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A Roman Pipe-burial from Caerleon, Monmouthshire

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IN May 1927 Mr. J. R. Gabriel, of Caerleon, drew my attention to a Roman burial which had just been discovered during building operations in the village of Ultra Pontem, the bridge-head suburb of Caerleon on the southern bank of the Usk. The eastern edge of this village has long been known to impinge upon an extensive Roman cemetery, and fragments of Roman tombstones are still found here from time to time. The new discovery was made some 60 yards east of Yew Tree House and 550 yards east-south-east of the south-east end of the bridge (Ordnance Survey 6-inch map, Mon. XXIX, S.W.), during the digging of a cess-pit for bungalows then under construction on the hill-side south of the Bulmore Road. At a depth of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet the southern side of the pit was found to consist largely of a vertical slab of stone, which, as the digging proceeded, fell downwards and disclosed a stone cist containing a lead canister (figs. 1 and 3). The cist and its contents were then left in position until Mr. Gabriel and I had seen and recorded them, and with the consent of the owner of the property (Mrs. Lewis), who rendered every assistance, both cist and canister were removed to the Caerleon Museum.

The cist was floored with a large flat slab, above which, to a height of a foot, was a packing of rammed earth containing fragments of brick, roofing-tile, and charcoal—perhaps some of the debris of the pyre. On this packing stood the canister, which is $18\frac{1}{2}$ inches high and 15 inches in diameter. It is decorated with three horizontal bands of the normal astragalus

or reel-pattern, and the zone between the two upper bands was divided into three panels by means of flat vertical mouldings. Within the cist were found cremated bones, which were submitted by Mr. Gabriel to Sir Arthur Keith, F.R.S., who has very kindly reported as follows:

‘Amongst the contents of the urn I can trace parts of only one individual, apparently a man—so I judge from the largeness of the fragments; and, as the sutures of the skull are partly closed, at least over 35 years of age. The cremation was imperfectly done, the bones being less reduced than usual.’

Thus far the burial is of normal type. The leaden lid of the canister, however, presents a somewhat unusual feature; to it is attached a leaden pipe, which thus communicates with the interior of the vessel. This pipe has a diameter of $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches and a present length of 3 feet 3 inches, but the upper end is jagged and evidently incomplete. The pipe was carried upwards between the cover-slab and the south wall of the cist, the cover-slab being roughly shaped to admit it. The upper end of the pipe was found at a depth of about a foot beneath the present surface, but to this depth the soil was merely surface-mould, and there is no doubt that the pipe originally reached the open air.

Before discussing this feature it may be noted that the whole burial had been inserted in the bottom of a wide pit dug for the purpose (fig. 3), and that in the filling thrown into the pit on the completion of the burial was a fragment of Samian of form 31 and another of form 37 with decoration of c. A.D. 110–140.¹ The evidence does not carry us very far, but indicates

¹ Mr. T. Davies Pryce kindly supplies the following commentary on the two sherds:

(i) Form 37. The glaze is fairly good, but worn. The two compartments are divided by a wavy line ending in a spiral bud or spike. The wavy line is not uncommon in the period Trajan-Hadrian, but is relatively infrequent in Hadrian-Antonine times. *Figure to r. with ‘winged’ boots*; almost certainly the Warrior (Déchelette 117, Lezoux; compare also D. 110, Libertus). *Horizontally arranged, centrally constricted leaf-ornament*. I cannot find an exact parallel, but this type of ornament is found from Flavian to Antonine times (cf. Oswald and Pryce, *Terra Sigillata*, vi, 11, OF COTOI Wroxeter; Knorr, *Töpfer und Fabriken . . . des ersten Jahrhunderts*, 1919, 27, OF COTOI; Knorr, *Rottweil*, 1912, xix, 1, 2; *Brit. Mus. Cat. of Rom. Pottery*, 1031, Doeccus of Lezoux). The Caerleon leaf is, I think, more nearly related to the South Gaulish types than to the Antonine ones. On this account I should hesitate to place the fragment later than, say, about A.D. 120. The Libertus type of Warrior is also consistent with this dating.

(ii) Form 31. I have the greatest difficulty in diagnosing the date of these plate-fragments. The heavy foot-stand occurs both early (cf. Wheeler, *The Roman Fort near Brecon*, S. 6, OF PRIM1) and late; so also the rouletting of

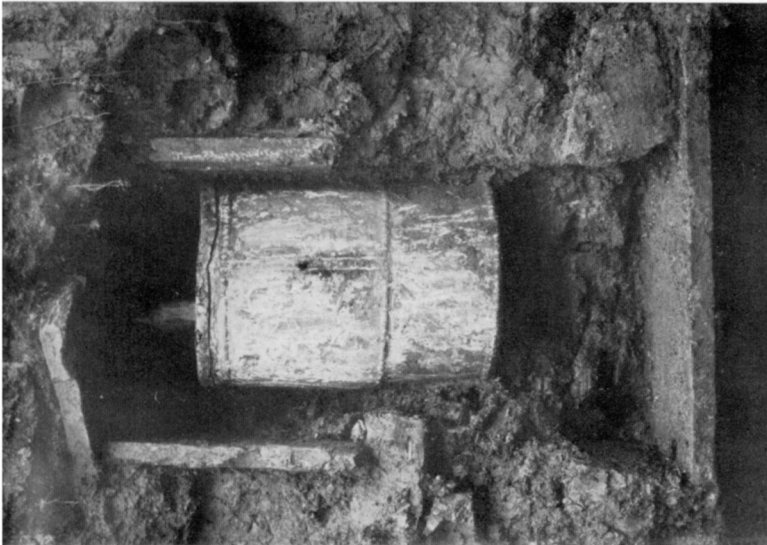


FIG. 1. The Caerleon pipe-burial

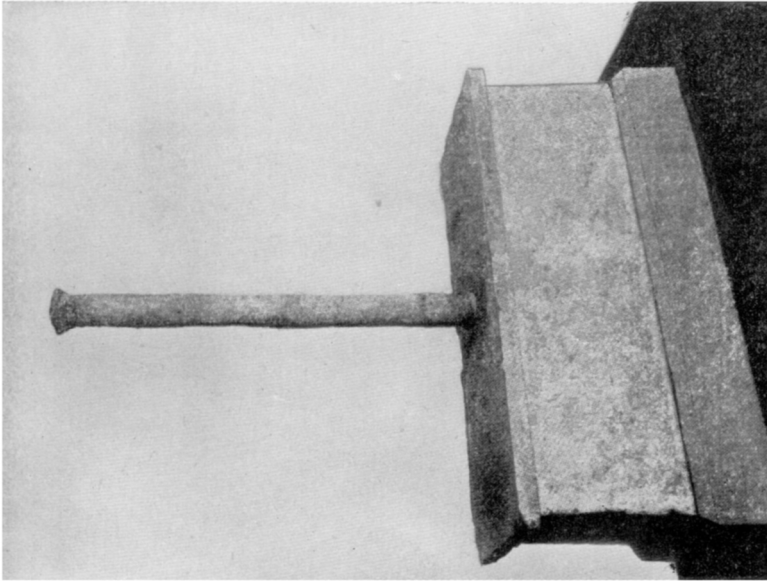


FIG. 2. Pipe-burial from Faleroni, Italy

The cist is 1.49 m. long.
(From *Notizie degli Scavi*, 1921)

that the burial is not likely to be earlier than the time of Hadrian.

For the distinctive feature of the burial—the pipe—only one definite analogy seems to be forthcoming in Britain. This is

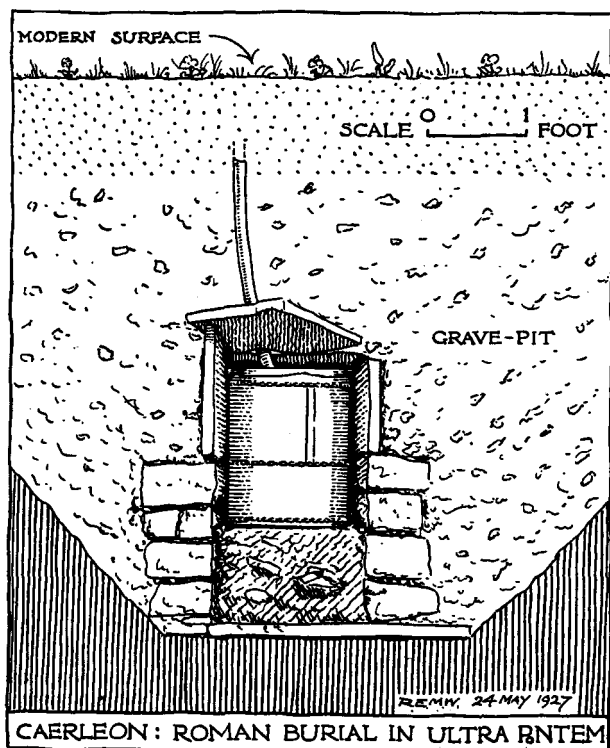


FIG. 3.

a leaden coffin found in Creffield Road, Colchester, in 1887, and now in the Colchester Museum. Near one end of the coffin-lid a lead pipe, of which a length of about 3 feet remains, communicated with the interior, presumably but not certainly above the face of the dead (fig. 4).¹

the basal interior. The plate had evidently no very pronounced internal convexity of the base, as in the dish-like type of 31 (Ludowici Sb; Oswald and Pryce, xlvii, 3). On the other hand the rouletting is of the coarse second-century class. For these reasons I am inclined to place the plate mid-way between the well-known large plates with rouletted basal interiors, of the first century, and the later examples of form 31 with rouletted interiors, of the second century.

Let us say 'Trajan-Hadrian' for both pieces.

¹ *Essex Arch. Soc. Trans.*, N.S., iii, 273. I am greatly indebted to Mr. M. R. Hull, Curator of the Colchester and Essex Museum at Colchester, for preparing

It is of interest to note that the two British examples of the pipe-attachment illustrate the use of this feature both for cremation and for inhumation burials. A similar continuity of usage is represented by the few recorded analogies from the Continent. The general principle of *accessibility* to the tomb is observed there not infrequently; for instance, in the neighbourhood of Lyon many cremation-burials had covers flush with the original surface, where they were marked by up-standing cones, grooved spirally and painted red, perhaps to represent flames.¹ In order to pour libations into the tomb it was thus necessary merely to remove the projecting cone and the cover. There are, however, a few examples which have a closer affinity with the Caerleon type. Thus in the region of Poitiers the Père de la Croix has observed several examples of earthenware pipes used as a means of communication between the Roman tomb and the surface of the ground.² At Syracuse also the grave of a child (a burial by inhumation) was connected with the surface by a vertical earthenware pipe, sealed by a movable stopper of stone (fig. 5).³ Closer still to the Caerleon example is a burial from Falerone (the old Falerio) in Italy, where a small stone sarcophagus, containing a cremation-burial, glass vessels, ornaments, and a worn coin of Gallienus, carries on the centre of its lid a vertical leaden pipe (fig. 2).⁴ Other instances occur at Pompeii.

Further research would doubtless extend these analogies from

the new drawings of the coffin and the vessels which it contained—the latter here illustrated for the first time. The neck of the glass phial is scarcely datable, but the pot, of grey ware with a heavy, overhanging rim, is a characteristic Colchester type which begins shortly after the middle of the first century and lasts on until the latter part of the Antonine period. The later examples are somewhat slimmer than the earlier ones; the present example should not be very much later than c. A. D. 150 and suggests an unusually early date for the burial, interment by inhumation being rare before A. D. 180–200.

¹ A. Allmer, *Découverte de monuments funéraires au quartier de Trion*; A. Steyerd, *Histoire de Lyon*, i, 351; E. Espérandieu, *Bas-reliefs . . . de la Gaule romaine*, iii, p. 40, no. 1797. More than thirty of these cones are preserved in the museum at Lyon.

² E. Linckenheld, *Les stèles funéraires en forme de maison chez les Médiomatriques et en Gaule* (Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Univ. de Strasbourg, fasc. 38. Paris, Soc. d'Édition: Les Belles-Lettres; Oxford, Univ. Press, 1927), 129, citing Coutil, *Mém. Soc. Préhist. Française*, iv, 1919; and 'Notes archéologiques' in *Bull. Soc. Antiq. Ouest*, 1917 and 1919. I am indebted to Miss M. V. Taylor for this reference.

³ *Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei: Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità*, 1913, 273.

⁴ *Ib.*, 1921, 191; hence T. Ashby, *Times Literary Supplement*, Dec. 21, 1922, 858, col. i. I am indebted to Professor R. C. Bosanquet for this reference. Incidentally, the occurrence of a cremation-burial at the end of the third century is noteworthy.

the classical world. More light, however, is thrown upon the purpose of the pipe by the observant traveller Pausanias who, writing in the second century A. D., records that at Tronis in

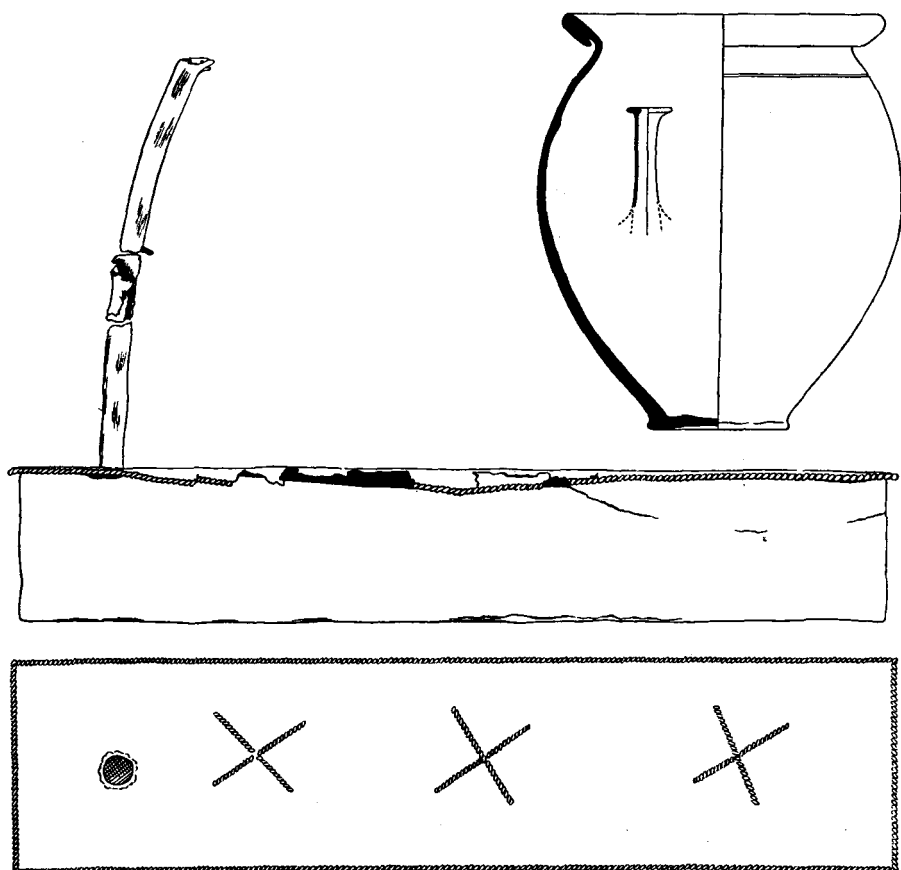


FIG. 4. Lead coffin and contents, found in Colchester
(coffin $\frac{1}{2}$ urn and glass bottle-neck $\frac{1}{4}$)

Phocis the Phocians every day brought victims to the tomb of the hero Xanthippus and poured the blood 'through a hole into the grave'.¹ The Phocian ceremony at once confirms the obvious explanation of the Caerleon pipe; but the value of the statement of Pausanias lies not least in that it provides his editor, Sir James Frazer, with an opportunity for one of his illuminating comments.² After noting the frequency of references to the offering of blood to the dead—as in the *Heracleidae* of Euripides, 'But suffer them not to let libations

¹ iv, 10.

² J. G. Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, v, 227.

or blood trickle into my grave'—Sir James Frazer adds: 'But the present passage of Pausanias is the only one, so far as I know, in ancient literature, which distinctly speaks of a hole carried right through into the grave, so that the libations

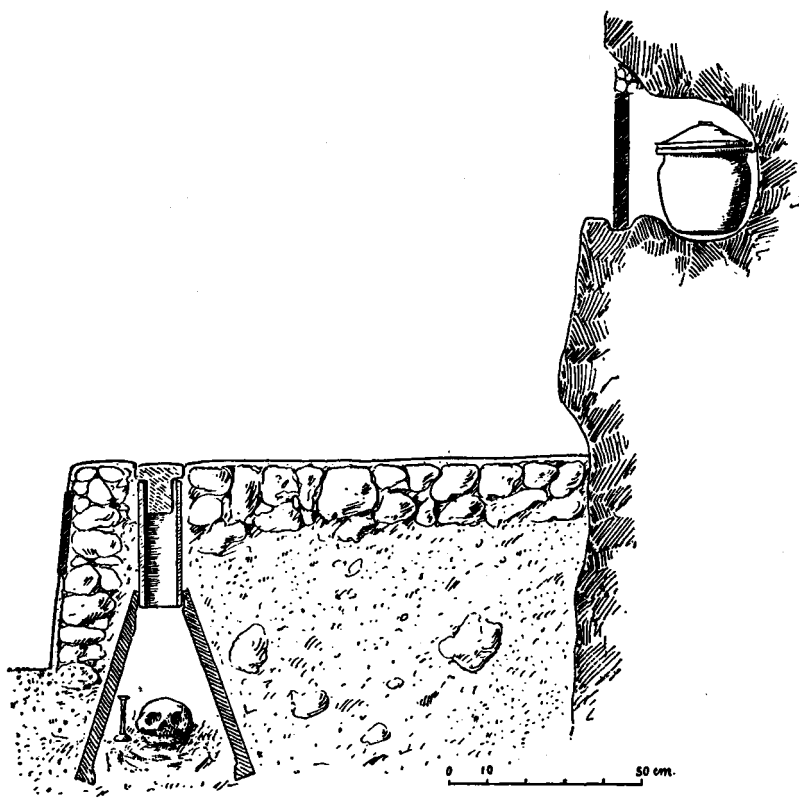


FIG. 5. Pipe-burial at Syracuse, Sicily
(from *Notizie degli Scavi*, 1913)

poured down it could reach the bones or the ashes of the dead. The hole, too, seems to have been not a temporary one made for the occasion but a permanent one. This is implied by the expression used by Pausanias (*ὀπή*, not *βόθρος* or *ὄρυγμα*); and it is what we should expect, since the offerings appear to have been made daily. Such a permanent opening into the grave, to be used for passing offerings in, has been found in the great barrow on the peninsula of Tamar in the south of Russia. . . . Excavations made in the barrow in 1864 brought to light two sepulchral chambers and a funnel-shaped aperture shut with a stone and leading down to a place enclosed with tiles, on which

it appears that a meal had been offered to the dead. . . . A very similar arrangement has recently been discovered in two Roman cemeteries near Carthage. . . . Each tomb encloses one or more urns containing calcined bones. Each urn is covered with a saucer, in the middle of which there is a hole ; and this hole communicates with the exterior of the tomb by means of an earthenware tube placed either upright so as to come out at the top of the tomb, or slanting so as to come out at one of the sides. Thus libations poured into the tube ran down into the urn. . . . At Mycenae the funnel-shaped aperture in the round altar which was found over one of the graves was probably used for the purpose of pouring blood down into the grave. . . . These facts bring vividly before us the belief of the Greeks and Romans that the souls of the dead still lived and retained their bodily appetites in the tomb. The same primitive belief has led to similar practices in many parts of the world.' Sir James proceeds to cite widely-spread analogies from modern Africa, in several of which a funnel, generally of bamboo, communicates with the grave and carries libations to the dead. India, East Russia, the Tartars, and a South Sea Island all provide more or less approximate parallels. We may perhaps add the 'port-hole' through which offerings were passed to the image of the dead enshrined in the Egyptian *mastaba*, the similar opening which is found in the entrance-slabs of megalithic tombs from Great Britain to India, and the hole which occurs occasionally even in the cover-slabs of prehistoric cist-burials.¹

But the most entertaining comment is supplied to me by Mrs. R. C. Bosanquet from an English north-country song, which begins :

Lavender 's blue,
Lavender 's green,
When I am king
You shall be queen,

and ends with the verses :

If you should die,
As it may hap,
Then you shall lie
Under the tap.
I'll tell you why,
I'll tell you why—
That you may drink
When you are dry.

¹ A. J. Evans, *Archaeologia*, lii, 326.