

The late Roman cemetery at Lankhills, Winchester

Excavations 2000-2005

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Front Cover: Photograph of crossbow brooch from grave 1846

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Summary

Excavations were carried out from 2000-2005 on part of the major late Roman cemetery at Lankhills, Winchester, a site already well-known from excavation carried out in 1967-1972 by Giles Clarke, which had examined a total of 444 inhumation and seven cremation graves. The new excavations, undertaken by Oxford Archaeology (OA) on behalf of Hampshire County Council, revealed a further 307 inhumation graves (plus six more partly-excavated previously) and 25 more cremation burials. The latter included seven burials of *bustum*-type, unusual in a late Roman context. The northern boundary of the cemetery was identified. Most burials were aligned roughly west-east in relation to this boundary or perpendicular to a north-south boundary at the eastern margin of the excavation. Further west an approximate WSW-ENE alignment was more common, relating to the line of the Winchester-Cirencester road lying beyond the western margin of the site. Localised areas of intercutting pits associated with cremation burials formed early 4th-century foci for continued intensive activity within the northern part of the site. Burials, as in the earlier excavation, were mostly in wooden coffins and were much more commonly provided with nailed footwear and other grave goods than is usual in late Romano-British urban cemeteries. Pottery vessels were found in 39 inhumation graves and coins in 28 graves. Other finds included combs, spindle whorls, bracelets, rings, beads, and a pair of shears. A number of age/gender associations were apparent; jewellery was often associated with adolescents and young women and spindle whorls with older women, for example. A further six crossbow brooches, one from a cremation burial, were found, to add to the eight from earlier work. These were almost invariably associated with elements of belt equipment (and the latter often with knives) and indicate an unparalleled official/military element within the cemetery population, particularly from the middle of the 4th century. The most spectacular individual burial contained a gilded and inscribed crossbow brooch, a silver gilt belt fitting and decorated spurs, a unique assemblage for Roman Britain.

The human remains indicate a generally quite healthy population with reasonable life expectancy, a number of individuals being assigned to a '60+ years' age bracket. Neonates and infants were

present but, as usual, only in small numbers. Analysis of carbon and nitrogen isotopes suggests that many individuals enjoyed a relatively mixed diet. Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis was carried out on 40 individuals to provide a wide-ranging assessment of geographical origin, particularly important in the light of controversial claims by Clarke to have identified intrusive groups on the basis of aspects of their grave assemblages. The analysis revealed diverse origins for the sampled individuals, with as many as 11 perhaps having been born outside Britain. Only one of these correlated fairly closely with the suggested area of origin of Clarke's principal intrusive group in Pannonia. Most of the 'foreigners' were of unspecific but broadly western European origin, but three may have come from the Mediterranean area, possibly even from North Africa. There was an almost complete lack of correlation between non-British isotopic origin and 'intrusive' suites of grave goods.

Use of the cemetery probably commenced early in the 4th century and continued at least to the end of the century, but an attempt to use radiocarbon to clarify the date of very late burials (including some with associated coins dated after AD 388) produced problematic results and the degree of use of the cemetery after AD 400 remains uncertain. Some chronological trends are apparent, however. Burials of the official/military group were dated after *c* AD 350, and the majority of the incomers identified by isotope analysis (including those identified in an earlier study) were also of this date. While burials with pottery were more common in the first half of the 4th century the range of grave goods deposited seems to have expanded later. Very late 4th-century burials in the north-west corner of the site included a few richly furnished north-south aligned graves. Isotope evidence suggests some spatial separation of two non-local groups (broadly western- and central-European), respectively in the northern and southern parts of the cemetery area, but such hints of differentiation within the burial population are rare and their significance is debatable. The implications for the cemetery population of the possible identification of Winchester as the location of an Imperial weaving shop (*gynaecium*) are explored. Such a presence might account for the appearance of the official/military community, but this can be no more than a tentative suggestion.

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