Life and Death on a Romano-British estate: Turnershall Farm in Hertfordshire

Introduction

In 2002 metal detectorists discovered two of the most significant burials to come from Roman Britain. The objects from these burials, including two silver brooches, were taken to Verulamium Museum in St Albans for assessment by the Coroner, and found to be Treasure Trove. Subsequent excavation and geophysical survey produced additional finds and revealed a Late Iron Age to Roman period landscape providing a clearer picture of the lives of the two people interred on this site.

The story of these two Romanised Britons from the 2nd century AD has been pieced together with the help of specialists in a variety of fields. It tells us of life and death in a far-flung province that had contacts with the whole of the Roman Empire. The story begins in the Late Iron Age on a royal site where coin production and other metalworking took place. The site and possibly the family that ran it, became part of the new expanding Roman Empire with all its benefits. They built themselves a villa, imported sumptuous objects from across the known world. A family of this status would probably have had a town house and helped organize the local politics in the Municipium of Verulamium, formerly Verlamio. They were buried near to their home and the villa was deliberately demolished some time after their death, but they went to the next world surrounded by the comforts that they had known in this one.

Turnershall Farm: the background

Turners Hall Farm lies on the north side of the River Lea in an area that has produced important sites and burials in the past. Important Iron Age regional sites include the *oppidum* (or Iron Age town) at Wheathampstead, identified by Mortimer Wheeler as the site of Cassivellaunus's final battle against Caesar. There is also the famous burial from Welwyn Garden City, which is on display in the British Museum. The funerary pit at Welwyn contained high status objects illustrating the impact that Caesar had had on southeast Britain and may be the first evidence for the Romanisation of the elite. Caesar took hostages with him back to Italy and these were 'adopted' by high-ranking Roman

families before returning to their homeland on reaching adulthood. These 'hostages' would have been indoctrinated into the Roman lifestyle and many would have seen the appeal of this way of life over their previous existence and the desire for luxury would have returned with them.

Where does the Turnershall Farm site fit in?

In 1996 a gas pipeline was dug across Hertfordshire, and during the course of this work evidence for Late Iron Age and Roman occupation turned up at Turnershall Farm. Most significantly it included Iron Age coin pellet moulds used in the production of coin blanks; also present were ironworking slag, and traces of two Roman buildings.

This suggests a site with connections to the oppida and its mint at Verlamio possibly producing coin blanks for striking at a mint. The territory of Verlamio may have encompassed and controlled the old oppida site at Wheathampstead. Occupation at Wick Avenue and Aldwickbury Golf Course also suggests that there were enclosures along the river valleys right up until the Roman invasion, which then went rapidly out of use.

At Turnershall there is less evidence for a break in occupation and more for continuity. The Late Iron Age ditches have successive fills indicating natural weathering, although, significantly, the main fill of the ditch under the Villa was composed of large chunks of clay intermixed with topsoil, suggesting a deliberate slighting of the bank. This, along with the incidence of many 1st century (AD) features, such as pits and ditches, and second century (AD) finds from the main grave may indicate continuity. It suggests an emotional tie with the past and a continued pattern of land tenure.

After the mid-first century AD the site, with its important metalworking evidence, was probably reconstituted into a new larger Roman Verulamium *territorium*. However the process may have taken almost forty years to be complete. In the Roman period there is little evidence for metalworking on site and it may have subsequently been given over to farming.

The Burials

Both burials were dated to AD 150 or later. The calcined bone from main burial, the larger of the two, was probably in a wooden casket, which was itself within a richly furnished wooden chamber or chest. The second burial, also within a wooden chamber, had the calcined bones buried in a large glass bottle. Both were cremations; the main burial from which little bone survived was probably female and aged around 20-45 years, the second was almost certainly a female aged between 35-50 years.

The Main Burial

The larger burial measured 2.3m by 1.35m with a maximum depth of 0.41m below the topsoil. All of the bronze objects and some of the others had been removed prior to the excavation.

The detectorists found most of the finest artefacts. These included samian cups and bowls, glassware in the form of jugs and bowls, and most spectacularly a series of bronze vessels. The two most remarkable of these were a decorated patera and jug. The patera, which looks similar to a modern frying pan, may have been used during rituals for pouring libations. It has a decorated fluted handle with silver inlaid vine-scroll where it joins the body of the vessel and terminates in a silver inlaid ram's head and collar. The large jug was made in four pieces and soldered together. It had a Medusa-type mask at the base of the handle and at the top between the handle and the jug was a Triton, a half-man half-fish mythical creature. This figure is in the act of pouring from an object in his right hand into a flat object in his left, possibly from a jug or cornucopia into a seashell, or a patera.

Other objects from the main burial included lion-headed mounts, rings and a lock clasp, all from the wooden casket, which may have held the bones of the deceased. There were also small fragments of decorated bone and flat ivory slivers, possibly from the casket, and two small silver brooches.

Archaeological excavation of the centre of the chest produced little information. However, from the sides came a variety of objects, most noteworthy were two groups of arrowheads. Two arrowheads lay on the south side, later conservation revealed two more lifted in an iron lump. There were still remains of wooden shafts in the sockets of two of

the arrowheads suggesting that this group may have been complete when the grave was laid out and available for immediate ‘use’ by the deceased. From the other side of the grave an encrusted iron lump was lifted and after conservation an additional group of 31 arrowheads was defined. None showed any evidence for shafts but they were in close contact with a woven material, either wrapped in it, or in a bag. The arrowheads comprised a variety of types ranging from bolt-shaped ones, to others with large flat barbs. It has been suggested that this variety in shape allowed for the hunting of any prey that was to be encountered.

There was no direct evidence for a bow; this may have been lost due to the acidic soil, although the ivory slivers could have been from an arrow pass or nock strengthener.

Other finds from the excavation included possible evidence in one corner of the grave for a box decorated with four copper-alloy rings and containing a group of tools. Within this were four woodworking planes in two pairs, one set with a flat shoe, the second slightly smaller with a groove down the centre of the shoe, perhaps for planing arrow shafts. There was also an unusual flanged bowl that appears to imitate mica-dusted examples and a small samian bowl.

The Second Burial

The second burial was much less disturbed prior to excavation although some objects had already been removed from the southwestern corner of the burial, notably a copper alloy open lamp and bowl. The pit measured 1.3m by 1.15m with a maximum depth below the topsoil of 0.2m.

From the excavation it was possible to determine the layout of the wooden chamber and the groupings of the other objects. In the centre was a large rectangular glass bottle containing the cremated bone, alongside were two samian cups. In the northeast corner was a small copper alloy jug and glass skillet, and in the southeast a glass jug and samian bowl. The bronze jug and glass patera may have been the equivalent to the usual bronze jug and patera set, an example of which came from the main burial.

What is interesting about this burial is the amount of seemingly vacant space. The reason for this apparent lack of objects was probably the non-survival of organic materials, such as cloth, leather and wood. Although actual evidence for organics was only found in the main burial, it is almost inconceivable that there were none in the second burial too.

The Villa

Approximately 50m to the north of the burials a Roman villa was uncovered, 27m in length and 10.5m wide. It survived only as flint and chalk wall foundations overlying a first century AD ditch. There were ten rooms, which were arranged symmetrically. A corridor along the south side, possibly with a central entrance, fronted a large central room that may have been the main reception room and each side of that were two narrow rooms, possibly staircases. Either side of these, at the ends of the building, were two further suites of three rooms, function unknown.

The wall foundations were slightly more substantial along the outer walls than the inner ones leading to the conclusion that the outer wall foundations were capable of taking a two-storey timber superstructure. In this case the traditional interpretation of an open-fronted villa is unlikely. An open structure would in any case be impractical in the British climate both for the inhabitants and for the decorative elements in the corridor, such as painted wall plaster and mosaics, which appear elsewhere to have survived without signs of weathering.

This building appears to be the most important one on an estate of many buildings, and one of possibly fifty estates in the Verulamium *territorium*. It is likely that the villa was deliberately demolished around AD 150. Evidence from a timber-lined tank, adjacent to the villa, included pottery dating to the mid-2nd century AD and a quantity of building materials and painted wall plaster. There were also abundant tesserae in the topsoil over the building suggesting possible residuum from demolition. When compared with villas in the region, many show demolition but others show construction of new masonry structures in the second century, either as attachments or new phases. These were much grander affairs than the earlier villas like the one here, which creates the possibility of a new masonry building still to be discovered.

Ostentatious display of wealth

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