THE SILENT MINORITY: WOMEN IN ROMANO-BRITISH CEMETERIES

By Dorothy J. Watts

A disparity exists between the numbers of males and females buried in Romano-British cemeteries, as compared with those of the late pre-Roman Iron Age: this is interpreted as reflecting the influence of Romanisation and the practice of female infanticide. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries A.D. the practice was in the process of being curtailed with the expansion of Christianity in Britain. The balance between the sexes was restored after the end of the Roman occupation.

An examination of the remains in Romano-British cemeteries reveals a considerable imbalance in the numbers of males and females buried. This trend is marked from an early period and continues until the end of the Roman occupation, with a couple of notable exceptions. It will be argued that the disparity is due to the practice of selective infanticide and that, in those parts of Britain which were Romanised, until Christianity took hold very late in the Roman period, between one and six out of ten females born were not allowed to survive.

The problems of sexing skeletal material, particularly that which has been cremated, are widely recognised (see, for example, Buchet 1993, in relation to burials in Gaul, and Welinder 1988–89, on burials in Norway). In respect of the 102 Romano-British burials (97 cremations, 5 inhumations) from Skeleton Green, Puckeridge (Herts.), the 'uncertainty of the material' is noted, and it is shown that 84% of the cremations were 'well fired'. Nevertheless, the sex of 94% of the adult cremations, or 79 out of 84, has been determined (Wells 1978, 85; 1981, tab. 29). The 79 included 65 'well-fired' cremations. A figure of 94% of adults sexed does seem rather confident. By comparison, in the more recent report on the 489 late Iron-Age burials (472 cremations, 17 inhumations) from King Harry Lane, Verulamium (Herts.), only 32% of adults or 91 of the cremations were sexed (Stead and Rigby, 1989). Of these, 28 were 'badly burnt' or 'very well burnt' (Sturland 1989, 241–43). Similarly, at
Magiovinium (Bucks.), while 51% of adults or 20 out of a total of 83 burials (44 cremations, 39 inhumations) were sexed, this included only two (or 5%) of the cremations (Neal 1987). At Skeleton Green, it is also interesting to see that there were 43 females and 36 males identified from the cremated remains, a situation which might be, as suggested for the Iron-Age cremations (four male, 22 female) from Westhampnett, Chichester (West Sussex), the result of a bias reflecting the ease of identifying females (Fitzpatrick 1997, 65). Given that only a further 19 cremations beyond those identified at Skeleton Green have been sexed in all the Romano-British burials used in this study, we may well be justified in omitting the Skeleton Green cemetery from the discussion. The percentage of males and females would be little affected overall (M = 58%, F = 42%); these figures would be the same if all sexed cremations were eliminated.

A further problem in cemetery studies is that the populations of some burial sites may not present a true demographic picture. This has frequently been remarked in respect of the absence of adolescents, children or infants (e.g. Warwick 1968, 147; Wheeler 1985, 275; Neal 1987, 104; Crummy et al. 1991, 63; Dawson 1994, 29–36), and the burial of infants in habitation sites rather than in cemeteries is well recorded (Watts 1989). More importantly for this analysis, the relatively small populations of some cemeteries may not even reflect accurately the ratio of males to females. That consideration has influenced the methodology employed here.

Initially, 25 cemeteries from a wide area of Roman Britain were examined (Illus. 1). Many date from the fourth century, but some are earlier, and at least two extend beyond the period of Roman occupation. They are a mix of inhumations and cremations, with some cemeteries having both burials rites, whose numbers vary from very large to very small. They all have in common that at least a reasonable proportion (around 40%) of the individuals identified as adults could be sexed. In the analysis, the term ‘adult’ covers those over the age of about 15, but also includes adolescents or sub-adults able to be sexed; ‘adolescent’ is used for those aged 11–14 years, ‘children’ for 1–10 years, and ‘infant’ for children under one year, but older than neonate.

The sites included in the study are as follows: Ancaster, Lincs. (Wilson 1968), Ashton, Northants. (Frere 1983; 1984), Baldock, Herts. (Stead and Rigby 1986), Bletsoe, Beds. (Dawson 1994), Bradley Hill, Somerset (Leech 1981), Cannington, Somerset (Rahlt 1977; Rahlt et al. 2000), Chichester (Westhampnett), West Sussex (Fitzpatrick 1997), Chilmark (Eyewell Farm), Wilts. (Fitzpatrick and Crockett 1998), Cirencester (Bath Gate), Gloce. (McWhirr et al. 1982); Colchester (Butt Road), Essex (Crummy et al. 1991), Derby (Racecourse Road), Derbys. (Wheeler 1985), Dorchester (Poundbury Camp), Dorset (Farwell and Molleson 1993), Dorchester (Queensford Farm), Oxon. (Chambers 1987), Dunstable, Beds. (Matthews 1981), Ealingham, Suffolk (West 1976), Leicester (Newarke Street), Leics. (Cooper 1990), Magiovinium, Bucks. (Neal 1987), Owslebury, Hants. (Collis 1972), Peterborough (Lynch Farm), Cambs. (Jones 1975), Puckeridge (Skeleton Green), Herts. (Partridge 1978; 1981), Winchester (Lankhills), Hants. (Clarke 1979), and York (Trentholme Drive), NorthYorks. (Wenham 1968). Most of these are single-site cemeteries, but there are exceptions. Ashton had a formal cemetery and other burials found in the
# Shorter Contributions

## Women in Romano-British Cemeteries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of Identified</th>
<th>Number of Identified</th>
<th>Unsexed Adults Identified</th>
<th>Adolescents/Infants/Neonates Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Inhumation</td>
<td>C = centuries</td>
<td>Number sexed</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Sexed</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancaster #+</td>
<td>C4</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>12/65%</td>
<td>83/37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashton (backyard) #*</td>
<td>C2- late 4</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>36/68%</td>
<td>17/32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashton (formal) #+</td>
<td>C4</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>81/69%</td>
<td>36/31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldock (R) #*</td>
<td>late C1- late 4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7/70%</td>
<td>3/30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bletsoe #+</td>
<td>mid C4-early 5</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>23/54%</td>
<td>21/40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley Hill #+</td>
<td>C4- early 5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>10/56%</td>
<td>10/50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannington #+</td>
<td>C4-7</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>127/39%</td>
<td>197/61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chichester, c. 70-150</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4/36%</td>
<td>7/63%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealdhampton (R) #*</td>
<td>Late C4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3/56%</td>
<td>3/50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilmark, Eyewell Farm #*</td>
<td>C3-5</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>262/72%</td>
<td>100/38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Gate #*</td>
<td></td>
<td>#441; *1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colchester, But Rd Period 1 #*</td>
<td>c. 270</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11/66%</td>
<td>7/39%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colchester, But Rd Period II #+</td>
<td>320/40</td>
<td>#36; *5</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>170/55%</td>
<td>140/45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby, Late C1-3</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11/62%</td>
<td>19/38%</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racecourse Road #*</td>
<td></td>
<td>#66; *2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester Dorset, Poundbury Main Farm #+</td>
<td>335-</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>326/49%</td>
<td>346/51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester Dorset, P Bury (Other) #*</td>
<td>late</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>60/52%</td>
<td>56/48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester Oxton, Quenford Farm #</td>
<td>C2- mid 6</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>46/53%</td>
<td>40/47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunstable #*</td>
<td>C4- early 3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>10/59%</td>
<td>13/41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icklingham #+</td>
<td>340/50-1790</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11/48%</td>
<td>12/52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leicester, Newarke Street #+</td>
<td>Ant'mine &amp;</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8/42%</td>
<td>12/58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalenium, Bucks. #*</td>
<td>C1-4</td>
<td>#39; *4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>13/89%</td>
<td>2/13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ousebury (R) #*</td>
<td>C2-</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>13/89%</td>
<td>2/13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterborough, Lynch Farm #</td>
<td>C3-4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>21/66%</td>
<td>14/40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## SHORTER CONTRIBUTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cemetery</th>
<th>Sexed Burials</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Number of Burials</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Puckeridge</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>39/47%</td>
<td>44/33%</td>
<td>C.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skeleton Green</td>
<td>C1 - C4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>C4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lankhills</td>
<td>#444</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td></td>
<td>505</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>231/82%</td>
<td>#32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trenchhime Drive</td>
<td>C2 - C4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>5523</td>
<td>3185</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>1828/49%</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>1031</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If cemeteries with fewer than 5% of adults sexed (including Derby) are eliminated, M = 57%, F = 43%
If cemeteries with fewer than 30 sexed burials are eliminated, M = 56%, F = 44%
If all sexed cremations are eliminated, M = 58%, F = 42%

back- and front-yards of domestic or industrial blocks. At Baldock, burials from the Roman period comprised three distinct groups, in addition to a 'special' burial (no. 50), a set of four late disposals in wells, other presumably discrete adult burials within the area of settlement, and a large number of neonates or infants found near Roman buildings. The Puckeridge data are made up of burials at Skeleton Green itself and those at sites on the Puckeridge By-pass. The Poundbury burials at Dorchester were separated into those in the main cemetery and those termed 'other' in this paper, including inhumations from Site C, the Eastern and Northern Peripheral Burial Groups, the outlying late-Roman burials, and the infants from Structure R16.

The cemetery at Guilden Morden, Cambs., dating from the early first century A.D. (late pre-Roman Iron Age) to fourth century (late Romano-British), was not included in the study, despite the fact that the number of known burials was around 125. Only 23 were examined and 21 sexed, and the results (M = 10; F = 11) recorded in the first report on the site (Fox and Lethbridge 1926). The second report (Lethbridge 1936) did not give any analysis of the later skeletal material found (52 inhumations and 30 cremations). The virtually equal numbers of male and female burials recorded in the first report may well be significant, if it were possible to determine whether they were from an earlier or later part of the cemetery. This information was, however, not given.

It will be noted that, in the cemeteries analysed, the percentage of males and females overall is M = 57%, F = 43%. These figures vary slightly (M = 56%, F = 44%) if small cemeteries with fewer than 30 sexed burials (Baldock, Bradfield Hill, Chichester Westhampnett, Chilmark Eyewell Farm, Colchester Butt Road I, Leicester Newark Street, Magiotovium and Owlsbury — all of the Roman period) are eliminated from the analysis. They do not change at all when cemeteries with fewer than 50% of burials sexed (Baldock, Chichester Westhampnett, Colchester Butt Road I and Derby Racecourse Road) are removed. But there were still 31 burials that could be sexed at the Derby cemetery; this number is thought to be sufficient for the site to be included. For the following discussion, therefore, analysis of the populations of the smaller cemeteries will generally be avoided. Of the remaining cemeteries analysed in Illus. 1, if 50% or more of burials can be sexed, and/or that figure equates to 30 or over, the sample is sufficiently large to give some indicator of the distribution of the sexes.
From the table it is evident that, while overall there were more men than women, the percentage of women buried varies considerably, with one 'large' cemetery, Cannington (M = 39%, F = 61%), having appreciably more women than men. There has, however, been no overall analysis of the distribution of males and females in Romano-British cemeteries. Even the most comprehensive study of Romano-British burial practices to date (Philpott 1991) does not look at this aspect, although some of the authors of individual reports postulate reasons for the imbalance of the sexes in their assessments.

A military presence is suggested for two sites. For the Bath Gate cemetery (M = 72%, F = 28%), it is proposed that Cirencester was a place for the retirement of veterans, whose numbers would have contributed to the population imbalance (Wells 1982, 135). The same reason is suggested for the cemetery at Trentholme Drive, York (Warwick 1988, 147), where the figures were M = 82%, F = 18%. However, Cirencester is more than 80 km from the nearest Roman fortress at Caerleon, in south Wales. It is not likely that veterans would settle in such numbers in Cirencester as to skew the balance of females to males to the extent of a ratio of 3:7. The proposal for York, however, is more convincing. It was a centre which owed its life to the army; it boasted a fortress and was also a Roman colonia, where veterans retired after their 25 or 50 years of service. Discharged soldiers would probably have settled in an area where at least some already had wives and children, the ban on marriage having been lifted by Septimius Severus at the end of the second century. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are also very low percentages of women in the two distinct burial groups from Ashton, Northants. (F = 32% and 31%), a town where there had never been a military presence.

The imbalance in the Lankhills cemetery in Winchester (M = 61%, F = 39%) is explained as an accident of preservation: the bones of males are heavier and thicker than those of females, so their survival in greater numbers is partly a result of this, in view of the acidic soils of southern Britain (Clarke 1979, 123, 137, tab. 9).

For Icklingham cemetery, Wells (1976, 103) suggests that, while the percentage of women of 45% (a ratio of 2:3) was not a 'demographically normal' one, the difference was not significant because of the smallness of the sample: 50 burials in all. It is also worth keeping in mind here the comment by Wells that an imbalance between male and female burials is a 'common tendency' for Roman cemeteries, unlike Anglo-Saxons sites, where females outnumber males.

At Bletsoe, the figures were 25 male, 21 female and one unsexed adult, giving a percentage for females of 46%, which was considered to be 'roughly equal' to that of males (Dawson 1994, 30). The same kind of argument was advanced in the Butt Road, Colchester report: the ratio in the Phase II cemetery of 1:1.21 was above the expected 1:1, but 'not statistically different (chi-square) from a normal biological population', especially when compared with Cirencester and Trentholme Drive (Pinter-Bellows 1991, 62). But we must bear in mind that a ratio of 1:1.21 gives us a percentage of males 35% to females 45%.

All this brings us to the point of this study. Where were the females of Roman Britain? We know that there are almost equal numbers of males and females born in the world
(actually a slightly higher number of males); but we also know that male infants in developed countries have a higher mortality rate than do the female. Those facts would hold as much for Britain of the fourth century A.D. as for today. Even if the well-worn argument of high female mortality as a result of childbirth is introduced, one would still expect to find roughly the same number of adult females as males in cemeteries, albeit with a lower average age.

There is nothing in the ancient literary material to suggest that there was any Roman practice which caused women to be buried separately from men, although there may have been regional traditions for such a practice in Iron-Age Britain. But there is both literary and archaeological evidence to suggest that in the Roman period selective infanticide was practised, and that this habit was the reason for the lower numbers of adult females in Romano-British cemeteries. The fact that our archaeological evidence is weighted to urban rather than to rural sites reinforces the view that it was as a result of Roman influence that this situation occurred.

Literary evidence for infanticide in the Roman period is considerable. The power (patris potentias) of the male head of the family or paterfamilias was, in theory, absolute over his offspring, and indeed over his wife in a manus marriage (for a comprehensive coverage of this topic, see Boswell 1989, 1-186). The paterfamilias had the right to order a deformed offspring to be killed (Twelve Tab. 4; Cic. de Leg. 3.8.19) or an unwanted newborn to be exposed. Even if he had previously acknowledged the child, he could still rescind this and require it to be exposed: a well-known example is that of Emperor Claudius, who ordered the exposure of the infant daughter of his wife, Urgulanilla, because he came to believe he was not the child's father (Suet. Claud. 27).

Exposure did not necessarily lead to death. The child might be rescued and reared by a stranger. But exposure would often have fatal consequences, and the act might thus be regarded at best as a 'haphazard form of legal infanticide' (Carcopino 1941, 90) or, at worst, murder. Early Christian writers such as Tertullian (Apol. 9.4-11) and Minucius Felix (Oct. 30.2) certainly saw it as such, and spoke with abhorrence about the practice. Tertullian accuses the pagans of killing babies about to be born, or of exposing them after birth to cold, starvation or dogs; and he reminds his audience that Christians are forbidden murder or abortion. The Justinian Digest, compiled in the sixth century A.D., cites a legal opinion attributed to the third-century jurist, Paulus, that those who exposed a child were, in effect, committing infanticide (Dig. 25.3.4).

No mention of the sex of the child is made in any of these sources, and children of both sexes must have been exposed. However, records from the second and early third centuries show that public assistance for needy children (alimenta) was heavily in favour of males: in one instance, from Veleia in northern Italy, of 179 legitimate children given aid, 145 were boys and only 34, or 16%, were girls; the return from one benefaction went to 18 boys and only one girl (ILS 6675 = CIL 11.1147). While the scheme was probably intended to improve the numbers of potential recruits into the army (Pliny Pan. 26.3: 28.4-5), the discrimination in favour of boys clearly shows that they were considered more important than girls. In other words, particularly amongst the poor, male babies were reared while the females were not.
This observation would appear to confirm a much older tradition in which female infants were considered expendable. A law attributed to Romulus required citizens to rear all their male children and the first daughter (Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 2.15.2), which implies that subsequent daughters did not have to be reared. This seemingly contradicts the remark of Dionysius of Halicarnassus elsewhere (Ant. Rom. 9.22.2) that all children must be reared but, in view of the evidence of the Imperial household (above), it would appear that exposure was a convenient way of getting rid of an inconvenient female infant. The unwanted female child is a frequent motif in the early Latin writers: for example, in Terence’s Heautont Timorumenos (526–43) a husband berates his wife for not exposing her baby daughter as he had ordered. Other examples include Ovid’s Metamorphoses 7.669–684, where Ligus, a poor freeborn man, tells his pregnant wife that if she gives birth to a girl, it will have to be killed as he cannot afford to keep it; and a papyrus from Oxyrhynchos, which has an apocryphal letter from one Hilarion of Alexandria to his wife, telling her to raise their child if it is a boy but to expose it if it is a girl (Oxy. P. 744).

The result of the selective culling of newborns was that, by the time of Augustus, even among the nobility there were many more males than females (Dio 54.16). To redress this imbalance, a series of laws was introduced with the aim of inducing citizens, and in particular the upper classes, to marry and to raise their offspring. It has been pointed out that the fact that Augustus brought in laws to increase the population shows that he did not believe their failure to produce and raise children was due to infertility (Wiedermann 1989, 38).

Emperors from Nerva to Septimius Severus supported the alimenta schemes whereby poorer Italian families were given help to feed their children. Doubtless imperial advisors were as much concerned with the falling numbers of Italian soldiers in the Roman army as with the plight of the citizens who would give them birth (see Patterson 1987, cf. Woelf 1990). There is, however, no evidence that the practice of exposing infants and in particular female infants was ever questioned. Certainly, in upper-class Roman circles, while patria potestas diminished along with manus marriages, one of the remnants of this power was the right to expose an unwanted child. Patria potestas was limited in 318 (Cod. Inst. 9.17), and exposure probably banned by the Christian emperor Valentinian in 374 (Cod. Theod. 9.14.1).

By this time Britain had been a part of the Roman empire for more than 300 years, and the disparity between numbers of males and females observed in Rome was also reflected in cemetery populations in this part of the empire. It would appear that the practice of selective infanticide came to Britain with the Romans in the first century A.D., and that it continued virtually until the end of the occupation, with some significant exceptions.

It might be argued that this study is dealing with Britain, not Rome, and that differing customs may have obtained in that part of the world, and may even have varied within Britain itself. That is undoubtedly true, and there is no way of telling to what extent the concept of patria potestas was current in Britain or, indeed, how widespread was the adoption of Roman law. But if the sites where there is a preponderance of males to females are examined, it will be seen that these are found in what might be considered the most Romanised parts of the province, and in cemeteries
which yielded grave goods which were indicative of long contact with Rome. For example, the late first/early second-century structures 1, 3 and 4 at Derby Racecourse contained human remains accompanied by a pig, suggesting the early adoption of Roman burial practice (Cic. de Leg. 2.22, 57). Structure 1 also had a number of lamps and other Roman-type grave goods. Most of the animal bones at Derby Racecourse cemetery were from pigs, but there were also chicken bones, and the cock was an attribute of Mercury, messenger of the gods (Hom. Hymn Her. 572), who accompanied the dead to the Otherworld. (That is not to say, however, that grave offerings of pigs or fowls were unknown in the Iron Age. There were a pig and two fowls in the late Iron Age cemetery at Mill Hill. Deal.) Contact with Rome may have been well established before the occupation: in regard to the cemetery at Verulamium, which has an atypical disproportion of males to females for the late Iron Age, the archaeologists observe, 'throughout the first half of the first century AD burials on both sides of the English Channel are indistinguishable;...there are identical collections of Gallo-Belgic imports and brooches' (Stead and Rigby 1989, 86).

We might also look at the situation in Britain prior to the coming of Rome. The burial evidence was extrapolated from 16 sites from the late pre-Roman Iron Age (Illus. 2). These included the 'Arras' culture sites of Cowlam, (Stead 1986), Garston Slack/Kirkburn and Rudston/Burton Fleming (Stead 1991), and Wetwang Slack, Hum. (Dent 1982; Whinster 1981, 102), as well as Baldock, Herts. (Stead and Rigby 1986), Bledlow, Bucks. (Collard and Parkhouse 1993), 'Central Southern England' (Whinster 1981, 4-30), Chichester (Westhampnett By-pass), West Sussex. (Fitzpatrick 1997), Danebury, Hants. (Cunliffe 1984), Deal (Mill Hill), Kent (Parfitt 1993), Dorchester (Poundbury Camp) Dorset (Farwell and Molleson 1993), Maiden Castle, Dorset (Wheele 1943; Whinster 1981, 37-47), Litton Cheney and Whitcombe, Dorset (Whinster 1981, 43-5), Owlebury, Hants. (Collis 1977), and Verulamium (King Harry Lane), Herts. (Stead and Rigby 1989). Burials were cremations or inhumations, and most were in very small cemeteries, when such common burial grounds existed. For example, the Baldock burials numbered only four, but were included here because of the later ones from the Romano-British period. There are some multiple-site groupings: a number of inhumations comprising pit burials, 'orthodox' graves, and burials in ditches, ramparts and banks from central southern England, collated by Dr Whinster (1981), are listed under that heading; and the data from Maiden Castle are compiled from Phases A and B (M = 4; F = 6), Phase C (M = 8; F = 7) and the 'War Cemetery' (M = 22; F = 10) at that site.

It is obvious that the same problems of selection and interpretation in Roman Britain apply to the Iron Age, although they are compounded by the paucity of detail in many reports. The more recent and more comprehensive publication of some larger sites such as the barrow cemeteries in East Yorkshire, the King Harry Lane cremation burials at Verulamium and the inhumation cemetery at Mill Hill in Kent has allowed a reasonable analysis to be undertaken.

This shows that the overall percentages are the same for male and female, although there do appear to have been regional differences, and perhaps some segregation of burials may have occurred. As with the Roman analysis, when cemeteries with fewer
## SHORTER CONTRIBUTIONS

### ILLUS. 2 Women in Iron-Age cemeteries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Approx. number of dated burials</th>
<th>% of identified Adults Sexed</th>
<th>Number of M/TM &amp; % of Sexed Adults</th>
<th>Number of F/F &amp; % of Sexed Adults</th>
<th>Unsexed Adults identified</th>
<th>Adolescents/Children/Infants/Neonates identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ares Culture:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowlam #</td>
<td>C2-1 BC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2/50% 2/50%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorten Slack/</td>
<td>C3-1 BC</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8/47% 9/53%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>N1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkburn #</td>
<td>C2-1 BC</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>8/47% 9/53%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>C 5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudgeway/</td>
<td>C3-1 BC</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>70/41% 11/59%</td>
<td>4?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burton Fleming #</td>
<td>C1 BC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wetwang Slack #</td>
<td>C1 BC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1/50% 1/50%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>C 2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldock #</td>
<td>C1 BC-AD C1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1/50% 1/50%</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>A/C 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bledlow # *</td>
<td>AD C1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4/15% 22/85%</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Central Southern England' #</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chichester</td>
<td>90-50 BC</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4/15% 22/85%</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenningham By-pass #</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danebury</td>
<td>50-50 BC</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8/50% 8/50%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Period #</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deal</td>
<td>C2-3 BC</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14/47% 16/53%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A/C 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mill Hill # *</td>
<td>AD C1</td>
<td>5 #</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>12/52% 11/48%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C 5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester/Dorset</td>
<td>late IA</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>12/52% 11/48%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C 5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poundbury IA #</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Dunmow'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maiden Castle #</td>
<td>C2 AD-AD mid C1</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34/60% 23/40%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilian Chene #</td>
<td>AD C1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>1/60% 2/40%</td>
<td>1?</td>
<td>A/C 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whittingham #</td>
<td>AD C1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6/67% 3/33%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>C 1:1:7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owstoke # *</td>
<td>C1 BC</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4/67% 2/33%</td>
<td>14?</td>
<td>N 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verulamium</td>
<td>AD 1-60</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>73/24% 25/26%</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>A 5: C12; N 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Harry Lane # **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>#1929</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>389 474</td>
<td>298</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If cemeteries with fewer than 50% of adults sexed (including 'Central Southern England' and Verulamium) are eliminated, M = 51%, F = 49%.

If cemeteries with fewer than 30 sexed burials are eliminated, M = 51%, F = 49%.

If sexed cremations are eliminated, M = 48%, F = 52%.

than 30 sexed burials are disregarded, the percentages vary slightly (M = 51%, F = 49%). If, as for the Romano-British sites, we eliminate cemeteries which have fewer than 50% of all adults sexed, then the result is still M = 51%, F = 49%. But this would exclude two large burial groups, 'Central Southern England' with 109 sexed burials.
(48% of identifiable adults sexed) and Verulamium, with 97 (35%). It is proposed, therefore, to include these in any comparison with data from the Roman period, together with all other cemeteries with more than 30 sexed burials, but to disregard individual figures from the small cemeteries of Cowlam, Garton Slack/Kirkburn, Baldock, Bledlow, Chichester Westhampnett Bypass, Danebury Late Period, Poundbury Iron Age, Litton Cheney, Whitcombe and Owlebury.

The Iron-Age figures (M = 50%, F = 50%) can now be compared with those of the Roman period (M = 57%, F = 43%); it is at once evident that there is a decline in the number of females being reared.

This premise can be supported to some extent by a study of the skeletal evidence in the cemeteries from the Roman period, and the incidence of congenital defects which are carried in families. To date only two reports have produced enough detail to allow such an examination to be made; a third may give some support. While the information from these reports differs in substance, as evidence it points in the same direction.

The first site, Icklingham, was a small cemetery of 50 identifiable bodies, with 41% of the sexed adult population female and 59% male. A congenital defect, gonial eversion of the mandible, believed to be a family trait, was found in 68% of the males in the sample, thus indicating a close relationship between them; on the other hand, the same defect was found in only 26% of the females. This could suggest a certain amount of culling of female infants in the community, to the extent that the adult females in the cemetery were not as closely related to each other or to the males. The sample is very small, however, and the bone specialist concedes that the defect may be sex-linked (Wells 1976, 107). Alternatively, it could suggest an influx of females into the settlement from outside the local gene pool.

Poundbury and Cammington cemeteries have a different type of evidence which is perhaps more conclusive. In the adult population of both sites there were actually more females than males—a feature to be addressed later. Another congenital defect, dental agenesis or hypodontia (a missing third molar), also an hereditary trait, was found in 43% of females and 33% of males at Poundbury (Moleson 1993, tab. 169), and in 62% of females and only 38% of males at Cammington (Brothwell et al. 2000, tab. 36, fig. 180). This suggests an absence of infanticide of females at these sites, a situation also proposed for Poundbury after an examination of the perinatal burials in the cemetery (Moleson 1993, 174).

From Cammington there is also the evidence of a spinal abnormality, a cleft atlas vertebra, which was found in five men and five women, and interpreted as "a gene-based congenital defect" (Brothwell et al. 2000, 201). While the sample is small, it supports the findings from the dental study.

All of these cemeteries are identified as Christian (Watts 1991) and Christian leaders opposed infanticide. But it is, perhaps, significant that infanticide was still prevalent amongst Christians at least as late as the beginning of the fourth century A.D.: in c. 305, the Council of Elvira (canons 63, 68) condemned the practice. The solution to this seeming contradiction lies, it is suggested, in the dates of the cemeteries, and the
circumstances of their going out of use. The degree of Romanisation of the population might also be a factor when considering these and other sites.

The cemetery at Icklingham began around the mid fourth century, over what has been interpreted as an earlier pagan site. Its use probably ceased a decade or so before the end of the century when it and a small apsidal building and associated D-shaped structure, identified as a church and baptistery, appear to have come to an abrupt end. The cemetery may have barely lasted two generations. It seems that the Christian phase at Icklingham was too short-lived to produce a change in attitude to infanticide and the killing of female infants which would effect a subsequent correction in numbers of the sexes.

On the other hand, the Christian phase at Poundbury probably began around 335, but continued to the end of the Roman occupation and very likely well beyond; the numismatic evidence in Britain generally runs out in the first decade of the fifth century, when coinage ceased to be brought into the province. The archaeological evidence from the burials themselves suggests that they, too, decreased in number over time with a concomitant decline in the standard of interment (Farwell and Molleson 1993, tab. 5, 128; Watts 1998, 114). The cemetery probably lasted 80 or more years in its Christian phase, time enough for changed social practices to be reflected in the burial pattern.

This cemetery, like others identified as Christian, had infants buried along with adults, but in discrete graves, and given the same respect as adults (see Watts 1989). There were a number of neonates found; these have been identified as 59% male, and 41% female, the kinds of figures which one would expect in a modern context and almost exactly the same percentages found in the excavation of a modern cemetery in Hungary of 59.5% male infants and 40.5% female (Farwell and Molleson 1993, 173–74). It is, therefore, very interesting to see that there were more females than males in the adult population in the Poundbury cemetery: 51% female to 49% male. This means that more females survived to adulthood than males, and indicates that female infants had been raised to maturity. Indeed, of the very elderly, and there were quite a number at Poundbury, the greater percentage were women.

It is also noteworthy that the percentage of women in the main Christian cemetery at Poundbury is greater than in the peripheral (presumably pagan) burials, many of which were contemporaneous; and at Colchester, the percentage of women in the Butt Road cemetery increases from Phase I (pagan) to the later Phase II (Christian). Both these sites continued into the fifth century A.D.

It is concluded therefore, that, in those cemeteries which were in existence early in the Roman period, there is evidence that selective infanticide was practised. In the fourth century, however, with the expansion of Christianity, and continuing on into the fifth century with the removal of direct Roman influence in Britain, the number of female infants allowed to live increased, to the extent that a 'normal' ratio of females to males finally became established.

But the situation at Cannington, in Somerset, is beyond what might be considered normal. The large number of women in the cemetery (61%) may reflect not only the Christian character of the population, but also the more unsettled times of the later fifth and following centuries. There may even have been some assimilation of Saxons,
as a number of graves dating to the post-Roman period contained knives – an intrusive element in the cemetery. However the excavator believes this could as readily indicate cultural or trade links (Rahtz et al. 2000, 411, 415–16). Suggested reasons given for the imbalance of the sexes include: a higher mortality rate for male infants, despite an excess of males over females at birth; segregation of burials caused by younger males being buried away from home as the result of war; female immigration (although elsewhere in the report there is the suggestion of inbreeding; e.g. Rahtz et al. 2000, 188, 201); or the result of a bias caused by the ease of identification of females (Rahtz et al. 2000, 139).

It was suggested above that the degree of Romanisation might also be a factor to consider when seeking reasons for the imbalance of the sexes in Romano-British cemeteries, and that such sites are located in the most highly Romanised area of the island. Some with the lowest percentage of females, such as York and Cirencester, were also long-established towns having strong connections with Rome: both were probably provincial capitals by the fourth century A.D. Yet there were low numbers of females in the two burial groups at Ashton. At best Ashton could be termed a 'small town', but its early establishment in the Claudian period (Bunham and Wacher 1990, 279) also points to a lengthy knowledge of Roman customs.

One final problem must be addressed: the fate of the unwanted infants. Archaeologists at Romano-British sites have over many years recorded the remains of infants in buildings, wells, middens and other domestic contexts. It is clear that Roman law regarding the prohibition of intramural burial did not apply or was not applied to infants. The subject has been treated in some depth by the present writer (Watts 1989; 1991, 40–51). Unwanted infants would have included both freeborn and slave. Freeborn children could legally be exposed until the legislation of Valentinian in the late fourth century. Slave women would certainly have taken a risk, since both they and the children they bore were the property of their master, but we are told by Dio Chrysostom (Disc. 15.8) that many destroyed their unborn or newly born children in order to avoid adding the burdens of parenting to those of slavery. Undoubtedly slave children were among those remains found at many sites. Others were free, and a greater percentage of these would have been female. Advances in the sexing of infants will help to confirm this in future excavations (e.g. Schutkowski 1993).

Despite the poor prospects of survival for newly-born females, when they did survive there is little evidence that females received worse treatment than males. The inscriptions of Roman Britain show that women could have status and respect; and a preliminary analysis of the reports on the bones and teeth from the cemeteries studied here indicates that females generally suffered no more than males from malnutrition, or from accidents or incidents which resulted in broken limbs, particularly 'parry' fractures of the ulna. This aspect of the burial evidence and the likely position of women in late Iron Age and Roman Britain will be discussed in a future publication.

Many Roman practices were adopted by the native population of Britain, especially those in the towns and in areas in close contact with Rome. The exposure or killing of infants, particularly females, was one of the most repugnant, to us. But it lasted only as
long as the Romans in Britain, and does seem to have been in the process of being curtailed with the coming of Christianity. Had Christianity prospered in Britain, it is likely that the male:female ratios in Romano-British cemeteries might have equalised during the Roman occupation. As it was, the failure of Christianity coincided with the withdrawal of Rome. The religions, cults and practices of pre-Roman Britain, which had co-existed and to some extent had been submerged by centuries of occupation, were resumed and even revived; the Saxons brought with them a different set of mores, and the imbalance between the sexes largely disappeared.

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University of Queensland

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