



Spring 2019

Learning from the Dead: How Burial Practices in Roman Britain Reflect Changes in Belief and Society

Samuel F. Engel
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship

 Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#), and the [European History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Engel, Samuel F, "Learning from the Dead: How Burial Practices in Roman Britain Reflect Changes in Belief and Society" (2019).
Student Publications. 710.

https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/710

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/710

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Learning from the Dead: How Burial Practices in Roman Britain Reflect Changes in Belief and Society

Abstract

This paper begins by examining the burial traditions of the Iron age Britons and Classical Romans to see how these practices reflect their societal values and belief systems. The funerary methods of both the Britons and Romans are then analyzed following the Roman occupation of Britain in 43 AD to see how these practices changed once the two groups came into contact with each other. The findings show that rather than Romanization, there is a hybridization of burial practices which incorporated and reflect both Roman and British beliefs and values.

Keywords

Roman Britain, Burial, Cremation, Iron Age Briton, Inhumation

Disciplines

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology | European History

Comments

Written for ANTH 400: Anthropology Capstone

How Burial Practices Reflect Societal Change in Roman Britain

The manner in which groups of people bury their dead and the rituals pertaining to these traditions reflect larger belief systems within their society. Shifts in mortuary practices elude to wider societal changes occurring within the living communities. I will be examining the burial practices of Iron age Britons (8th Century BC until the 1st Century AD), Classical Romans (2nd Century BC until the 3rd Century AD), and Roman Britons (1st Century AD until the 4th Century AD). It is important to understand the ritualistic significance of the funerary systems of the Iron age Britons to better discern the differences that are seen once the Romans occupy the island. I next look into the evidence of burial methods during the Roman occupation which began with the invasion of 43 AD under Emperor Claudius and culminated with incorporation of Britain into the Roman empire as a province. Examining how the dead were buried after the conquest of a foreign force elucidates the impacts on the indigenous population's own beliefs and funerary practices.

By examining these time periods, primarily using archaeological evidence and ancient written sources to understand the contemporary thoughts regarding death, there should be distinct changes over the course of time. The specific customs of burial, such as cremation and inclusion of certain grave goods is highly significant in the Roman world. The adoption of these traditions in Britain shows the shifting changes in society as tribal Britain became part of an empire that placed heavy emphasis on conforming to the ideas of the centralized state. The Roman empire was multiethnic and its army was comprised of many soldiers from the provinces, as well as Rome itself. Due to this, one

may find burial rites that originated elsewhere within the empire which appear as outliers, further increasing the diversity of funerary methods. My goal is not to show or prove Romanization being reflected in funerary practices, but rather to explore the possibility of combined traditions that form hybridized mortuary rites based on the changing beliefs and ideals of the native Britons and the invading Romans as their cultures were assimilated together.

Since this research encompasses several centuries, focusing on three distinct time periods and cultures, there will be three sections of this paper. First, I will examine the burial methods and belief systems of the Iron age Britons which lasted from about the 8th century BC to the first century AD. However, much of the evidence I will be analyzing will come from the mid to later part of the Iron age due to better archaeological evidence and research. Unfortunately, the Britons of this time period did not have a written language so I am unable to use their contemporary sources to try to understand their beliefs regarding death and the afterlife. For this reason, archaeological data and the opinions of professionals will constitute the information that will make up this section.

Second, I will examine Roman funerary practices of cremation and burial. Archaeologists have done extensive research on this topic, which in conjunction with contemporary Roman accounts and memorials will show how the Romans treated their dead, as well as the beliefs they held regarding the afterlife. Since Roman history spans many centuries, I will be examining the late Republican period, from about the turn of the second to the first century BC up through the early empire period in the second century AD, during which Britain becomes fully incorporated within the empire.

Third, I will examine post conquest Britain, starting in 43 AD. Unlike in Rome where there are fairly unified funerary rites, the Roman province of Britain is on the far frontier of the empire so there will be some discrepancies with burials. However, in the long run there should be a clear shift from Iron age practices to ones that at least partially reflect the Roman trends that were predominant within the time period of the conquering army.

Disposal of and Analyzing Human Remains

Before carefully examining the rituals pertaining to the dead, now is a good time to go over the three main disposal methods the people of this study practiced. One of the most common methods is inhumation, which is the basic burial of the body underground, whether that be in a coffin or not. The second, which also was and still is frequently practiced is cremation, the burning of the mortal remains. Cremations can be difficult to study or even discover depending on if the remains were scattered and not placed in an urn. The third practice, which is less frequent, but nonetheless important throughout Iron age Britain, is excarnation. This is the practice of exposing the body to the elements in order to remove the flesh and organs so only the skeleton remains (Merrifield 1987, 59-60). Each of these mortuary methods have their own unique rites and significance within the context of the groups of people who are practicing them.

The study of the dead at first appears to be to only tell us about the deceased, such as their skeleton, or health. In actuality, there is far more to learn about the living and the people who performed the mortuary rites than the deceased themselves. How a body is prepared illuminates the way the survivors view death and what they believe regarding the afterlife. Death is a transition period in almost all cultures, including the

ancient Britons and Romans. The living must perform the correct rituals in order for the dead to be cleansed and able to pass on to the afterlife. The living also face a period of mourning that requires the proper treatment of the deceased in order for them to move on themselves. There is also the element of pollution in which the deceased can both literally and figuratively have negative impacts on the living community. The social structure of the community is effected by a member dying, so the proper steps have to be taken to mend those ties. The dead themselves must also be sent off in the proper manner so that they may reach the afterlife or so that they do not enacted vengeance upon the living. Just like birth, reaching adulthood, and marriage, death is part of a transition in life, in this case from living to dead. Therefore, the rites associated with it are those that have to deal with moving through thresholds and preparing for the person's spirit or soul to move to their next destination (Pearson 2000, 22-24).

Burial and Belief in Ancient Britain

Before delving into the specific details of what constituted the typical mortuary rites associated with Iron age British peoples, it is important to understand that there was no uniform method. There are trends that are overarching throughout the British Isles, however, just like in modern times, there are a multitude of ways to dispose of the dead. This lack of a unified practices is in part due to tribal or regional differences. The societies of early Iron age Britain were largely egalitarian, with communities clustered at hilltop fortresses known as oppida (oppidum singular). Egalitarianism would gradually change around the fifth and fourth centuries to produce warrior elites, but the social structure still was not even close to the hierarchal scale of Rome (Dyer 1997, 130-132).

With this in mind, it is easier to perceive a culture which doesn't place a heavy emphasis on memorialization of the dead.

The Britons of this time period relied on their small communities for survival. There was not the pressure to conform to a central state power like in Rome, so there was a greater sense of individualism, which is reflected in the manner in which the dead were disposed of. Even when examining burials all from within the same region, there are varying methods which were used. A case study of 106 remains found in Wales is an excellent example of the lack of cohesion in burial rites in pre-Roman Britain (Davis 2018). Unfortunately, the soil in Wales isn't conducive to well preserved remains, so compared to other regions in Britain, 106 is a relatively small sample size. Nonetheless, the remains provide an interesting insight into just how many different ways these Iron age people buried their dead and the preferred methods of the time. Forty six of the remains were full inhumations, where the entire body was buried in the ground with purpose. This differs from the twenty one articulated remains in that there doesn't appear to have been clear intent to bury these individuals in a ritualistic manner. An articulated skeleton simply means that the body still had flesh and muscle when the body was buried so the skeleton is in the same position as it was when the person died. These examples lack the characteristics of purposeful burials that the inhumations have, such as intentional positioning of the body in the grave, which I will go over next. The other types of remains were thirteen skulls, or parts of skulls, which is significant due to headhunting and skull veneration among Celtic peoples (Aldhouse-Green 2018, 139). There were eight cases of individual bones and ten examples of cremations. This survey shows the popularity of inhumations in the Western part of Iron age Britain, while

at the same time also including the diversity in which remains be buried after death (Davis 2018, 64-65).

How remains have been laid to rest is imperative to examine because it can provide evidence of rituals that have otherwise been forgotten to history. Location, orientation, and body configuration should be taken into account when the data is present. In the case of the case study above, over half of the remains were excavated from within the settlement boundaries, with another 23% being near the settlement (Davis 2018, 67). This is in stark contrast to the Roman tradition, which will be elaborated on later, who almost never bury their dead within the city walls, but rather in designated cemeteries beyond the area of habitation. Since little is actually known about British beliefs in the Iron age, one has to speculate as to why there is such a high percentage of burials so close to where people live. One possible reasoning for this is the veneration of ancestors, which the Celts are known to have done, specifically with skulls. A deceased ancestor being in close proximity with the living would provide their descendants with a sense of comfort as their ancestor would still play a part of their everyday lives. It is difficult to prove or disprove this due to the lack of information regarding Iron age Celtic religion and beliefs. Despite this, there are other examples of settlements that have been occupied for centuries and only a handful of burials have been found within them. If the favored method was universally to bury remains within settlements, than one would expect to find many more inhumations buried within the boundaries of habitation in other sites. This is just another example of individual communities having their own preferences differing from their neighbors. Iron age burials were highly eclectic and depended on the individual community's predilection.

In order to make a hypothesis for the reasoning of certain burial practices, there needs to be multiple examples of the same archaeological evidence. Following the case study in Wales, there are a few general rules that can be found with the full inhumations. Of the forty six full inhumations, twenty nine were in a crouched, fetal like position. There doesn't appear to be a preference for whether they were laid on their left or right sides. There are an equal number of examples of both positioning. There were also three cases where the deceased were laid flat on their backs in an extended position known as supine, much like in modern times. No remains have been found laying faced down in either crouched or extended positions. The Iron age Britons buried their dead facing upwards, towards the sky and the heavens, rather than facing the earth. Perhaps this was an easier way for the deceased to ascend to the afterlife. Furthermore, a large percentage of the remains were oriented North. The ancient Britons did possess astronomical knowledge, so there is a good chance that the reason the burials faced North is due to some reverence to a god or astronomical belief. Of course there are exceptions, including infants. Infants were buried with their heads facing the South, which may be symbolic of childbirth (Davis 2018, 69-71; Dyer 1990,150). The infant's head is oriented the opposite direction from the mother's, so in death they face the same direction as they would have at birth.

As previously stated, there is no single normative burial practice within the Iron age period in Britain, and individual communities and regions dictated how the dead were buried. One can surmise that along with their varying practices came differing religious beliefs. Unfortunately, for the most part, all we are able to do is speculate as to what their beliefs were by trying to use evidence from certain traditions that are

associated with known beliefs from other Celtic peoples. While there are distinct differences from community to community, it is interesting to see persistence within certain groups when there is sufficient data from over the course of the Iron age occupation. The site of Danebury is one of the best preserved and excavated Iron age site in Britain. It was occupied for roughly five hundred years from the sixth century to the mid first century BC. Throughout those five centuries, the occupants of this hilltop fort preferred single element burials, meaning a single bone. In the case of Danebury and many other sites in Britain, that single bone was primarily skulls or fragments of skulls. Skulls in Celtic cultures held special significance and were often kept as trophies from enemies or as objects of veneration. The skulls at Danebury fit into two categories; complete skulls and incomplete skulls, which have been purposefully been mutilated. The complete skulls were likely from an ancestor or other prominent figure, who's body was left to decay and the skull removed by their surviving kin. The remains were probably on display within homes or in public spaces (Aldhouse-Green 2018, 139). By maintaining the entirety of the physical form of the skull, the ancestor would have been able to keep watchful presence over the living. In a sense, they were still able to participate within the community from beyond the grave. The other category that is even more prominent in Danebury is fragmented skulls. These were scattered throughout the settlement in no particular locations or with a specific purpose. One can interpret the skulls which lack the mandible or frontal bones, which make up the jaw and face, as having been purposefully silenced in death. There are at least seven examples in Danebury which exhibit postmortem mutilations of the skull, further pointing to head hunting and trophy taking in conflicts (Tracey 2012, 368-373).

Despite the examples above, overall, there appears to be far fewer remains from the Iron age than one would expect. A popular explanation is the practice of excarnation/exposure or cremation and the scattering of ashes. The process of excarnation requires the body to be exposed to the elements and scavengers, and is typically placed upon a platform. After the natural decay of the corpse, the bones are collected and either scattered or kept for ritual purposes, as in the case of skulls for veneration. This mortuary practice allows for the body to decay rapidly and for the bones to be easily dispersed after death. It is thought that many of the single element burials are results of such scattering of bones after exposure (Cunliffe 1988, 40-41; Tracey 2018, 373). By physically destroying the body, the spirit is free of its past mortal bindings and able to move on to its next destination, whether that be a form of heaven or reincarnation. Excarnation is difficult to prove and the evidence is circumstantial. However, Iron age settlements and hilltop forts have provided clues in the form of structural evidence of four post holes in rectangle shape. Sometimes referred to as sky burials, excarnation in the ancient Celtic world was performed on an elevated platform. Although there are no ancient sources that survive that depicts this happening in Britain, there are accounts of this practice being performed by other Celtic peoples. The body is placed on a platform where scavenging birds clean the remains. Two classic writers described that by allowing vultures and other birds to consume the flesh of the deceased, the soul of the person was able to go directly to heaven, rather than continue through the cycle of reincarnation. It is not entirely known whether or not all Celtic peoples believed in reincarnation, but it appears that if the Iron age Britons shared aspects of their religions with other Celtic peoples on continental Europe, then it is easy

to hypothesize that they did as well. The Celts of Gaul believed in reincarnation and also shared similar burial practices with their British cousins, so there is a strong likelihood that the Iron age Britons held similar beliefs (Aldhouse-Green 2018, 198-199).

Another interesting method of burial that can be found fairly consistently across Southern Britain, is the phenomenon of pit burials. These pits were originally used as storage for grains and ranged from six to nine feet deep. The way they worked was after being sealed the grain would ferment and harden. However, only the outer layers would rot, rapidly using up the oxygen which became carbon dioxide. The inner grain would remain fresh until ready to be used and once it was removed the pit would fill with garbage. Yet, before the hole had been entirely filled with refuse, a ritual deposit was also placed within the pit. Of the thousands of pits excavated at Danebury, roughly 20% also served as burials for animals and humans. Nothing else about the pits are different in any other way from the ones that do not contain any remains. Both full inhumations and single element burials have been recorded.

These burials were completed with a particular intent, the full meaning of which we will never fully understand. However, there are a few theories which would make sense especially considering the other beliefs the Iron age Britons held. One theory is that those who were buried in the pits stood out in some way, whether that be how they lived their lives or how they died. Unlike many of the other mortuary practices in the region where the remains were scattered, these pit burials show deliberate signs of efforts to keeping the entire body together. Some of the bodies had been placed in a tight crouched position with signs of probable wrapping or even being contained in a bag. By keeping the remains from separating, the individual would not experience

reincarnation like with excarnation. This could be a punishment for criminals or other undesirables, or it could have been a personal choice to not reenter society for some reason. Either way it is apparent that whoever these individuals were, they stood out in some way, whether that be in a positive or negative way. Even though there are numerous examples of this in various settlements, they are not as common as the other methods of disposal (Aldhouse-Green 2018, 199; Tracey 2018, 374).

Another theory regarding pit burials is that the deceased were placed there as offerings to the gods in hopes of a better harvest. They may have been part of a termination ritual, which is held at the end of the pit's usage. One theory is that the storage pits had served their purpose by correctly preserving the grain and the community wanted to make a special offering to the gods in thanks. Another idea is that the grain had all rotted meaning that the gods were displeased with the community, so they had to try to appease them with the body of one of their members. Either way, termination rituals are a sign of a transition and the offering of a human is the most sacred gift to the gods (Merrifield 1987, 48-49). Human sacrifice was not unknown in the Celtic world, however, these burials do not appear to show any signs of violence so it is unlikely that they were victims of human sacrifice. Instead they appear to have been ordinary people who probably died of natural causes. How they lived their lives is unknown to us, they could have been criminals or members of a religious order such as the Druids. Either way, the burial of complete corpses in pits was a purposeful rite that intended to keep the body together in life, as well as in death (Hutton 2013, 197).

The Iron age Britons were a collection of loosely connected tribes who maintained unique cultural practices associated with burial. There are far too many

individual examples of unique practices to go through them all, so the ones that I examined here were well documented. To add further variety to the array of burial practices found in Britain in the pre-Roman era, I will briefly explain a few other culturally distinct mortuary practices studied by archaeologists working in the region. Along the most South Western part of Britain, cyst burials were the most prominent form of internment. Graves were cut from the stone and stone slabs were placed above the grave to form a form of tomb. Just like the in the samples from Wales, which happens to be fairly close in proximity to this region, the deceased were in a fetal position oriented northwards (Dyer 1990, 151).

In northern Britain, near the border between modern day Scotland and England was the Arras culture. Their burial practices were similar to others in the south in that the dead were positioned on their sides in a crouched position, facing to the north. However, these burials stand out from the rest due to the grave goods which accompanied the deceased. There are several examples from the fourth through the second centuries BC of the body being placed between two chariot wheels. In some cases whole chariots were buried with the dead. The individuals were likely part of some kind of warrior or elite class because these burials make up a minority of graves and show signs of wealth. Weapons such as swords and spears, as well as armor have also been frequently found in association with these burials. The chariots may have symbolized the swift transportation of the dead to the afterlife. Its interesting that these graves share more similarities with the Celts of Gaul than they do with the other people of Britain. This could be evidence for migration from continental Europe to Britain. It also

is evidence for a shared belief system between the Celts of Britain and Gaul (Dyer 1990, 151-154).

Roman Beliefs and Burial Practices

The Romans practiced both inhumations and cremations, but the latter was much more common during the period of the late Republic from the first century BC into the early empire up until the third century AD. Fortunately, a plethora of archaeological work has been done regarding Roman burial practices, as well as the survival of primary sources from the Romans themselves. Unlike with the Iron age Britons, we have a better idea of Roman religion and their beliefs regarding the afterlife. We also know that methods of burial were far more homogenous than the practices of Britain.

Memorialization of the dead is very prominent within Roman culture. Grave markers with descriptions of the deceased's life are quite common and among the wealthier elites, grand mausoleums were constructed in Rome to remember the dead. Overtime, the preference shifted from cremations towards inhumations in the third century AD.

This could be due to the increased interest in Greek culture among the elite and emperors. By the time Christianity is spread throughout the empire in the fourth century AD, inhumations became almost the exclusive burial practice in the Western territories.

This section will explore how the Romans perceived death and how their mortuary practices reflect their beliefs (Carroll 2006, 4-8).

Contemporary Romans viewed cremation as the "Roman tradition" and can be found in some of the early empire's most influential literary works, such as *The Aeneid* by Virgil. Although the *Aeneid* is a work of fiction, it was written under the reign of

Augustus at the end of the first century AD and delves into the religious beliefs of the time. It also gives a description of a Roman cremation, including the proper rites associated with it and the consequences of improper burials. The protagonist, Aeneas, travels to the underworld, but before reaching it he comes across a funeral on the shores of a river. The mourners build a large pyre built out of oak and pine, which is adorned with foliage. While the pyre is being constructed, the body is washed and anointed in oils as onlookers weep for the dead. After the ceremonial washing, the body is clothed in purple robes, signifying this was a person of nobility, and placed upon a litter and carried in a procession to the pyre. Once placed upon the pyre, frankincense and other incense are also placed upon the pyre to both cleanse the deceased and mask the smell. After the fire consumes the pyre and everything in it, the remaining bones and ashes are collected and placed in an urn (Virgil 19 BC, 212-236). The vivid descriptions of Virgil are representative of a wealthy Roman's funeral, but his work is still valuable as a manual for the proper funerary procedure in the late Republic and early Empire. Cremations of common Romans would have been much the same, but would have lacked some of the expensive furnishings such as the purple robes or expensive incense. However, other than those additions, a similar procedure would have been carried out for their funerals. Cremations were seen as a swift method of separating the soul from the body and easily sending it to Charon, the ferryman, and subsequently be judged in the afterlife.

The living were obligated to participate in Roman funerals, since to stand idly by was considered an insult to the deceased. Noteworthy members of society, such as Julius Caesar, Augustus, and other important figures received state funerals in public

spaces such as the forum. Many people from Rome would come out to witness the pyres burn and pay their respects. Even for people of a lower social class, attendance was expected at their funerals. There are several examples of literature describing the process of cremation up close and the effects of the fire on the body. This suggests that despite the flames and sights of the event, many people stood close to the funeral pyre for long periods of time, often from start to finish. The living were very much a part of the process of cremation. From those that built the pyre, washing and anointing the deceased, those in the procession in which the corpse is carried to the pyre, those who watched the pyre burn, the mourners calling out the name of the dead, and then the ones who would collect the bones at the end. Typically feasting was also carried out throughout the funerary process. The dead were along for the ride while the living were expected to do certain jobs, all to make sure that the proper steps had been taken to send them to the afterlife (Habinek 2016, 3-5).

Virgil also explains the necessity of receiving a proper funeral and subsequent burial. Aeneas makes his way to the river's edge as he sees a boat approach the shore with Charon, the ferryman. Aeneas is currently in what we would consider purgatory and the river separates him and the other souls with him from entering the underworld proper. Charon selects certain individuals to board his boat and to be taken to the other side. We find out that those who were chosen were properly buried. While those who remained on the shore weren't cremated and buried so their souls are forced to wander a hundred years or until "their bones have found a resting place" (Virgil 19 BC, 295-336). It is fortunate that writings from the time period have survived to this day because it makes analyzing the actual acts of burial much easier than the case of the

Iron age Britons who did not have a written language. We also learn from Virgil that the Romans from this time period believed that depending on how one conducted themselves in life reflected their destination in the afterlife. Those who committed egregious offenses in life were sent to Tartarus, which is the equivalent of hell within the Judeo-Christian tradition. While those who lived good lives get to go to Elysium or the Elysian fields. This destination is described as peaceful groves and meadows where the souls of the dead could rest (Virgil 19 BC, 539-641).

Romans of all social classes wanted to be remembered, which differs from the Britons, who were buried with no markers commemorating their death. The only example of memorialization would be ancestor worship through the veneration of skulls. The Romans were a bit different and wanted their memory to live on after their death. Tombs and grave stones are common place in Rome, ranging in size from a single ceramic urn, to massive mausoleums for the emperor and his family. The survival of a person's name and in turn their memory was paramount to Roman ideology. Epitaphs are inscriptions on gravestones or other memorials where the body is laid to rest. Not only were the deceased's names and age of death inscribed upon the stone, their accomplishments during life were prominently displayed. Politicians or others who held eminent positions in public life will have that inscribed on their epitaph. All of their political and civilian achievements were written in stone to be preserved for longevity's sake. Even freedmen or lower class members of society had their memories preserved. Often times these memorials would incorporate their heritage and explain when their family line had been emancipated. Since they were barred from holding public office,

but were able to hold positions in priesthoods or as attendants in cults, these posts are commonly referred to on their graves (Carroll 2006, 136-140).

Noting oneself as being a member of the military and the specific legion a man was a part of was another popular addition to memorials. A famous example of this is actually a cenotaph, of a centurion who died at the battle of Teutoburg forest in 9 AD (which differs from an epitaph in that the body is buried elsewhere). His statue is dressed in full military attire, with medals and the legions standard in his hand. He is flanked by two busts of his freedmen who were to be interned at the cenotaph, which would in a way transform it into a epitaph. Despite the difference between epitaph and cenotaph, this example is a significant representation of a funerary memorial because it also has the addition of carved images. The addition of images increases the status of the person being remembered, not only through a vivid representation, but also in the actual amount of money it takes to carve the stone would take to commission. Just like many other cases, the dedicator, in this example the centurion's brother, stated that he was the one to erect the monument. It is tradition to include the person's family members, usually the father or grandfather, as well as the dedicator to connect that person with the deceased. It may appear to be selfish, but being associated with the honored dead would increase the dedicator's social capital (Carroll 2006, 32-33, 142-143).

Now that the significance of memorials has been covered, it is time to go back to focusing on the rituals regarding the remains. Cremation burials often only contain a small percentage of the total remains that survived the pyre. These are known as token deposits and hold special symbolic significance. They also are more practical for the

less wealthy who could not afford a large enough urn or an efficient pyre. Small urns could hold only a few pieces of bone, while the majority of the bones are disposed of by other means (Stutz and Tarlow 2013, 154-155; Williams 2004, 418). The difference between the scattering of bone in the Roman context from the Celtic Britons, is the effort to memorialize the dead, even if that means the retention of only a small fraction of the bones. By burying them in an urn, it would allow for the poor to meet the requirement of a proper burial that all souls must have to enter the afterlife. Evidence of this can be found in the discovery of hundreds of mini urns. These small ceramics were found along the Via Appia, the main road leading to Rome, and are only a few inches tall. Keeping with the importance of memory, the name of the individual and the date of their death was inscribed in the pottery. Inside each urn was a small fragment of cremated bone, symbolic of the body as a whole This is an example of poorer members of society trying to still keep up with the religious belief of needing a proper burial to enter the afterlife. (Carroll 2006, 66-69

Slaves made up a huge proportion of Roman society and had to be buried somewhere. For the most part they did not received recognition in life or in death. Their graves are anonymous and found clustered together unceremoniously. It is possible that the poorest of the poor were also buried here because they had no other options. Small ceramic urns also constitute the vessels for the cremated remains. However, they differ from the ones previously mentioned in that they do not have any form of identification These individuals are lost to memory, yet still received a small kindness in that they were buried so there is hope that they could possibly move on to the afterlife (Carroll 2006, 69-70).

Roman Britain; Clash or Combination of Beliefs and Burials?

In 55 BC, during the middle of the Gallic Wars, Julius Caesar ventured beyond the edges of the known Roman world, across the channel to Britain. This was the first real contact the Romans and Britons had with each other, even though it was brief and only then with a few communities. At this point it's difficult to assess the influence the Romans would have had on the Briton's society and in turn burial practices, so I will be examining the changes that occurred following the Claudian invasion of 43 AD. This would lead to a lasting occupation and result in what some might call Romanization, but I think a better term is either creolization or hybridization. For many years in classical studies, the predominant idea was that the Romans were stronger both militarily and culturally so they simply imposed their cultural practices of the native Britons. I disagree with that notion and instead believe that the two groups created hybridized burial practices and beliefs which show aspects of both the Celtic Britons and the Romans.

For the Romans, there was a far greater emphasis on unity and the power of the centralized state during the Republic and especially during the period of the empire. Due to this we see far less diversity in the methods of burial and funerary procedures. There is a set series of steps which should be carefully followed or else the dead would be unable to reach Elysium. This is a major difference between the Britons, who weren't united and had a wide variety of burial practices with regional differences. Another distinction between the groups relates to how they remembered the dead. The Romans clearly required epitaphs and memorials in stone to feel secure that their memory would live on. The Britons relied less on material reminders and more on personal and

communal memory. This correlates well with Rome's use of Latin as their written language and since the Britons had no form of written language they relied on oral traditions instead. Following the Roman invasion and occupation of Britain in 43 AD, we see a change in burial practices and belief systems of both the invading Romans and the occupied Britons.

With the Roman army came a plethora of new gods and goddess from not only the Roman pantheon, but also deities from mainland Europe, Africa and the near East. Roman legions were comprised of soldiers from all of the provinces, not just from the Italian peninsula, and with them came their own beliefs. For brevity's sake, I will refer to those in the Roman military and colonization simply as Romans unless there are specific examples that call for further explanation. Sites of Roman military installations have uncovered numerous examples of statues and relics depicting various deities from across the empire. Eventually we see these foreign religions within civilian populations as well. There are not any examples of pre-Roman deities from the Iron age in Britain, which aligns with the lack of memorialization of the dead or idolization of deities. The Romans on the other hand created detailed depictions and idols of their gods and this custom made its way to Britain. Native Celtic deities also begin to appear in art forms as well. For the most part, Rome allowed for provincial peoples to practice their own religion and would often incorporate their gods into their pantheon or equate their own deities with the other's gods who shared similar characteristics. Temples were erected on Iron age sites of worship, allowing for a continuation of those religious rites, but in the recognized form imposed by the state. Although other religions were permitted within the empire, the Roman authorities tended to alter or encourage worship to fit the

imperial standard. This is a perfect example of Roman tolerance, as long as the rituals and rites fit into the accepted protocol of the empire (Hutton 2013, 235-244; Wells 1999, 163-169).

With the introduction of Roman traditions to British soil, there is a quick change in burial practices throughout the island. Some small communities retained their ancestral rites, but on the larger scale we see new methods introduced. We see the Britons cremating their dead in much larger numbers than ever before. Cremation wasn't unknown in Celtic Britain even though it was rare, but urns were seldom used, if ever during the Iron age. One of these is the introduction of ceramic urns and the symbolism of eating during funerals. The Romans are known for feasting during funerals and the mourning period. On the other hand, we are not sure if the Britons practiced this as well, as there are not any sources from the time period to confirm nor deny it. Even if they did include feasts as part of a mortuary rite, the way it is expressed during the occupation period has a distinct Roman flavor.

Within only a few decades of Britain becoming a Roman province, new burial methods began to pop up. This was due to the strictness of the state in performing the proper rituals. The most interesting of these has to do with giving offerings to the deceased. Cremated remains were buried with a lead or ceramic pipe connecting the urn and the surface. Visitors to the grave would share meals with the dead by pouring libations of wine or other liquids down the pipe while eating above ground. Groups of people would have ceremonial parties in which they would hold feasts in cemeteries. This act of remembrance was far more personal than the stone inscriptions on gravestones. By sharing meals with the dead, they never really left and still played a

role in society. It was believed that the grave/urn itself was a link from the world of the living and the dead. This practice was fairly new to the Roman world and was not seen before the first century BC, but it was found to be present in Britain immediately following the invasion. This act of remembrance was easily accepted by the Britons and probably shows that the Celts also engaged in ritual feasting (Carroll 2006, 71-74; Merrifield 1987, 61-64).

Unlike in Rome where funerary urns were created for the purpose of containing cremated remains, many urns in Britain were initially domestic ceramics. We see household vessels repurposed as urns, rather than containers being created for the sole purpose of holding remains. Ceramic items which weren't intended to be used as urns, such as vessels that held food or liquid, are commonly utilized in funerary rites and in holding the body of the deceased. Some ceramics were burned upon the funeral pyre and some were buried along with the cremated remains as offerings. Unlike with the urns belonging to the destitute people of Rome, where at least the majority of them had the person's name and date of death, the Roman Britons didn't take hold of such a practice of commemoration. The new burial methods were a combination of the Roman tradition of placing cremated remains in urns and burying them, but without the same type of memorialization. Instead, the practice of feasting at the funeral creates a form of social memory. The living consumed certain foods and drinks and placed some of them on the fire alongside the body, cleansing the food and soul. The act of consuming is in two parts, one being the actual eating of food, while the other is the symbolic consumption of the deceased by flames. By eating with the dead for one last time, the Roman Britons created one final memory with their loved ones. The mourners

metaphorically embodied the act of the funeral pyre, themselves being the fire and the food being the body. This is one of the ways the traditional Roman burial practices was altered by the natives and occupying peoples of Britain (Williams 2004, 417-225).

The Roman army played a major role in the spread of culture in Britain. Legionary bases were constructed before civilian populations came to the region and we see that quite frequently civilian settlements were constructed in the backdrop of military installations. The Roman legions were uniformly trained and instilled with intense discipline throughout the empire, which extended to their funerary practices. However, we will see evidence along Britain's Northern frontier of both uniformity and diversity in burial procedures. Hadrian's wall was constructed during the second century AD and separated the "civilized" world of Roman Britain from the "barbarians" of the North. Stationed along this frontier were auxiliary soldiers recruited from along the Rhine and Danube frontiers. Burials in this region have yielded evidence of burials that included horses being sacrificed and buried along with the deceased. This is neither a Roman nor a British practice, but a tradition found along the Danube river. Burials like these show the introduction of entirely new practices by the multiethnic Roman army (Thompson, Szigeti, Gowland, and Witcher 2016, 830).

Outlier burials like the one mentioned above are extremely rare so it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from them. Evidence from other military bases along Hadrian's wall have yielded more conclusive evidence pointing towards a more unified funerary procedure. A case study examined the cremated remains from five Roman military cemeteries in Northern Britain dating from the first century to the fifth century AD (Thompson, Szigeti, Gowland, and Witcher 2016). The size and color of the bones were

used as indicators for the type of funeral pyre that was used at each site. The researchers utilized micro and macroscopic analysis to determine that the bone's color, size, and levels of crystallinity were all consistent among the five sites. Overall, the remains were relatively large in comparison to other cremations. This indicates that the pyre was allowed to burn without interference from someone mixing the remains into the embers or raking the bones from the ashes after the fire. The color and crystallinity is also an indicator of a medium intensity burn. Since the body and pyre were left to burn down by itself, the bones received differing degrees of heat which resulted in varying levels of calcination. The level of homogeneity among these five sites suggests that the Roman army had a standard procedure of operation for funeral pyres.

Despite the homogenous funeral pyres, which shows the level of uniformity of the military, there are individual differences in burials that most likely depended on social class and place of origin. Metal nails have been discovered amongst certain remains which point to the individual being placed upon a bier during cremation. Jewelry and hobnails from shoes suggest that certain individuals being fully clothed during the act of cremation. Where those objects are not present one could surmise that they might have just been covered in a shroud and not adorned with jewelry. Those who had other objects collected among their remains point to an individual of greater wealth and prestige. Differences in urns also suggest the urge for some kind of individuality in the face of such a standard procedure practice by the military. Some urns were domestic vessels like discussed earlier, others were fine ceramics created specifically as urns, and yet others for the wealthiest, were glass vessels. Some urns held remains that were intentionally placed from the bottom up of the individual. The feet bones were placed

first, then the subsequent bones placed on top. The level of uniformity in the military and in their funeral pyre procedure caused the individuals to seek a way to show their uniqueness in how they represented their ethnic and social class in death. They chose small individual differences such as goods to be placed on the pyre or if they were to be dressed or not to make themselves stand out from the rest, at least symbolically (Thompson, Szigeti, Gowland, and Witcher 2016, 829- 835).

Another variation noted in Roman-occupation burial practices is the bog body phenomenon documented throughout North Western Europe from Germany to England. A bog body is the remains of a person who was ritualistically sacrificed and intentionally placed in a swamp with the knowledge that the conditions would preserve the corpse. These remains are remarkably well preserved due to the lack of oxygen and chemical make up found in bogs. Often times the bodies have essentially turned to leather, conserving extreme details of the person's life and gruesome manner of death. Although bog bodies have been documented from the Iron age and earlier, a significant amount have been dated to around 100 BC until 400 AD. I do not think it is a coincidence that this also happens to be at the height of Roman expansion into Northern Europe. That is the reason why I did not mention this during the section on Iron age Britain because I believe it to be more pertinent to show this revival or continuation of human sacrifice during the Roman period. Various hypotheses trying to explain the reasoning behind this brutal practices have been put forward, but I believe the majority of bog bodies to have been sacrifices due to social strife created by the changing sociopolitical climate of the encroaching Roman world.

Lindow man was a bog body discovered in 1984 in Northern England, it was one of the best preserved examples found to date. A few years later in 1988, the remains of a second man were found in close proximity to the first Lindow man which indicates a double sacrifice. I will focus on the first body and will refer to it simply as Lindow man for clarity's sake. Both bodies were tentatively dated to the end of first century or beginning of the second century AD, perfectly coinciding with the initial occupation by the Romans. Lindow man experienced what is known as called multiple deaths, meaning he was inflicted multiple injuries which were symbolically representative of dying multiple times before actually expiring. Due to his excellent preservation, we know exactly how he was killed. He was first struck with a blunt object to the head, then with an axe. Although he was almost certainly knocked unconscious at this point, he would have been held up by multiple people to keep him from collapsing. Next, a garrote was placed around his neck and his throat was slit, the sacrificers would have pulled the garrote tight causing blood to gush from the throat wound. He was then left in the bog as a sacrifice to the gods.

Fortunately, despite this extreme violence, he probably was sedated to an extent due to the remnants of mistletoe in his stomach, which can cause toxic shock. All of this corresponds with other examples of bog bodies in other parts of Europe. There is the consistent use of poisoning, bludgeoning, stabbing, strangulation, and drowning. The entire process would have been carried out in a specific ritualistic manner. It is also interesting to note that Lindow man showed no signs of living a rough life, he had clean, almost manicured fingernails. The other body actually had a genetic mutation which resulted in having six fingers on each hand. It is likely that Lindow man was part of an elite class, and maybe even a druid (the druids were the Celtic priest class which were

known to use mistletoe in rituals). It is unknown whether or not their sacrifice was voluntary or not, but their demise and symbolic offering to the gods would have been done for the betterment of their community (Pearson 2000, 67-71; Taylor 2002, 145-160).

Despite the changing burial preference shifting towards cremations, sacrificial bog burials during the Roman occupation period were a continuation of much older practice. Conserving the body in its entirety, including soft tissue, is vastly different than the primary burial method of both the Iron age Britons and the Romans. The goal was to preserve the body in order to prevent their soul from moving on to the normal next destination. Although this is an inherently Northern European, and specifically in this case a British practice, bog burials were certainly not the norm. They were conducted in dire circumstances when only the ultimate sacrifice to the gods was needed to aid the community. A high percentage of bog bodies have been discovered to have had physical abnormalities, such as the previously mentioned example of the second Lindow man having six fingers. People who stood out physically or mentally would have been seen as marked by the gods. Most bog bodies also do not show signs of malnutrition or being exposed to physical labor. This would suggest that they were treated well and possibly even honored during their lifetime, but were essentially being groomed for sacrifice if the situation ever arose (Pearson 2000, 70-71). Their deaths were overly violent, causing as much injury as possible without actually killing the victims. Slightly more poison, or a harder blow to the head would have ended their lives swiftly, but we see intentional injuries that were not meant to kill outright. This was a way to inflict as much insult and injury as possible before death to appease the gods.

They're violent death was symbolic of the social turmoil that the Roman conquest was causing to relatively regional and to an extent egalitarian communities. Bog burials are examples of when local populations retained or revived some of their ancestral practices in response to being occupied by the Romans. The entire process of sacrificing the individual was ritualistic and their internment in a bog was symbolic of being preserved and returned to the gods, not ascending to the afterlife. Thus they wanted the return of the old order of life, and did not want to live under Roman rule.

Conclusions

Having examined three distinct time periods from the Iron age in Britain to Classical Rome up to the occupation of Britain by the Roman empire, I was able to determine the primary methods of burial for each period. While there was diversity of burial practices within each period, there were key points that made them distinct from each other.

The Iron age Britons had a wide variety of burial preferences due to their lack of unity, but reliance on communal and regional cultures. They primarily practiced inhumations of full bodies or excarnation in which they kept certain bones for ritualistic purposes and disposed of the rest. Skulls were very important to Celtic society and were found in large numbers in certain settlements. Pit burials were ritualistic interments which were done in order to mark the termination of storage pits and in the hopes of pleasing the gods for a successful harvest. The Romans were more uniform in their practices, having fairly standard funerary procedures involving the cremation of individuals on a pyre. They also emphasized memorialization of the deceased on

epitaphs and on urns. Even symbolic burials were performed to ensure the dead would meet the right criterium to enter the afterlife.

Following the occupation of Britain in 43 AD, we see a shift from inhumations to cremations, but with with British additions. There are many examples of domestic vessels being repurposed as urns and the inclusion of feasting rituals as metaphors during cremation. There isn't the same level of memorialization in Roman Britain which was prominent in Rome, but almost nonexistent among the Britons. The Roman military brought along a level of homogeneity in its standard cremation procedures, but still allowed for individual identities to be manifested in the urns and choices of how the deceased was represented in death. Despite the overarching trends towards hybridized burial practices, some old British rites were still practiced during the Roman period. Human sacrifice and the bog bodies that provide us with evidence of such acts, show that the Romans didn't impose their entire culture on the Britons. Bog bodies represented the ritualistic reactions of the Britons being occupied. Their ways of life were severely altered and they did the only thing they thought would help under such social stress, sacrifice their own people to the gods in hopes that they would help return their old way of life.

I set out to understand the reasons why the Britons and Romans buried their dead in a certain way and how their beliefs reflected their traditions. I wanted to see how those beliefs and burial methods changed once the two groups were forced into a single social environment with the Roman occupation. The research showed that there was more of a hybridization of burial practices than the classic interpretation of Romanization where the Romans imposed their culture upon the Britons. Even when

there wasn't a direct sign of a hybrid burial, I found examples of direct opposition of the Roman rites and continuation of British traditions.

Bibliography

Aldhouse-Green, Miranda J. 2018. *Sacred Britannia: The Gods and Rituals of Roman Britain*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Carroll, Maureen. 2006. *Spirits of the Dead: Roman Funerary Commemoration in Western Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cunliffe, Barry. 1988. "Celtic Death Rituals." *Archaeology* 41, no. 2 : 39-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41731995>.

Davis, Oliver. 2018. "Iron Age Burial in Wales: Patterns, Practices and Problems." *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 37 (1): 61-97. doi:10.1111/ojoa.12131. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=127191588&scope=site>.

Dyer, James. 1997. *Ancient Britain*. London, UK: Routledge.

Habinek, Thomas. 2016. "At the Threshold of Representation: Cremation and Cremated Remains in Classical Latin Literature." *Classical Antiquity* 35 (1): 1–44.

Hutton, Ronald. 2013. *Pagan Britain*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Merrifield, Ralph. 1987. *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*. New York: New Amsterdam.

Pearson, Michael Parker. 2000. *The Archaeology of Death and Burial*. Stroud: Texas A&M University Press.

Redfern, Rebecca C., and Dewitte, Sharon N. 2010. "A New Approach to the Study of Romanization in Britain: A Regional Perspective of Cultural Change in Late Iron Age and Roman Dorset Using the Siler and Gompertz-Makeham Models of Mortality." *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 144, no. 2 : 269-85.

Stutz, Liv Nilsson, and Sarah Tarlow. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Timothy. 2002 *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Thompson, T. J. U., J. Szigeti, R. L. Gowland, and R. E. Witcher. 2016. "Death on the Frontier: Military Cremation Practices in the North of Roman Britain." *Journal of Archaeological Science*:

Reports 10: 828-836. doi:10.1016/j.jasrep.2016.05.020. <http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edselp&AN=S2352409X16301730&site=eds-live>.

Tracey, Justine. 2012. "New Evidence for Iron Age Burial and Propitiation Practices in Southern Britain." *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 31 (4): 367-379. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0092.2012.00393.x. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=82335523&scope=site>.

Virgil. 19 BC. *The Aeneid*. Book VI.

Wells, Peter S. 1999. *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Williams, Howard. 2004. "Potted Histories - Cremation, Ceramics And Social Memory In Early Roman Britain." *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 23, no. 4: 417-27.