

AN EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT COLCHESTER?

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EXCAVATIONS OF ROMAN AND LATER CEMETERIES, CHURCHES AND MONASTIC SITES IN COLCHESTER, 1971-88. By NINA CRUMMY, PHILIP CRUMMY and CARL CROSSAN. ISBN 1-897719-01-9. Pp. 298, Illus. 172, Fiche 9. Colchester Archaeological Report no. 9, 1993. Price: not stated.

The bulk of this important volume is concerned with the definitive reports on the excavation of the Butt Road Roman cemetery (pp. 4-163) and an adjacent building identified as an early Christian church (pp. 164-91). These reports are accompanied by a discussion of the evidence for Christianity at these sites by Dorothy Watts (pp. 192-202). The remainder of the volume presents reports on three other excavation sites (at St John's Abbey, Maldon Road, and Crouch Street) where evidence of medieval ecclesiastical sites and cemeteries were found in addition to Roman graves. Finally, the book contains a broader discussion of the cemeteries of Roman Colchester (pp. 257-75) which draws heavily on the late M. R. Hull's never-completed inventory of graves.

In view of the importance of the information from the Butt Road sites for any debate about Christianity in later Roman Britain I will spend most of this review considering these excavations. This should not be taken to detract from the importance of the other contents of the book which add significantly to our developing knowledge of the archaeology of Colchester.

The authors and the Colchester Archaeological Trust are to be congratulated as the whole volume is very well presented and carefully thought out, maintaining the high standards already set in this series. I was particularly pleased by the bold decision to include all the grave plans together with brief text descriptions in the microfiche. Although not many people will regularly refer to these, their publication provides an essential research tool for the future. The format adopted for the *Colchester Archaeological Reports* series means that the principal classes of finds are to be published in separate monographs which will need to be consulted by any serious researcher. The pottery and glass vessels from graves are also discussed in this volume, but for the small finds researchers will need access to a copy of *Colchester Archaeological Reports 2*. Although I understand this decision, it does make viewing the contents of the few well furnished graves difficult, especially for those overseas scholars who will undoubtedly wish to use the Butt Road report. These researchers will, however, be delighted to find full accounts of the bones from each of the graves although the soil conditions on the site meant that many of the bodies were poorly preserved and difficult to identify. The careful analysis of the non-metrical attributes of the human skeletons provides some very clear indications of probable family groupings within the cemetery. I was particularly pleased to see the way in which the authors had consistently attempted to interpret these data in relation to the overall organization of the cemetery. Romano-British cemetery studies remain in their infancy and this volume makes a very important contribution in providing a detailed account of over 700 graves from a *Colonia*. It is the scarcity of comparable evidence from elsewhere published to an equal standard which presents the main problem in evaluating some of the interpretations offered here.

The sequence at Butt Road has two principal periods. From the first to the late third century or early fourth century the site was exploited for a variety of purposes typical of those found around the margins of a town. Burial began during the third century in a series of plots which were defined by ditches. In the late third to early fourth century a more organized inhumation cemetery with north-south graves became established. In the second period this graveyard was developed on a much larger scale with a change in the grave orientation to east-west. This change is interpreted as resulting from the introduction of Christianity, a view supported by the construction at about the same date (c. A.D. 330) of a basilica on the same orientation which is interpreted as a Christian church. It is a pity that there is no single detailed plan which enables the reader to relate this basilica to the whole cemetery and its broader context.

Few of the burials were furnished with grave goods and, in combination with the general absence of intercutting graves, this has made it very difficult to phase or date the development of the site. There can be no doubt from the published finds analyses (pp. 129-56; Tables 2.66-67) that the east-west graves start in the fourth century; to be more precise is very difficult. The authors make a

fundamental decision in their interpretation: they assume that the change in cemetery alignment followed the construction of the basilica, which they interpret as a Christian church (pp. 59; 159–62). This allows them to date the rapid change to an east–west alignment to c. A.D. 330 (but see below). The date of the last burials in the cemetery is also difficult to assess in the absence of grave goods. Although the latest objects date a few graves to after A.D. 380 they are too few to allow any absolute assessment of the date of the latest burials.

Throughout the report the identification of the site as Christian is central to the interpretation. The case for this is summarized by Dorothy Watts (pp. 192–202) but I am not convinced by her arguments and believe that throughout the volume the Christian explanation has been presented with too much certainty. There is significant room for debate about these conclusions, so I would like to raise a few of the principal issues, not as criticisms but rather as points for debate. My main worries concern three aspects of the analysis: the identification of the basilica as a church, the implications drawn from the grave orientation, and the other criteria used in the identification of burials as Christian.

The basilica had been previously examined by William Wire in the nineteenth century and M. R. Hull in 1935. As a result of these excavations, and damage caused by other activities, the site was poorly preserved. It consisted of a rectangular stone-founded structure c. 18 m long by c. 7.5 m wide, orientated at about 7° from a true east–west alignment. At its east end was an apse with a radius of c. 1.5 m. Along its length were pairs of aisle posts set c. 1.8 m in from the walls. At c. 9 m from the east end a set of transverse post holes is interpreted as a screen. Clustered near the centre line of the building at its eastern end were three probable graves, whilst a deep pit, excavated by Hull, lay to their south in the aisle. A timber building with traces of use for cooking stood just to the west of the basilica. Its north wall was aligned with the axis of the basilica.

Past disturbance of the site has made interpretation difficult. A *terminus post quem* for the construction is provided by mid-second- to third-century pottery from a dump beneath the north wall, but the principal dating comes from the unusually large assemblage of 515 coins found on the site. On the basis of his analysis of these coins Davies argues that major activity began after A.D. 330 (p. 182). As the coins were not stratified beneath the building this date does not tell us when it was built. It only identifies a major phase of coin loss, which may result from abnormal usage or might equally suggest the presence of a dispersed hoard. As Davies points out, there is an unusually low representation of coinage of A.D. 259–94, but given that coinage of the periods A.D. 294–317 and 317–30 is generally scarce (Reece 1987, fig. 5.2) the proportion of coins of these periods (0.8 and 2.2 per cent respectively; microfiche p. 990) does not seem unduly low, especially as the percentage values are depressed by the abnormal numbers of later coins. On these grounds, and knowing that the coin list represents essentially unstratified material, I must question its use to provide a firm date of A.D. 330 for the construction of the basilica (p. 171) and, by extension, the establishment of the east–west orientated cemetery (p. 159). We can only legitimately say that activity in this area increased sometime after A.D. 294.

There is little evidence for the structural development of the building although it is clear that the west wall had been rebuilt at some stage (p. 166 and fig. 3.5). Less clear is the evidence used to support the idea that the apse was secondary. There is a straight joint between the apse and east wall at foundation level, however, both walls were of similar build and there appears no evidence for the expected foundation of the east wall which would have continued across the apse if there had been a primary rectangular building (p. 166). I can see no reason why the straight joint does not simply represent a constructional phase, with the apse having been bonded to the flanking walls above foundation level. I am equally unconvinced by the conjectured development of the building (fig. 3.24) which envisages the aisle posts having been extended to the western half of the building in a secondary phase. Since aisle posts have a structural function in supporting a roof they must have been needed along the whole length from the outset. Their position, aligned with the sides of the apse, also suggests that the whole building was designed and built as a single, carefully planned entity. Taken with the dating suggested above, this alternative interpretation casts doubt on its identification as a church since it would be entirely pre-Constantinian.

Evidence for the use of the building as a church is limited. Basilicas were built as Christian churches after 313, but the structural form was in common use in the Empire for a variety of purposes

so evidence aside from the plan needs to be produced to support the Christian interpretation. The only distinctive feature of many early churches was the presence of a lobby or *narthex* at the end furthest from the altar in which unbaptized converts could stand to observe services. Such a feature appears absent from this building.

The finds from the basilica exhibit three distinctive features. There was a large coin assemblage as already discussed, an unusual number of large chicken carcasses which were apparently butchered and consumed on site (pp. 178–79), and an odd group of objects recovered by Hull from the pit in the south aisle at the east end (pp. 175–76; Hull 1958, 247, fig. 111). These were interpreted by Hull as votive and included a human skull and thigh-bone, an iron knife and parts of two iron vessels (a ‘frying pan’ and a bowl). The re-evaluation of the pit in this book convincingly demonstrates that the pit had been backfilled at a late date, perhaps after the building had become derelict. They also show that some of the pit’s contents had derived from the surrounding earth, but this does not seem to me to undermine Hull’s view that the pit group had religious characteristics. There were also three probable graves whose positions leave little doubt that they were associated with the basilica; the suggestion that the earliest of them may predate it is tenuous (p. 173) and is based solely on its alignment in relation to the structure. None of these characteristics need be associated with Christianity and, indeed, a pagan context is surely more likely. I would thus see the basilica as a funerary banqueting hall (as noted on p. 187) used after A.D. 294 and without Christian associations. The absence of known parallels is largely a result of our general failure to excavate Roman cemeteries.

Another piece of evidence used in the identification of the building as a church is its east–west orientation (p. 199) and this too is invoked to support the identification of the cemetery as Christian (p. 193). This argument raises two problems, one specific, the other more general. In looking at the Butt Road site we should note three sets of alignments, that of the basilica (fig. 3.3), those of the Period 2 graves (fig. 2.21), and that of the projected Roman road (fig. 2.1, argued to be reflected in the ditch AF 136, p. 9 and fig. 2.2). Each of these is broadly aligned east–west, although we may observe how the alignment of the Period 2 graves drifts away from the east–west alignment with increasing distance from the road (fig. 2.21). The report takes the view (p. 59) that the construction of the basilica set the alignment for the cemetery, but the reverse may equally be true. It is surely even more likely that both the graves and the building were set out in relation to the local topography as created by the road which had been in existence since Period 1. This hypothesis receives some support from both the drift in grave alignment already noted, and the way in which the Period 1 graves had also been aligned parallel with topographic features, in this case the different plot boundary ditches (fig. 2.2). Whilst this does not explain the change of grave orientation in Period 2, it does remove any necessary causal link between the alignment of basilica and graves. It also loosens the peg on which the whole chronology of the site has been hung. The Period 2 cemetery can only strictly be dated to after the beginning of the fourth century (for *termini post quos* see Table 2.16, p. 54).

It might still be argued that the change from a north–south to an east–west grave orientation is significant and distinctively Christian (p. 192), but there is little firm evidence for or against this suggestion despite the authors’ belief that it is supported by other features of the site (pp. 192–98). It is important to note that there is more widespread evidence for a change in fashion towards east–west grave orientation during the early fourth century (Clarke 1979, 352) and supposedly Christian characteristics are not found at all the cemeteries which share this pattern. Lankhills, Winchester, for instance has many well-furnished east–west graves in a pagan tradition (MacDonald in Clarke 1979, 425). The change towards poorly furnished east–west burial (like the earlier shift from cremation to inhumation) is not understood, and the idea that it was simply a result of Christian influence risks obstructing a fuller understanding of the complexities of later Roman burial practice. Put simply, if all east–west burials in the fourth century were Christians, where have all the pagans gone?

Other features identified as Christian in the cemetery are equally debatable and some of the points made by Watts seem to be based on special pleading. The lead coffin (p. 192) is not self-evidently Christian in its iconography, and given the variability of rite in later Roman cemeteries the absence of disturbed graves and of features like decapitated and flexed burials may be the result of a variety of selection procedures other than religion. The presence of ‘plaster’ burials is equally ambiguous, and the argument that in Britain this tradition spread from Christians to pagans (p. 195) is profoundly

unconvincing. Equally the significance of the neonatal burials within the Period 2 cemetery remains uncertain. It is argued that they are a Christian characteristic, but they were also found in the Period 1 cemetery (p. 16 *contra* Watts p. 195).

My point is that the interpretation of this cemetery and other later Roman cemeteries is not a straightforward matter as we are at a very early stage in characterizing later Roman burial practice in Britain. There was a range of rites (now catalogued by Philpott 1991) and trying to shoehorn the evidence of one site into a simple category like Christian does no justice to the evidence. Given the excellent quality of the work published in this volume it will not be difficult for researchers to move behind the conclusions to quarry new and interesting interpretations of this fascinating site. My criticisms of the authors' interpretations are insignificant in relation to the quality of the evidence they have presented for us.

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