered from within the bronze patera and some of the samian ware vessels, in particular, may possibly represent remnants of the lid of a box after it had decayed and collapsed.
- 3.3.4 The fill of the cremation urn (107) contained not only cremated human bone (see below), but also a jasper intaglio (SF 42) and some 115 iron hobnails.
- 3.3.5 In outline, the contents of the burial are listed in the table below:

Small find No.	Material	Object Description
SF24	Ceramic	A pottery urn with cremated remains (block lifted)
SF 25 and SF 23	Ceramic	Two samian ware dishes
SF 7 and SF 16	Ceramic	Two samian ware cups
SF 8	Ceramic	A pottery flagon/jug
SF 13 and SF 26	Glass	?Two glass vessels
SF 9, SF 12, SF 14, SF 15	Cu alloy	A bronze jug with decorated handle
SF 17/18 and SF 34	Cu alloy	A bronze? patera
SF 6	Iron	A long iron point
SF 5 and SF 11	Iron	An iron open lamp or lamp holder
SF 4	Iron	A small iron object of uncertain function
context 103, no SF number	Iron	An incomplete fragment of iron sheet
SF 10 and SF 19	Lead	Two small lead sheet objects
SF 42 (within urn SF 24)	Jasper	Intaglio
Within urn SF 24	Iron	C 115 hobnails

Table 1: List of grave goods

- 3.3.6 Insofar as can be determined given the disturbed nature of the remains the disposition of the objects within the grave was as follows:

3.4 Arrangement of grave goods

- 3.4.1 The cremation urn was located centrally in the southern part of the grave, with the pottery flagon roughly 0.3m away from it to the north. The samian ware vessels may have been arranged in a line running from beside the cremation urn towards the north-west corner of the grave, but this is not certain (it is impossible to say, for example, if any of the samian ware vessels were stacked). The glass vessels were placed next to

the samian ware vessels, between them and the pottery flagon. The metal objects all lay in the north end of the grave. Parts of the bronze jug were spread over a distance of some 0.4m extending towards the north-east corner, and the more westerly pieces were intermingled with pieces of the patera. It is likely that the two were originally placed closely adjacent, perhaps with the jug in the patera. The iron objects cluster towards the north-west corner of the grave and were amongst the earliest of its contents to be exposed; they may therefore have been positioned within the upper part of the grave, but this is uncertain. Given their function (see below) they may have been placed above the box in which the other objects lay. The two small lead sheet objects located immediately east and south-east of the main body of the bronze patera are similar in character and presumably in (unknown) function – it is possible that they derive from a single, larger object.

3.5 Provisional grave good inventory

3.5.1 Pottery cremation urn (SF 24)

3.5.2 The cremation urn has not been examined in detail. The Jar is a fine sand-tempered buff-brown fabric with black surfaces, probably of local origin. The pot has been badly crushed and is very incomplete; much of the upper part of the vessel appears to be missing as a result of truncation.

3.5.3 Samian ware dish (SF 23), Plate 7

3.5.4 The samian dish is Central Gaulish (Lezoux), Drag 31, diameter 185mm. Stamped FLO.ALBINIO - Flo Albinus, 1a. AD 150-185. Fragmented but complete.

3.5.5 Samian ware dish (SF 25).

3.5.6 The samian dish is Central Gaulish (Lezoux), Drag. 31, diameter 180mm. Stamped ?? CTX.[- the reading is very uncertain and part of the stamp is missing; the potter is unidentified. Antonine. The dish is fragmented but almost complete.

3.5.7 Samian ware cup (SF 7), Plate 5.

3.5.8 The cup is Central Gaulish (Lezoux), Drag 33, diameter 100mm. Stamped GRACCHI.M - Gracchus iv, 1a. AD 155-195. Fragmented but complete.

3.5.9 Samian ware cup (SF 16), Plate 6.

3.5.10 The cup is Central Gaulish (Lezoux), Drag 33, diameter 95mm. Stamped PRIMANI - Primanus iii, 6e. AD 160-200. Fragmented and incomplete (c 90% of rim present).

3.5.11 Pottery flagon/jug (SF 8).

3.5.12 The flagon/jug has a fine oxidised (buff/red) fabric. It is highly fragmented and incomplete. The rim is missing (probably lost to ploughing), but a small fragment suggests that there was a flange on the neck. A further small fragment comes from a handle with a simple oval section.

3.5.13 Glass vessels (SF 13 and 26).

3.5.14 Many fragments of clear colourless glass (>1mm thick), from a possible cup or beaker with a footring (diameter at junction of body and footring c 30mm). The vessel is highly fragmented and incomplete. The body is decorated with round/oval cut facets up to c 5mm, in no clearly discernible pattern. Cut horizontal lines are apparent on the upper body. No rim fragments have been identified.

3.5.15 Fragments of another thin (<1mm thick) colourless glass, many with thin trails. Only a very small part of the original vessel is represented by the surviving fragments. The

fragments are too small to determine the orientation of the trails with certainty, but they seem likely to be horizontal. Perhaps from a convex cup or beaker, cf Price and Cottam (1998), 103-4, fig. 39.

3.5.16 SF 13 was assigned to a single piece (2 fragments) of colourless vessel glass. SF 26 was assigned to a group of glass fragments located a little to the south, recovered in lumps of clay, and a further larger 'glass sample', also consisting of glass fragments within clay lumps of varying size, was simply assigned the context number 103 but came from a location immediately adjacent to SF 26. Both SF 26 and the 'glass sample' material include more than 100 glass fragments each, many of which are very small or tiny chips and splinters. Despite the extreme fragmentation, however, it is clear that two modules are present in both groups. The majority of the material is from a vessel of clear, colourless glass, the fragments of which range from just over 1mm to a little over 2mm in thickness. SF 13 is of this module. The second module, also of colourless glass which can be clear or opaque, consists of fragments which range from c 0.7-1mm in thickness. The decorative types found on each module are mutually exclusive.

3.5.17 **Bronze jug (SF 9, SF 12, SF 14, SF 15), Plates 8 and 9.**

3.5.18 The bronze jug was found fragmented and is still partly unexcavated. The Jug has a rounded body (SF 9, still in a block with fill *in situ*) and rolled tubular rim (SF14, separate fragments), c 90mm in diameter, but incomplete. The jug handle (SF12), a solid casting as opposed to the relatively thin spun bronze of the vessel body and base, survives in reasonable condition but requires specialist cleaning for its iconography, particularly that of the upper part. At the base of the handle is a 'sacro-idyllic' scene (M Henig pers. comm. for the use of this term). There are two prominent central standing figures, a male to the right and possibly a female to the left. The man has his left hand on the upper edge of an altar at the right side of the scene (as viewed). Balancing the altar on the left hand side of the scene is a third figure, smaller figure than the central two, perhaps a child or young adult. A stylised tree rises above the two central figures. The details of what is above the tree are less clear. The top of the handle curves upwards and away from the rim in a slightly hooked form, while lateral projections with volutes would have engaged with the rim of the vessel.

3.5.19 The form of the vessel is well-known and has a number of parallels in Roman Britain, including two from burials. The key point relates to the specifically religious imagery of the scene at the base of the handle. Comparable vessels come from Bayford (Kent; Wheeler 1932, plate XV, no. 2), Carlisle (Henig 1984, 134, fig. 57), Lesmahagow (Lanarkshire; Toynbee 1962, 175 and plate 128, no. 120) and (closer to hand) Thornborough barrow (Liversidge 1953-60, plate 3A; Eggers 1966, 138, Abb. 38, b). In each case the scene is different and probably or certainly involves overtly religious activity (sacrifice, altars etc), though only the Carlisle and Whitchurch pieces include more than one figure. These scenes contrast with the more common individual masks or medallions found widely on Campanian jugs of the 1st century AD. The Whitchurch vessel therefore belongs to a recognisable but rare type. Martin Henig comments (pers. comm.) 'The style is not obviously RB; it is essentially very much Roman in feel, but might have come from Gaul.'

3.5.20 **Bronze patera or dish (SF 17/18 and SF 34), Plates 10 and 12.**

3.5.21 Probable patera, with heavy cast base and thick, solid rounded rim, diameter c 190mm. The vessel has corroded where the metal is thinnest, at the bottom of the curving body wall where it would join the base. The two main surviving rim fragments (SF18 and SF 34, the latter in two separate pieces) make up most of the circumference of the rim. The

intervening body is heavily fragmented and the base is also damaged. This vessel is interpreted as a patera since this is the usual accompaniment to a jug, but there is no obvious sign of a handle. It is likely that such a handle would have been a flat (perhaps decorated) casting rather than a heavy tubular one as seen in earlier examples of this form (though one of these is present in the Thornborough barrow), and it is possible that evidence of it may emerge upon conservation of the various bronze fragments from the burial.

3.5.22 **Iron point (SF 6).**

3.5.23 The iron object is probably incomplete, and is damaged. It has a flat rounded end, probably originally a loop but now corroded solid (*c* 23mm across), and a roughly rounded section shaft *c* 8-9mm across, tapering gradually to a point. The total extant length including the looped end is *c* 171mm, but the object has been partly fractured and bent through more than 90 degrees about 42mm from the point. This damage is clearly recent, but it is not clear if the object was completely straight before the damage occurred, or whether it had originally been angled at this point. However, the object was almost certainly associated functionally with SF11 below, and on this basis it is most likely that it is incomplete and would have had a more clearly defined hook at the end of the shaft, which could have been at least twice as long as the surviving piece.

3.5.24 **Iron open lamp or lamp holder (SF 5 and SF 11), Plate 11.**

3.5.25 These two almost-joining pieces are certainly parts of the same, incomplete object. The larger piece, SF 5, was one of the first to be encountered in the initial excavation by the detectorists. It comprises part of a rounded flat sheet with an up-turned flange/side with a total height of *c* 16mm. From the top of the flange an arm, of slightly tapering rectangular section (16mm x 5mm at the midpoint), projects downwards for a further 90mm. At the top the arm is bent inwards slightly, but appears complete. SF11 has the same flange as SF5 and is S-shaped in plan, forming part of the 'wick end' of the lamp. Although the two pieces do not join they can be associated to suggest an internal length of *c* 110mm.

3.5.26 The object can be interpreted either as a lamp holder or as an open lamp in its own right. Eckardt (2002) regards comparable pieces as lamps. The closest parallels for the form, with a simple upright projecting handle, are in lead, from Caerleon and Colchester (Eckardt 2002, 242, nos 2259 and 1603). It is nevertheless probable that the handle end of SF 5 was linked to other elements, and therefore at least possible that the apparently complete end of the upright handle is in fact broken. It is almost certain that the iron 'point' SF6 (No. 11 above) was part of an arrangement for suspension. Another close parallel to the iron open lamp comes from a cremation burial at Wavendon Gate, Milton Keynes, discussed by Hylton (1996, 123-124, fig. 71), which also provides a good parallel for the suspension rod, comparable to SF6. This burial is dated to the mid 2nd century.

3.5.27 **Iron object (SF 4).**

3.5.28 This object consists of a flat piece of very dense iron, in shape roughly like an elongated pear, *c* 55mm long, up to 29mm wide at the rounded end and *c* 5mm thick. From the centre of the top of the rounded end a stem with a roughly spherical head projects at an oblique angle, and there is a corresponding broken pointed projection below. It is almost certain that the projections belong to a nail driven obliquely through the flat plate, but corrosion has in effect reduced these elements to a single piece. The sub-spherical form of the nail head is unusual. The flat plate appears to be complete. The function of the object is unclear, but it is just possible that it relates to SF11 and

SF5 above, and provided a means of attaching the upper end of the suspension system of the lamp to a wall.

3.5.29 Iron fragment (Context 103, no SF number).

3.5.30 A fragment of iron sheet, sub-rectangular, with extant dimensions of 30mm x 22mm x 3mm thick. This appears to be part of a longer piece. One end is rounded and may be complete, but the other is clearly broken.

3.5.31 Lead object (SF 10).

3.5.32 An irregularly shaped piece of lead, roughly in the form of a mostly in-filled U, with maximum dimensions of 25mm x 25mm and up to 7mm thick. The object may be complete.

3.5.33 Lead object (SF 19).

3.5.34 An irregularly-shaped piece of lead, sub-square with one corner cut out, all corners roughly rounded. Maximum dimensions 26mm x 25mm x 3mm thick. There is an irregularly shaped perforation (7mm x 5mm) towards one edge.

3.5.35 The lead objects are similar in character and were found c 0.15m apart. They are presumably related in function. It is possible that they were associated in some way with the lamp (SF5 and SF11 above).

3.5.36 Intaglio (SF 42) *Martin Henig*

3.5.37 Red Jasper intaglio. Flat upper surface. 18mm x 14mm x 4mm. Minerva stands on the left; she is helmeted, clad in a peplos, and holds her spear upright in her right hand, with her shield at her feet. In her left hand there is a patera. She is being crowned with a wreath by Mercury, nude but for the chlamys draped over his left arm, who stands on the right holding the wreath in his right hand to Minerva's head (this would be reversed in impression). The style of cutting and the use of red jasper is typical of the Antonine style of the 2nd century AD.

3.5.38 For a gem depicting Mercury crowning Jupiter cf Henig (1974), no. 11, illustrated in E. Wallis Budge (1907, 111). Mercury is frequently depicted crowning Fortuna (cf. Zwierlein-Diehl 1979, nos 1208-1210; Henig and Whiting 1987, nos 93-95). Note also an intaglio depicting Ares [Mars] identified by his helmet and sword, crowning Minerva with a wreath, (ibid., no. 225). For Minerva standing with Mercury, but not being crowned by him, see Zwierlein-Diehl (1979), no. 1211.

3.5.39 Both deities are very commonly depicted on gems, and indeed in figurines and sculpture in Britain as elsewhere. They both offered protection to their votaries. The intimate relationship between the two Olympians expressed by the subject of this gem would have been seen as doubly re-assuring by the person who wore it.

3.5.40 Intaglios are not common in burials from Britain, probably because in many cases they were bequeathed to the heir of the deceased, but perhaps this particular gem was set aside because Mercury was regarded not only as messenger of the gods and as master of flocks and herds and patron of traders but also as guide of the souls of the dead, hence his frequent appearance on sarcophagi.

3.5.41 Hobnails

3.5.42 Some 115 iron hobnails were recovered from within the cremation urn associated with the cremated human bone. It is not clear that these were burnt, and it is most likely that they derive from a pair of unburnt shoes deposited on top of the cremated remains after the latter had been selected and placed in the urn.



3.6 Human remains *Helen Webb*

3.6.1 *Methods*

3.6.2 Excavation and processing of the cremation deposit was carried out in accordance with published guidelines (McKinley 2004a). The cremation deposit underwent whole earth recovery, having been block-lifted for excavation and recording by a qualified osteologist, under laboratory conditions. It should be highlighted that systematic spit excavation of the urn was not possible due to the post-depositional disturbance and truncation. In addition, material from a separate sample <3>, comprising soil that directly surrounded the disturbed, fragmented urn, was processed and examined alongside the contents of the vessel itself (107), since it was clearly originally part of the same deposit.

3.6.3 Following excavation, all of the cremated bone and surrounding soil was wet sieved and sorted into >10mm, 10-4mm and 4-2mm fraction sizes. This allows for the degree of fragmentation to be explored. The extraneous material (e.g. stones) from the larger fractions (>10mm and 10-4mm) was removed. This was also carried out for part of the 4-2mm fraction and part of the residue (2-0.5mm). From the remaining unsorted 4-2mm fraction, a 20g sample was sorted in order to more accurately estimate the total weight of bone present within it. This estimated weight is included in the total weight presented below. For the unsorted 2-0.5mm residue, a visual estimate of the proportion of bone present was made, but this is not included in the total weight presented below.

3.6.4 Analysis of the cremation deposit involved recording its colour, weight and maximum fragment size. This information can facilitate the interpretation of the deposit, for example, whether it represents a formal burial, or a dump of redeposited pyre debris (McKinley 2004a, 10). The colour of the bone can be used to reflect the efficiency of the cremation process (ibid., 11).

3.6.5 The deposit was also examined for identifiable bone elements and the minimum number of individuals (MNI) was estimated. The MNI was determined based on the presence/absence of repeated skeletal elements and on the comparative size of bones (e.g. adult versus juvenile size). Where possible, estimation of age and sex was attempted following published methods (Scheuer and Black 2000; Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994). Any lesions of pathology were recorded and diagnoses explored with reference to standard texts (for example, Aufderheide and Rodríguez-Martín 1998; Ortner 2003).

3.6.6 *Results*

3.6.7 *Excavation of the deposit - observations*

3.6.8 Despite the fact that the urn was highly fragmented and incomplete, it was clear upon excavation that the cremated bone was concentrated at the base of the vessel, indicating that the urn had probably been placed in an upright position within the grave. The main concentration of bone was densely packed with very little soil between the fragments, and there was no charcoal within the deposit. The soil deposit within the urn, overlying and surrounding the cremated bone, comprised a very dense, light yellowish grey-brown boulder clay. This was probably material that had washed in from the main grave backfill deposit (103). Unsurprisingly, given the crushed and incomplete nature of the urn, there were small patches of cremated bone within the block-lifted surrounding soil matrix (103).



3.6.9 Aside from the cremated bone, a number of artefacts were recovered during excavation of the urn. These included a red jasper intaglio (SF 42), two iron nails (SF 43 and SF 44), probably having come from the wooden box in which the urn and grave goods had been buried, and around 115 iron hobnails (see above).

3.6.10 *Bone weight*

3.6.11 A summary of the findings from the osteological analysis of the cremated bone is presented in Table 1. The total bone weight recovered, including the material from sample <3> (131.7g) was 841g. In addition, the unsorted 2-0.5mm residue (total weight 269.9g, including 81.6g from sample <3>) contained a high proportion of bone, around 75% by volume. Whilst the total recoverable weight falls below the range observed in modern adult cremations (1000-2400g; McKinley 2000a, 269), it is quite reasonable, considering the wide range of weights generally observed in archaeological cremation burials. For example, at the Roman Area 15 cemetery, Baldock, a range of 1g – 1599.1g was observed (McKinley 1991), and at the Eastern Cemetery of Roman London, the range of weights obtained from undisturbed adult burials was 57.3g – 1713.7g (McKinley 2000a, 270). Therefore, at 841g, the weight is in keeping with the average weight of urned burial deposits from the Eastern Cemetery (743.3g; *ibid.*).

3.6.12 Table: Deposit 107 – osteological summary

Deposit	Skeletal region	>10mm	10-4mm	4-2mm	2-0.5mm	Colour, MNI, age, sex, pathology
107	Skull	37.8g (Vault, petrous portion, mandible)	12.4g (Vault, maxilla)	0.1g (Vault)	-	90% white 10% grey, black + blue MNI = 1 Adult ??Female Ectocranial porosity (non-specific inflammation)
	Axial	15.0g (Vertebral bodies + arches, sacrum, ribs)	10.0g (Vertebral bodies + arches, ribs)	0.3g (Ribs)	-	
	Upper limb	54.1g (Humerus, radius, ulna)	3.0g (Radius, ulna, scapula)	-	-	
	Lower limb	112.1g (Innominate inc. ilium + ischium, femur, tibia, fibula, tarsals)	17.2g (Femur, tibia, fibula, phalanx)	-	-	
	Unid. long bone	27.9g	64.2g	2.0g	-	
	Unid. joint surface	10.8g	7.9g	0.1g	-	
	Unid. hand/foot	-	1.5g	0.2g	-	
	Unid. other	28.5g	130.1g	166.3g (inc. 113g est.)	7.8g	
	(UNID. TOTAL)	(67.2g)	(203.7g)	(168.6g)	(7.8g)	
	Sample <3>	39.2g	62.4g	30.1g		
	TOTAL	325.4g	308.7g	199.1g	7.8g	

Key: Unid. = Unidentified. N.B. 4-2mm 'Unid. other' includes 113g estimated bone weight from unsorted part of the fraction. The 7.8g of bone from the 2-0.5mm residue is from sorted material. Visual estimate of bone content in unsorted 2-0.5mm residue not included here (see Methods section above).

3.6.13 *Fragmentation*



- 3.6.14 There are numerous factors that may contribute to the fragmentation of cremated bone. Non-deliberate fragmentation may be caused by the cremation process itself, collection of the bone from the pyre, burial, post-depositional disturbance, excavation, and post-excavation processing (McKinley 1994).
- 3.6.15 The level of fragmentation within the deposit was varied. Over one third of the total bone weight (36.7%) came from the 10-4mm fraction, although the highest proportion of the total weight (325.4g, 38.7%) comprised fragments that were greater than 10mm. This is useful osteologically because, in general, the larger the fragments, the easier it is to identify them to element and the more likely it is that indicators of age and sex will be preserved. The largest fragment observed during analysis was 42mm (skull vault), although during excavation of the urn a larger fragment (54mm, unidentified long bone) was present. It is likely that this fragment broke apart during processing. It is also worth highlighting that during excavation, a large quantity of trabecular (spongy) bone was noted, but far less was present upon analysis. The trabecular bone was extremely soft and much of it disintegrated to dust-sized particles during excavation and processing. This trabecular bone probably made up a large proportion of the unrecoverable bone within the 2-0.5mm residue.
- 3.6.16 *Elements represented*
- 3.6.17 Bones from all skeletal regions (skull, axial, upper limb and lower limb) were identified, details of which are given in the Table above. A high proportion of the total bone weight (63.1%) comprised unidentified fragments, but this was in keeping with the expected range for archaeological cremation deposits – it is reported that only 20-50% of a deposit is generally identifiable (McKinley 1989, 68). Unsurprisingly, the highest proportions of unidentified bone came from the smaller fractions (i.e. those less than 10mm). To quantify this, over three quarters (76.5%, 219.0g/286.2g) of the >10mm fraction bone weight (excluding sample <3>) was identified to element, compared with 17.3% (42.6g/246.3g) of the 10-4mm fraction and just 0.2% (0.4g/169g) of the 4-2mm fraction. A significant proportion of the unidentified bone was made up of long bone fragments.
- 3.6.18 *Oxidation (colour)*
- 3.6.19 The vast majority (90%) of bone was white, with the rest (10%) made up of grey, blue and brown fragments. White is indicative of full oxidation and a temperature of over 600°C, whilst grey and blue colours result from temperatures between 300°C and 600°C (McKinley 2004a, 11). The brown coloured bone surfaces are those which remained unburnt (ibid.).
- 3.6.20 A clear correlation between element and colour was noted, that is, the only fragments exhibiting grey, blue and brown colours were femur and pelvis. A similar pattern was observed at the Eastern Cemetery of Roman London, where the proximal femur and shaft most commonly showed a colour variation indicating a lower temperature (McKinley 2000a, 269). That the bones in this region of the skeleton reached lower temperatures than the rest of the body, probably relates to the fact that these areas have thicker layers of muscle and fat (McKinley 1989, 65). All soft tissue must be removed (i.e. burnt away) before the bone itself can burn (ibid.). Therefore, if the cremation process had been curtailed, either deliberately or, for example, due to insufficient fuel or adverse weather conditions (McKinley 2006, 81), it would not be surprising that these areas of the body were the least burnt. In observations of modern cremations, pelvic bones were noted to still be burning long after other areas of the skeleton and on removal were still black in colour (charred) (McKinley 1989, 66).



3.6.21 *MNI, age and sex*

3.6.22 In the absence of repeated elements or bones that were clearly of differently aged individuals, the MNI was estimated to be one. There were no specific indicators for age estimation, but the bones were in keeping with an adult (over 18 years of age) and a number of vertebral body fragments exhibited completely fused annular ring epiphyses, also indicating that the remains were those of an adult individual.

3.6.23 Only one sexually dimorphic trait was observed, and this was an orbit fragment exhibiting a sharp margin. This is more in keeping with female morphology, hence the individual was estimated to be female. That said, this estimate is tentative given that it was based on a single trait only.

3.6.24 *Pathology*

3.6.25 A single case of pathology, involving the skull, was observed. The ectocranial (outer) surface of a number of skull vault fragments appeared dense, with increased porosity and an 'orange peel' texture, indicative of healed inflammation. These lesions, which may have resulted from a minor scalp irritation, for example, as may be caused by head lice, are commonly observed in archaeological populations.

3.6.26 **Summary and discussion**

3.6.27 Deposit 107 comprised a moderate bone weight and a significant quantity of large (>10mm) fragments. The overall weight was in keeping with other Romano-British urned cremation deposits (McKinley 2000a, 270), although it is likely that some bone was lost to plough truncation. It is of course impossible to estimate the quantity of bone that may have been lost. The high proportion of >10mm fragments was probably due to the fact that the burial was urned, which would originally have afforded significant protection from the surrounding soil (McKinley 1994, 341). However, the eventual collapse of the wooden box in which the urn had been placed, and the subsequent overlying pressure from heavy agricultural machinery, as well as plough truncation, will certainly have increased the level of fragmentation (*ibid.*).

3.6.28 Whilst two or more individuals are occasionally identified within Romano-British cremation burials, the MNI estimate of one for deposit 107 is in keeping with the vast majority of cases (McKinley 2000a, 272). Osteological indicators of age and sex were limited, but it was estimated that the remains were those of an adult, possibly a female. All skeletal regions were represented, hence there was no evidence for deliberate selection or exclusion of specific elements for burial. This is also a common observation within cremation burials of all periods, including Romano-British examples (e.g. McKinley 2000a, 271-2; Witkin 2008, 332).

3.6.29 The vast majority of bone fragments were white in colour, indicating a generally efficient cremation process. This too is a common observation in most archaeological cremation burials (McKinley 2006, 84). That said, it has been suggested that the poor, unable to afford sufficient fuel, would have been less well cremated than the better-off (Morris 1992, 43). The high proportion of white fragments in burial 107 would perhaps, therefore, be consistent with the high status nature of the burial and its rich assemblage of grave goods. The few non-white fragments in the deposit were confined to the lower torso and upper leg region, a pattern commonly observed, and relating to the greater distribution of soft tissue in these areas (McKinley 1989, 65-66).

3.6.30 One of the observations made during the excavation of the deposit was that there was a complete absence of charcoal. This strongly suggests that the bones were hand-



picked from the pyre and placed into the urn, deliberately excluding any form of pyre debris.

3.7 Environmental Samples *Julia Meen*

3.7.1 Introduction

3.7.2 Five bulk environmental samples were taken during the excavation of the grave. Sample <1> was taken from context (104), a dark deposit thought possibly to represent the spilt contents of one of the vessels within the grave. Sample <2> was taken from context (105), a very dark, organic deposit thought perhaps to be the remains of the wooden box which held the grave furnishings.

3.7.3 Samples <3> and <5> were both taken from the fill (107) of the pot containing the cremation, taken for the full recovery of cremated bone and of any associated artefacts. The latter sample was taken during post-excavation emptying of the lifted vessel.

3.7.4 Sample <4> was taken from context (108), an organic deposit noted to contain fragments of wood, possibly representing a wooden object placed in the grave or remains of the enclosing wooden box.

3.7.5 Methodology

3.7.6 Samples <3> and <5> were processed separately by water flotation using a modified Siraf style flotation machine, in order to recover any charred plant remains present as well as for recovery of cremated bone and artefacts. The samples were 16L and 25L in volume respectively. Both flots were collected on a 250µm mesh and dried in a heated room. Samples <1>, <2> and <4> were hand floated for the recovery of waterlogged plant fragments, which were collected on 250µm meshes and kept in a moist, air free container to inhibit decay. Sample <1> was 0.6L, sample <2> was 0.8L, and sample <4> was 1L in volume. The heavy residues from all samples were sieved to 500µm and sorted by eye for artefacts and ecofactual remains. The dry flots were scanned for plant remains using a binocular microscope at approximately x15 magnification. The waterlogged material from samples <1>, <2> and <4> was examined by Sheila Boardman at high magnification to attempt to identify the species of wood present.

3.7.7 Results

3.7.8 Both sample <3> and <5> were rich in cremated bone, which was passed to the relevant specialists for further quantification. Pottery and iron were also recovered from both of these samples. Small fragments of copper alloy and glass were recovered from sample <3>, with further copper alloy and glass recovered from sample <4>.

3.7.9 Plant Remains

3.7.10 The waterlogged wood recovered from sample <4> was examined by Sheila Boardman for species identification. Although the material was generally not well preserved, seven larger fragments could be identified as either *Quercus* sp. (oak) or as cf. *Quercus* (probable oak). Flot <1> mostly consisted of degraded wood fragments and root material, with a small number of waterlogged seeds and rare charcoal fragments. Occasional insect remains were also noted. Flot <2> was almost entirely composed of fragmented, waterlogged wood, as well as a single waterlogged seed of nettle (*Urtica* sp.). These wood fragments have not been further identified at present, but are presumably the same material as that identified in sample <4>, derived from the wooden vessel containing the grave.



- 3.7.11 The dry flots from samples <3> and <5> were almost entirely composed of modern roots. Sample <5> contained one small fragment of charcoal and a single charred grain of wheat (*Triticum* sp.).

3.8 Chronology and character of the grave

- 3.8.1 The date of the burial is clear from the evidence of the samian ware, and is based in particular on the identifiable stamps, which give ranges of AD 150-185, 155-195 and 160-200 (Hartley and Dickinson 2008-2012). The form of the fourth samian ware vessel with the as yet unidentified stamp is entirely consistent with the others. In terms of other parallels, the Wavendon Gate burial quoted above is dated to the mid 2nd century, and 2nd-century dates are thought likely for other examples of the bronze jug type discussed above. The pottery indicates a *terminus post quem* of at least AD 160 for the burial, and allowing for this it can be suggested provisionally that the interment probably took place in the last quarter of the 2nd century, although a slightly later date is also possible.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Interpretation

- 4.1.1 Despite its relatively poor state of preservation the burial has a number of characteristics that make it of particular interest and importance. The main ones that will merit further work include the presence of multiple vessels including samian ware, the presence of glass vessels, the presence of a lamp and the provision of bronze vessels.
- 4.1.2 Glass vessels are found fairly commonly in cremation burials, but nevertheless serve to distinguish a significant minority of burials in Roman Britain (for example, in the recently published cemetery at Wallington Road, Baldock (Burleigh and Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010) only one grave out of about 200 produced glass vessels).
- 4.1.3 Lighting equipment is less common. Philpott (1991, 191) comments that 'Iron or lead lamp-hangers with brackets are found in a number of 2nd century cremations especially in south-eastern cist and box burials'. This scenario fits the present one exactly. With regard to lamps, Eckardt (2002, 330-331) lists 32 examples of iron open lamps from burials in her comprehensive review of lighting in Roman Britain. Chronologies range from late 1st to late 2nd century, but of the 23 cases for which dates are suggested 3 are assigned to the late 1st century, 5 to the early-middle 2nd century, 9 are Hadrianic/Antonine or later and 6 are only defined as 2nd century.
- 4.1.4 Burials with bronze vessels are likewise scarce. Philpott (1991, 410-411, fig. 8) lists only 30 instances of cremation burials with metal vessels, of which only about a dozen contain or include a set of jug and patera or skillet. There are, of course, several significant finds of graves including this vessel combination since Philpott's corpus was compiled some 25 years ago, with examples from (inter alia) Kent (Booth *et al.* 2008, 27-34; Allen *et al.* 2012) and Essex (Crummy *et al.* 2007, 185-186), but most of these graves are of early Roman date and are therefore not directly analogous with the present example. Graves which do have several points of comparison with Whitchurch include grave 2 at Bayford, Kent, which produced one of the relatively small number of bronze jugs with a 'sacro-idyllic' scene on the handle, and whose contents also included an iron open lamp, several glass vessels and no fewer than 15 samian ware vessels (6 dishes and 9 cups) (Payne 1886). Another recently-recovered parallel is a grave from Kelshall, Hertfordshire which, while richer than the Creslow example, has a

wooden box, an iron hanging lamp and glass and bronze vessels as common elements (British Archaeology 2015).

- 4.1.5 Most significant, however, in view of its proximity (only c 14km NNW of Whitchurch) is Thornborough. The finds from barrow 1 (Liversidge 1953-60) include another bronze jug with a religious scene (it may be suggested that the flat-topped object upon which the standing figure rests his left hand could be another altar, as in the scene on the Whitchurch jug) and further bronze vessels, glass vessels, pottery (including, unusually, a decorated samian ware bowl), a bronze lamp and other objects. Obviously the resources involved, particularly in erecting the mound over the burial, make this of a significantly different order from the Whitchurch burial, but points of similarity remain, not least in the dating, which Liversidge suggested (*ibid.*, 32) was 'perhaps in the later years of the second century'.
- 4.1.6 Some of the key characteristics identified above appear to have interestingly complementary distribution patterns. A quick review of Philpott's (1991) distribution maps shows that Buckinghamshire lies at the western edge of the core distributions of cremation burials which contain glass and bronze vessels, and the evidence for metal lighting equipment suggests a similar pattern. This distribution pattern is reinforced by the inclusion of Buckinghamshire sites such as Wavendon Gate, although this burial did not contain bronze vessels. A further similar wooden box burial was recovered in 2000 at Wendover, roughly 15km SSE of the present find. Again, bronze vessels were absent, but pottery and glass vessels were present, along with a lead open lamp and an iron adze-hammer, an unusual item in such a context. The burial is dated to the mid 2nd century (Zeevat 2003). The rich burial at Whitchurch is an important addition to this body of evidence, containing a characteristic combination of relatively rare object types, of which the decorated jug is individually the most important and, because of the unique detail of its decoration, a piece of national importance, enhanced by association with a securely dated burial context.

4.2 **Recommendations for further work**

- 4.2.1 The primary tasks are to ensure that the finds are all in appropriate condition for long-term storage.
- The extant fill needs to be extracted from the body of the bronze jug. This might best be done by a specialist conservator.
 - The bronze vessels require careful cleaning (and stabilisation as required) by a conservator.
 - The iron objects should be X-rayed. Further conservation may be required.
- 4.2.2 An expanded report for formal publication, with appropriate illustrations, can be prepared in the light of the information emerging from these tasks.
- 4.2.3 Decisions on the desirability of any further work, such as reassembly/restoration for potential display etc, can be deferred until the foregoing stages of work are complete.

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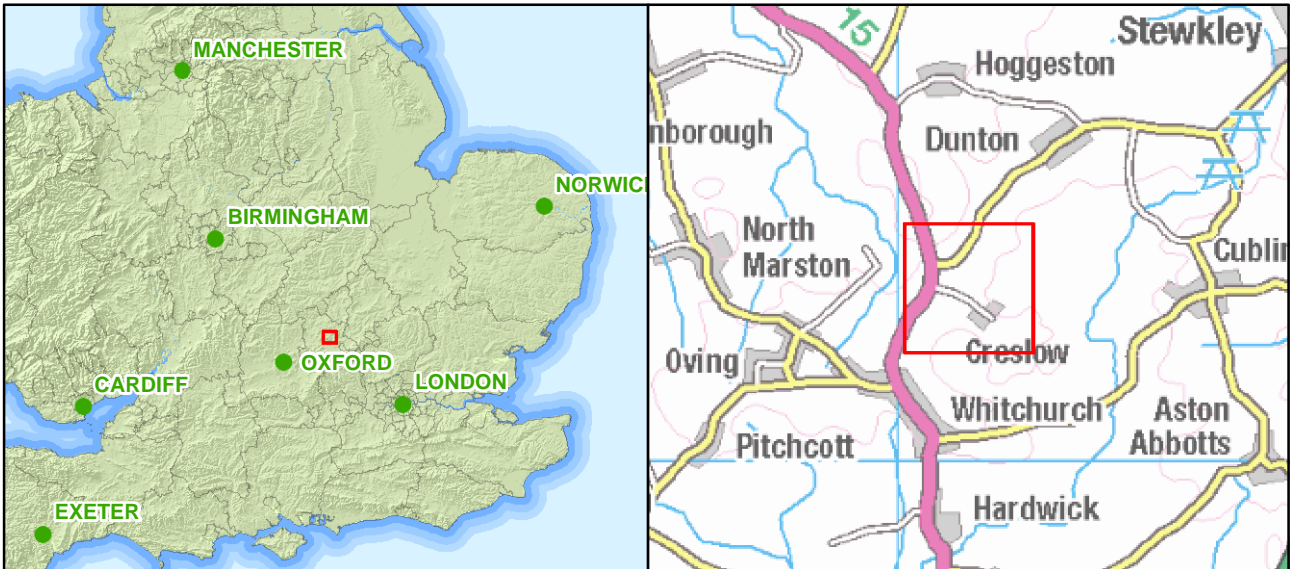
APPENDIX A. CONTEXT TABLE

Burial pit						
General description				Orientation		NE-SW
<p>The excavation of the casket burial revealed a late 2nd urned cremation burial with the inclusion of a rich assemblage of grave goods including samian dishes and cups, glass vessels, iron lamp holder, bronze vessels and cremation urn. The remains of the wood casket was represented by various organic fills at the base of the pit and an outline of iron nails. The pit was backfilled immediately with boulder clay and was later sealed by modern ploughsoil.</p>				Avg. depth (m)		0.60
				Width (m)		0.70
				Length (m)		1.10
Contexts						
Context no	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Comment	Finds	Date
100	Layer	-	0-0.30	Ploughsoil	Iron nails	Modern
101	Layer	-	0.30-0.40	Subsoil (weather upper boulder clay surface)	-	-
102	Cut	-	0.40-0.65	Cut of burial pit		Roman (late 2 nd century AD)
103	Layer			Redeposited boulder clay used to backfill the burial pit		
104	Layer			Dark organic		
105	Layer			Fill of Cu alloy dish SF17		
106	Layer			Fill of Cu alloy Flagon SF9		
107	Layer			Organic fill of SF 24		
108	Layer			Wood/dark organic deposit possible remains of wooden box		
109	Layer			Boulder clay (drift geology)		Pleistocene



APPENDIX B. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

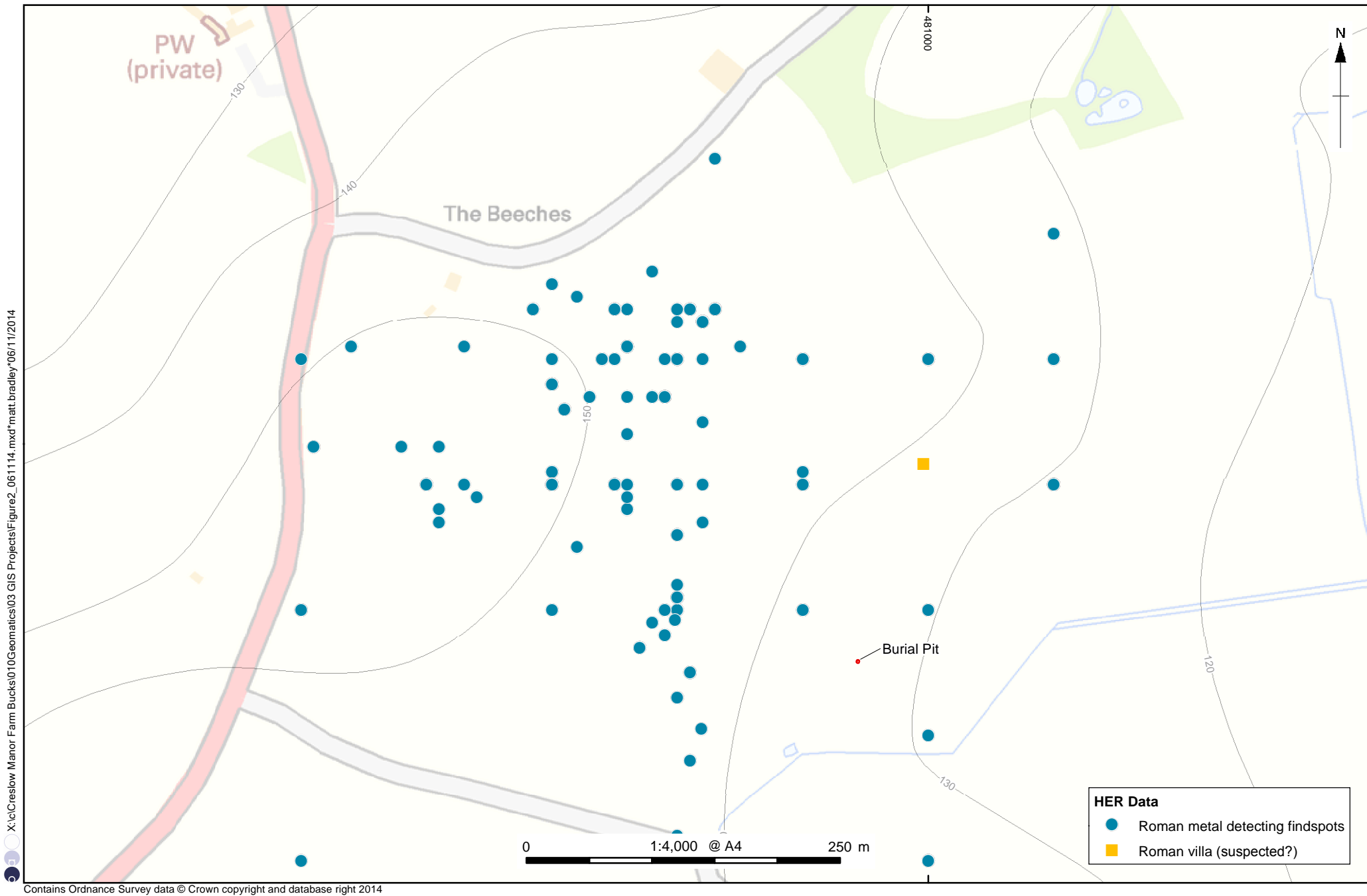
Site name:	Whitchurch, Aylesbury Vale, Buckinghamshire
Site code:	CRESL014
Grid reference:	SP 80943 22258
Type:	Excavation
Date and duration:	October 2014
Area of site:	4m ²
Summary of results:	<p>The excavation of the wooden box burial revealed a late 2nd century urned cremation burial with the inclusion of a rich assemblage of grave goods including samian ware dishes and cups, glass and metal vessels, and an iron lamp holder. The cremation urn contained human remains of an adult, probably female, as well as hobnails and a jasper intaglio. The wooden box was represented by various organic fills and an outline of iron nails. The pit had been backfilled immediately with boulder clay and was sealed by the modern topsoil.</p>
Location of archive:	<p>The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Buckinghamshire Museum Service in due course, under the following accession number: CRESLO14</p>



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Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2014
 Source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, i-cubed, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus
 DS, USDA, USGS, AEX, Getmapping, Aerogrid, IGN, IGP, swisstopo, and the GIS

Figure 1: Site location



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Figure 2: Wider landscape and heritage assets of the burial pit

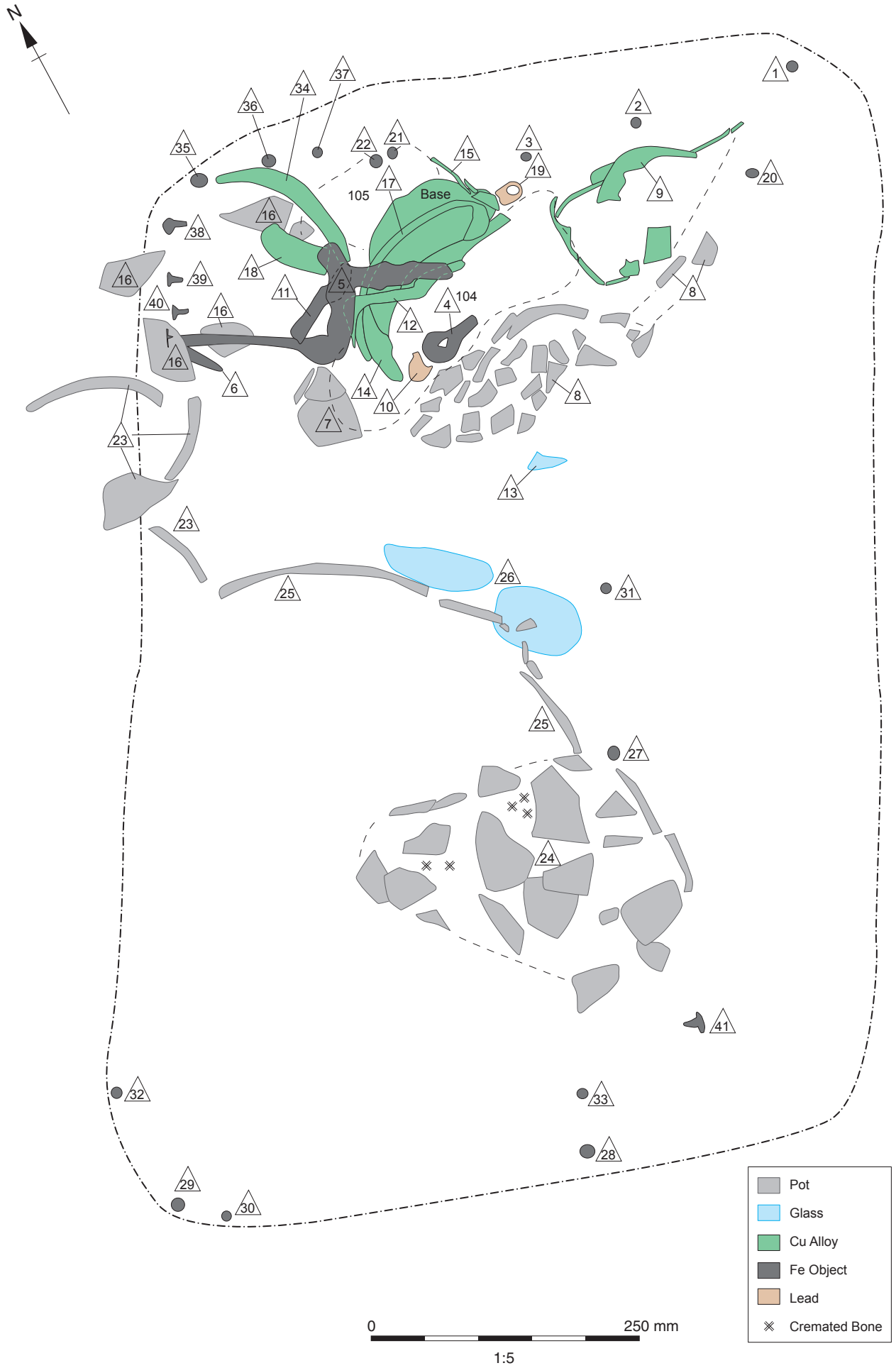


Figure 3: Plan of burial

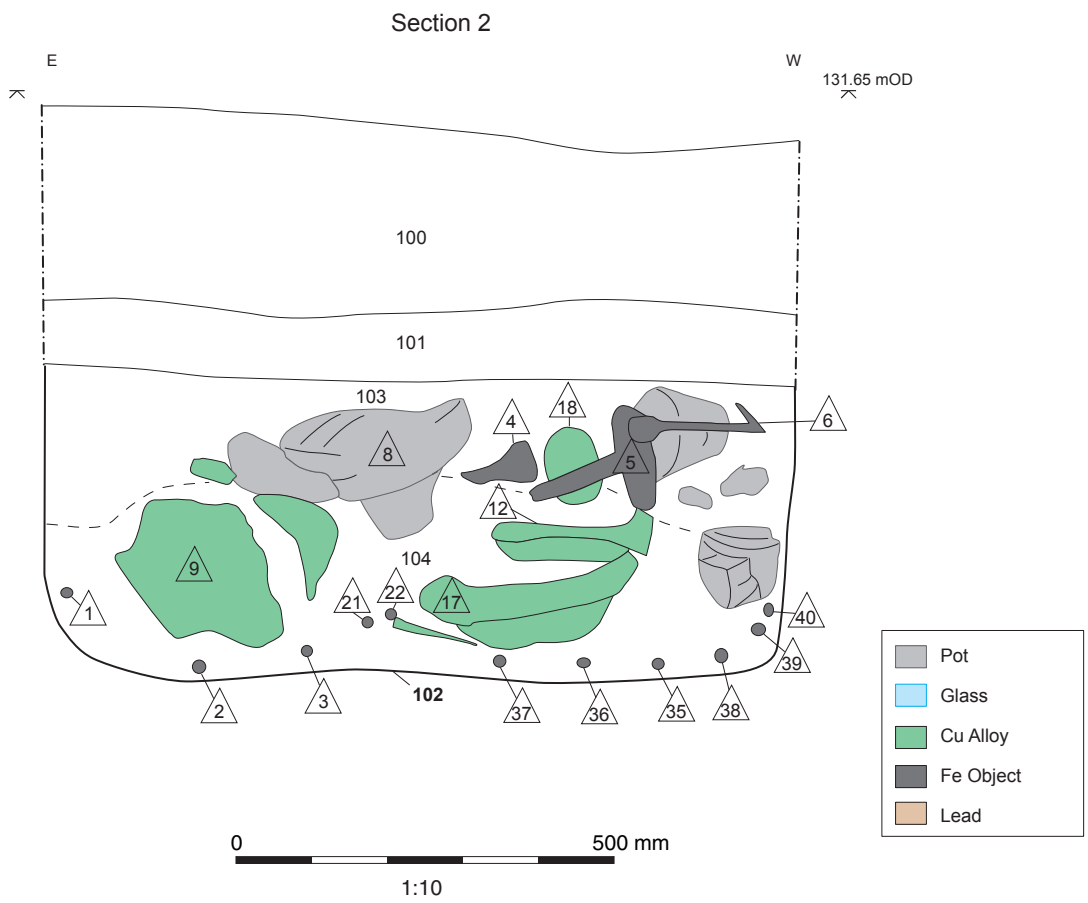
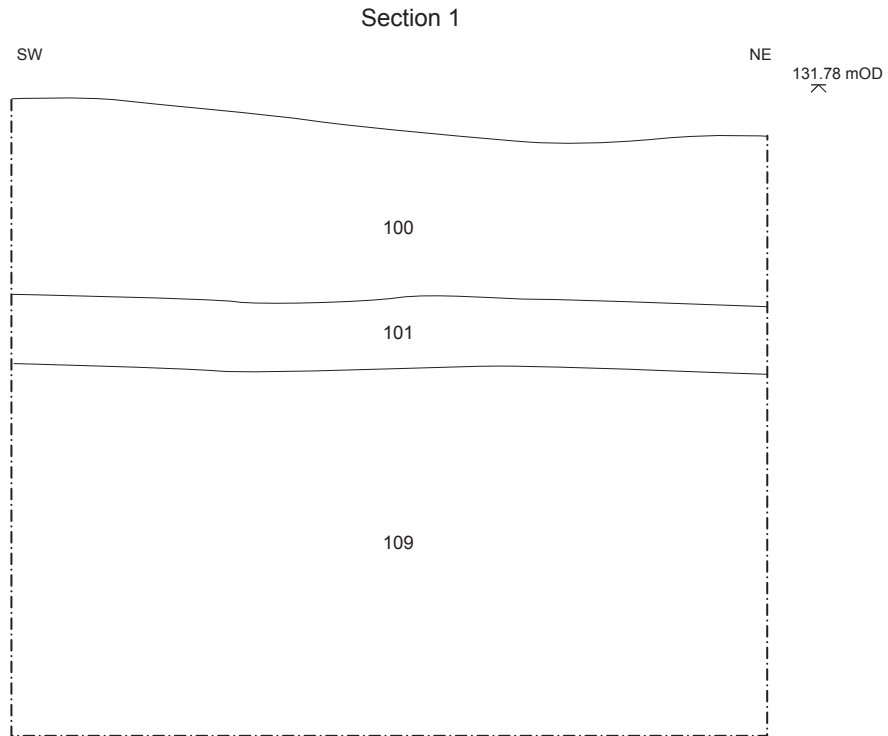


Figure 4: Sections



Plate 1: Initial excavation and cleaning of the findspot



Plate 2: Close up of the findspot (0.5m scale)



Plate 3: Remains of the cremation and samian vessels (0.5m scale)



Plate 4: Recording of the cremation vessel

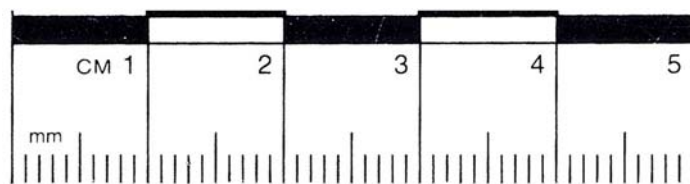
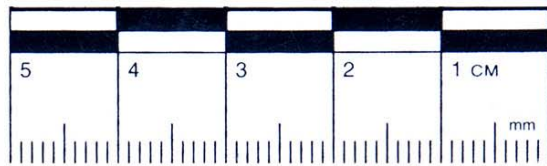


Plate 5: Samian cup and maker's stamp SF7

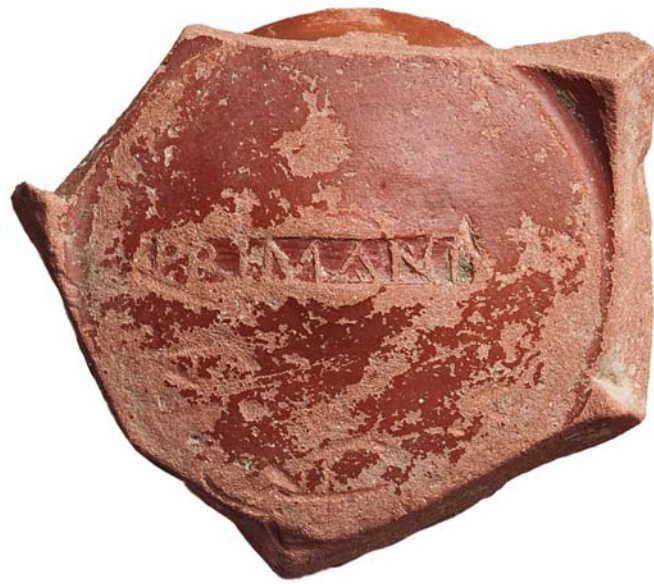


Plate 6: Samian maker's stamp SF16

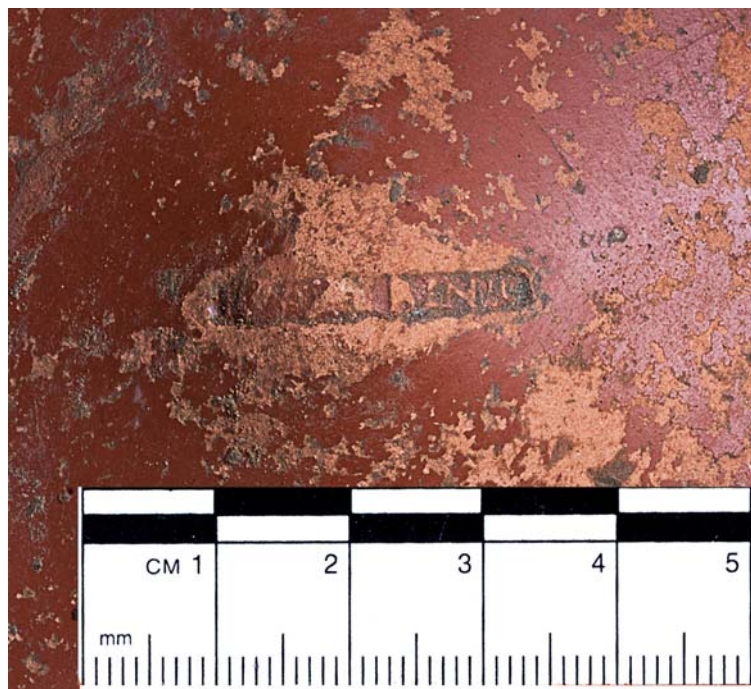


Plate 7: Samian maker's stamp SF23



Plate 8: Bronze jug handle SF12



Plate 9: Bronze Jug SF9



Plate 10: Plan and profile view of copper alloy dish SF17, 18 and 34



Plate 11: Iron lamp SF11 and SF5 (bottom insert) and SF 6 (top insert)



Plate 12: Close-up of bronze jug handle scene SF12



Plate 13 Intaglio SF 42



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