

# Chapter 4: Human Remains

by Sharon Clough and Helen Webb

## Introduction

The human remains comprised an early Iron Age cremation burial from Site 5, four early Roman cremation burials from Site 3 and three late Roman inhumation burials from Site 7, as well as a small quantity of disarticulated bone from Sites 2, 4 (Trench 54) and 5. The material was analysed in accordance with national guidelines (Brickley and McKinley 2004; McKinley 2004; Mays *et al.* 2004) and with reference to standard protocols (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994; Cox and Mays 2000).

## The assemblage

### Site 2

The human remains from Site 2 comprised four fragments of disarticulated bone from early Roman pit 2465. Fill 2467 contained a left distal humerus and a right rib fragment of a perinatal infant aged between 36 and 38 weeks. Fill 2468 contained a small fragment of cranial vault and a left distal tibia of a probably perinatal infant. Although these remains were recovered from two different fills, there are no repeated elements and the age is the same, and they are therefore likely to come from a single individual.

### Site 3

Four early Roman urned cremation burials were excavated, including one (104802) that was recovered from the evaluation (Table 4.1). A small quantity of burnt human bone was also recovered from a soil sample taken from the soil (3129) within a broken but substantially complete jar (3127) that may have been a disturbed or redeposited cinerary urn within the fill of late Iron Age enclosure ditch 3351.

### Early Roman cremation burials 3030, 3031, 3050 and 104802

All the cremation burials were of adult individuals. Burial 3030 has been tentatively identified as a young female but the others could not be sexed. No pathologies were observed. The percentage of material in the <10 mm fraction ranged from 31-58% with 26-62% in the 10-4 mm fraction. This level of fragmentation has hindered identification.

The bone from all four burials was predominantly white and well calcined, with a small number of black, grey and blue fragments from different parts of the body, indicating that efficient cremation had taken place. A small quantity of animal bone (8.7 g) was present in burial 104802.

### Burnt bone from enclosure ditch 3351

The burnt human bone recovered from the possible disturbed cremation deposit in ditch 3351 came from the <2mm fraction residue of wet-sieved soil sample 3011 and amounted to less than 0.2g in weight. Only one fragment of bone was identifiable. This was a partial distal phalanx, probably of the hand. The fragment was largely unburnt, displaying a normal, light beige colour, although a small blackened area at the proximal end indicated charring. The other, unidentified fragments, were white (completely oxidised) or grey (incompletely oxidised) in colour.

### Site 4 (Trench 54)

A total of five unburnt human cranial vault fragments were recovered from context 17319, a fill of middle Iron Age enclosure ditch 17719. The remains were adult but there was no indication as to the sex of the individual. The presence of part of an open suture on one of the fragments may, very

Table 4.1: Site 3, summary of cremation burials

Burial	Wt (g)	Colour	Max. fragment size (mm)	<10mm (g)	10-4mm (g)	4-2mm (g)	Age/sex
3030	466.6	White 90%, black and grey 8%, brown and pink 2%	19 x 33	164	287.2	15.4	Adult, possible young female
3031	208.4	White 90%, black 10%	32 x 23	64.5	92.5	51.4	Adult
3050	455.1	98% white, 2% black and grey	41 x 15	200	176.1	79	Adult
104802	520.7	White 90%, grey, blue black and brown 10%	30 x 16	301.2	134.4	85.1	Adult

Table 4.2: Summary of cremation burial 6067/6070

Burial	Wt (g)	Colour	Max. fragment size (mm)	<10mm (g)	10-4mm (g)	4-2mm (g)	Age/sex
6067/6070	96.5	98% white, 2% black and grey	40 x 14	0	96.5	unsorted	Adult

tentatively, imply that this was not an elderly individual. No pathological lesions were observed.

A single fragment of human bone was recovered during the evaluation from the middle fill (105406) of enclosure ditch 17345. The bone was the middle third of a probable right adult femur.

#### Site 5

An un-urned cremation burial and two disarticulated human bones were recovered from Site 5. The cremation burial (6067/6070) was dated by radiocarbon to the early Iron Age (770-400 cal BC; SUERC-30618: 2406±35 BP). The deposit is summarised in Table 4.2.

The majority of fragments were in the 5-10 mm fraction with the remainder in the smaller unsorted fractions. There were a lot of fissures and cracking observed on the bone, which may have contributed to the small size of fragments which impeded bone identification. The warping and circular fragmentation observed is indicative of wet fleshed bone that has been subjected to intense heat.

The bone weighed 96.5g in total and only 15.8% was identifiable (mainly skull followed by lower limbs). Hand and foot phalanges and tooth roots were also identified, perhaps indicating that some care was taken in the collection of burnt bone from the pyre.

The cremated bone was predominantly buff white in colour, with very minor areas of black and grey. Iron staining on one small fragment suggests close proximity to an iron object. However, no grave goods were found with the burial.

The deposit was an adult of indeterminate sex. An intermediate and a distal foot phalanx had fused together, suggesting that the joint had become damaged due to injury or through degeneration. If it was caused by erosion of the joint then it is possible that this was an older individual, as the prevalence of osteoarthritis increases with age (Rogers and Waldron 1995, 32).

There was no evidence for deliberate selection of particular body parts. Very little was identifiable but all parts seemed to be represented, including small bones.

The temperatures achieved on the pyre were evenly distributed and resulted in full oxidation of the entire skeleton. It is unclear how far later land use had affected the depth of the feature containing the cremated bone and therefore the weight of bone recovered.

#### Disarticulated bone

The proximal third of the shaft of an adult right femur was recovered from the fill (109108) of late Iron Age pit 109105 during the evaluation phase of the investigation. It had a prominent linea aspera and large gluteal attachment site. There was less surface erosion than had affected the other disarticulated bone (McKinley 2004, score 2/3). The platymetric index was 85 (moderate or eurymeric).

The upper two thirds of a left adult femur came from the fill (109110) of possible roundhouse gully 6021. The surface of the bone was quite badly eroded (McKinley 2004, score 4) and where it was broken midshaft the ends were weathered suggesting it had fragmented in antiquity. This bone was much smaller and less robust than that from context 109108, as well as exhibiting more evidence for erosion. The platymetric index was 71 (flattened or platymetric). The enormous difference in size and index between the two bones make it extremely unlikely that they are from the same individual.

#### Site 7

Three late Romano-British inhumation burials were recovered from within discrete earth-cut graves, and a small quantity of burnt human bone was recovered from the upper fill (15325) of enclosure ditch 15753.

#### Inhumation burials 15061, 15230 and 15341

Two of the graves (15061 and 15230) were located near a boundary ditch and the third (15341) lay a further 10m to the south-west. The latter was very shallow and had been plough-truncated. Skeleton 15060, in grave 15061, was extended on her right side while the other skeletons were supine. Skeleton 15229, in grave 15230, was wearing a bronze bracelet that had caused staining in the region of the lower arm and wrist.

Skeleton 15060 was a probable female aged 30-40 years. She was approximately 1.48m (4' 8") tall. Of the 26 teeth present, eight had calculus flecks and four sockets had periodontal (gum) disease. Very slight vertebral degeneration was observed.

Skeleton 15229 was a probable male aged upwards of 18 years. There were nine loose teeth, six of which had slight calculus. There was extra wear (attrition) on the lingual side of an incisor which may be related to an overbite or extra-masticatory use. There were marginal osteophytes around the bodies of thoracic and lumbar vertebrae,

but due to fragmentation these were unquantifiable.

Skeleton 15342, in grave 15341, was a possible female aged 40-44 years. The skull and lower limbs had been destroyed by ploughing subsequent to burial. There were seven loose teeth, one with medium calculus and one with a dental enamel hypoplastic line indicating an episodic disruption during dentine growth (Hillson 1996, 165) which could be related to any of a variety of factors including malnutrition, disease and dietary deficiency. Seven lumbar vertebral fragments had osteophytic growth on the facets which is indicative of joint degeneration.

All three skeletons were highly fragmented and less than 75% complete, which limited data recovery. Mean stature for females in the Roman period is 1.59m (Roberts and Cox 2003). Skeleton 15060 is much shorter than this. The dentition present had no caries, and limited calculus (mineralised dental plaque). This may indicate a diet low in starches, sugars and casein (Hillson 1996).

#### *Burnt bone from enclosure ditch 15753*

Eight fragments of burnt human bone were recovered, totalling 9.3g. Six of the fragments were from the cranial vault; the other two were unidentified. The largest fragment was from the cranium and measured 32mm in length. All the fragments were mottled in colour, ranging from white to bluish-grey and black. The remains appeared to be of an adult. One of the cranial fragments incorporated part of an open suture so it may, very tentatively, be suggested that the individual was not elderly. Sex could not be ascertained due to the absence of any sexually dimorphic features. No pathological lesions were observed.

## Discussion

The discovery of an early Iron Age cremation burial at Site 5 is unusual, although this may be partly because un-urned burials of this type are difficult to date. Two un-urned cremation burials were recovered from Biddenham Loop (Luke 2008, 143). They were located *c* 20m from the settlement. Un-urned Iron Age cremations have also been found in the ring ditch of a Bronze-Age barrow at Broom (Cooper and Edmonds 2007).

No burials of middle or late Iron Age date were identified, but disarticulated remains were recovered from non-funerary features at Site 4 (Trench 54) and Site 5. The bones comprised three incomplete adult femora and were in both instances associated with evidence for domestic settlement; the bone from Site 4 (Trench 54) came from an enclosure ditch and those from Site 5 from a pit and a possible roundhouse gully. The presence of isolated, disarticulated human bones within settlement-related features dating to the Iron Age is far from uncommon and has been discussed by numerous authors (eg Cunliffe 2005, 543; Whimster 1981; Wilson 1981; Wait 1985). An explanation that may

account for the frequent presence of disarticulated and fragmentary human bones within occupation deposits, is that the dead may have been exposed rather than buried (Cunliffe 2005, 554; Wilson 1981, 148). Bones may then have been incorporated into rubbish deposits either accidentally (either having washed into them, or being deposited by scavengers), or as part of a deliberate, secondary burial rite. The latter is perhaps more likely given the quantity known and the apparently formal placement of some of the bones within the features. Wait (1985, 117) suggested that the presence of single bones, usually with no cut marks or similar evidence for deliberate dismemberment, may be evidence for some form of secondary manipulation of the corpse after the flesh had decomposed.

The presence of only femora in the current assemblage may represent deliberate cultural selection of elements for burial. Wilson (1981, 150) states that long bones are usually the most 'representative' of the skeleton. It should also be remembered, however, that these bones, particularly femora, are robust, and may have survived preferentially over more fragile elements such as ribs and vertebrae. It is also possible that skulls and long-bone fragments tend to be reported with greater frequency than other isolated skeletal elements because they are more robust and are often more easily identified (Whimster 1981, 183). In a number of instances, these bones were buried in apparently formal votive contexts: at Broadstairs, Kent, for example, arm and leg bones, and a number of skulls, had been carefully deposited in a number of shallow chalk-cut depressions (Hurd 1909, 427-435).

Evidence for formal burial reappears in the early Roman period, with the small cremation cemetery at Site 3. All the remains were of adults, but only a single young female could be sexed. There is some evidence from this group that the buried remains did not include all of the cremated material from the pyre. The weights of the cremation burials ranged from 208.4-520.7g and these fall short of the average weight of an entire cremated adult skeleton, which is typically 1000-3600g (McKinley 2000, 404). This would suggest that the entire individual was not present in the urn. This may in some part be due to later truncation by ploughing, as the cinerary urns in burials 3031 and 3050 were noted to have some damage. However, commonly there is only a token amount of the individual buried in the urn. The identified elements for each of the cremated bone deposits indicate that there appears to have been collection of all parts of the skeleton, with the exception of teeth and small bones, which were represented only by a single tooth root from burial 104802 and one distal phalanx from the same burial. Body part collection appears then to represent a token amount from each body, with larger elements preferred, probably due to ease of identification.

Infant burials such as the early Roman example at Site 2 are frequently found in and around settlement areas throughout the Iron Age and Roman

period (Pearce 1999, 155). At Kempston neonates were associated with Romano-British enclosure L11 and structure G4004 (Dawson 2004, 187) and infants under six months of age were recovered from the Roman villa at Totternhoe (Jones 1992, 92). It has been suggested that infants lacked the social persona that would entitle them to the burial rites that were accorded to other members of the community (Esmond Cleary 2000, 135).

The only inhumation burials were the three late Roman graves at Site 7.

These burials are typical of late Roman rural areas. Such small groupings close to enclosure ditches are a common occurrence on sites in southern England (Pearce 1999). A similar situation was recorded at Marsh Leys Farm, where two burials lay close to Farmstead 4 and one near Farmstead 5 (Luke 2011, 159).