BRADLEY HILL, SOMERSET, AND THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN: A STUDY IN CONTINUITY?

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years archaeological interpretations of the end of Roman Britain have been focused on a single key issue: did a 'Romanised' way of life survive the end of the Roman administration *c*. 410? Until 1979 and the publication of an influential volume entitled *The End of Roman Britain* (Casey 1979) it was largely assumed that it did. One of the key sites in this 'long chronology' view was *Insula* XXVII at *Verulamium* (St Albans) where Frere (1983) had demonstrated that building activity had continued into the 5th century. However, with the advent of professional 'rescue' excavations this long chronology was challenged. With every site that was dug it became increasingly difficult to demonstrate that the *Verulamium* sequence was typical. The 'short chronology' view was established and to a large extent it still holds the field to this day (Faulkner 2001).

The 'short chronology' has always had it opponents and a number of sites dug in the past 20 years, notably Wroxeter (Barker 1997) and Birdoswald (Wilmott 1997), have demonstrated how subtle and ephemeral 'Dark Age' archaeology can be. Against this backcloth it is surprising to learn that the rural settlement of Bradley Hill in Somerset, which can be shown convincingly to span the year AD 400, has only ever gained a limited acceptance in print as an early 5th-century site, even in works written by those predisposed to the 'long chronology' (Dark 2001, 119). Therefore this paper reviews the evidence for 5th-century activity at the 'late-Roman' farmstead and associated cemetery at Bradley Hill, near Somerton.

THE TOPOGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Topographically Bradley Hill stands approximately 1km north of Somerton on the cusp of a ridge cut by the River Cary to the east. To the north of the site a steep scarp slope drops to the flatter and wetter land around Compton Dundon and the Somerset Levels beyond. The late-Roman farmstead at Bradley Hill was part of an extremely dense concentration of Romano-British rural settlement in the hinterland of Ilchester (Fig. 1). This hinterland was, in turn, part of a heavily exploited and densely occupied Romano-British landscape in southern Somerset (Leech 1977; Leach 1994, fig 2).

The relationship of the apparently prosperous 4th century in Somerset with the succeeding post-Roman, or early medieval centuries has stimulated considerable debate over the past three decades. Our understanding of 5th-century Somerset is largely dominated by a handful of re-occupied hillforts like Cadbury Castle (Alcock 1995) and Cadbury Congresbury (Rahtz *et al*. 1993). However, it is currently difficult to demonstrate that occupation at these hillforts began prior to the mid 5th century – at the earliest. This separation of 'late-Roman' and 'post-Roman' sites is not seen in many cemetery sequences. At Cannington (Rahtz *et al*. 2000) the extensive post-Roman inhumation cemetery may have begun as early as the 3rd century. The late-Roman inhumation cemetery at Poundbury, Dorset (Farwell and Molleson 1993) continued to be used into the 5th century and a similar sequence is plausible at the Northover cemetery, Ilchester (Leach 1994, 98–9). The post-Roman cemetery at Shepton

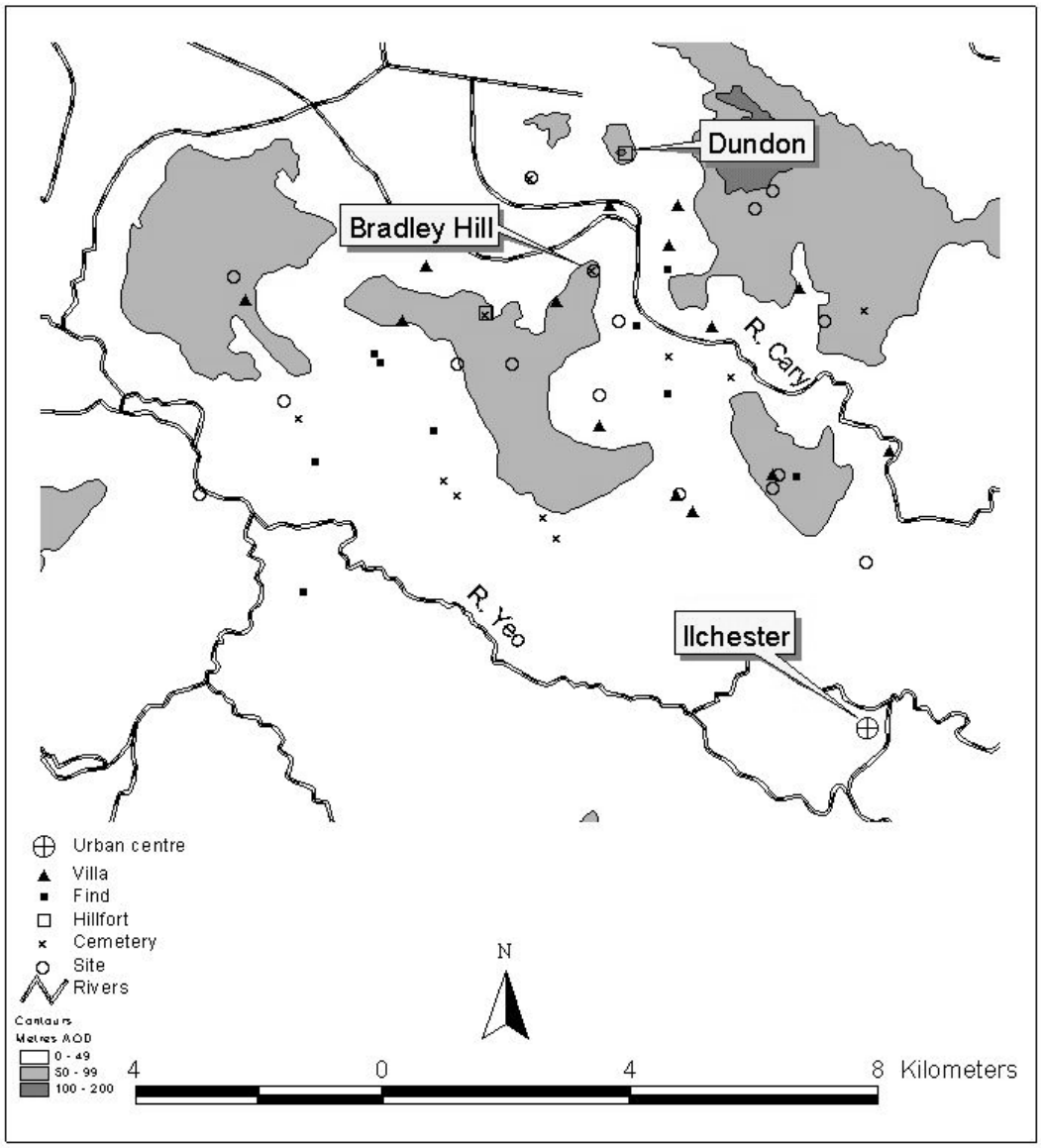

Fig. 1 Romano-British sites and finds north-west of Ilchester

Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001) is equally provocative as it has a fascinating relationship with the latest 'Roman' structures and deposits on the site.

This brief discussion of the archaeological background can be easily summarised. Somerset has a wealth of late-Roman and early post-Roman sites that have been well studied. By combining the knowledge and interpretations derived from these two datasets a greater understanding of Roman Britain's transformation into Anglo-Saxon England can be achieved. This paper will not, of course, achieve such a grand objective. Instead it provides a new interpretation of a late Romano-British site in southern Somerset. This interpretation will hopefully be a single step towards that wider and more grandiose goal.

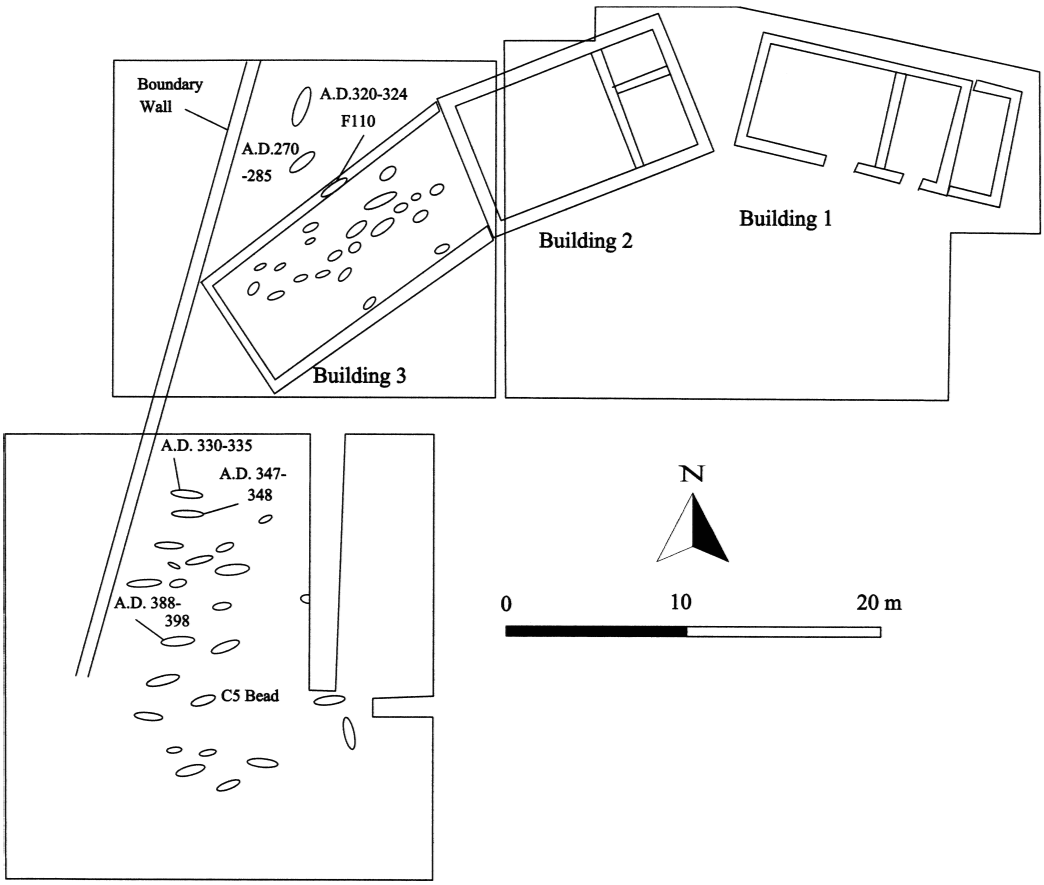

Fig. 2 Bradley Hill – overall plan (after Leech 1981, fig 2)

BRADLEY HILL REVIEWED

Excavations at Bradley Hill between 1968 and 1972 revealed three buildings and associated graves (Leech 1981). These burials formed two discrete groups of inhumations – one set within the interior of Building 3 and the other, on a different orientation, in the south-west of the excavated area (Fig. 2). Aerial photographic evidence suggests that these structures may have been part of a larger complex (Somerset HER 54501). The construction of Building 1, probably a dwelling, was dated by a coin to after *c*. 325 although it was noted that the flagged floors of the main occupation phase may have sealed coins of *c*. 365 (Leech 1981, 183). Occupation debris overlying the paved floor contained a coin of 392–402. The excavation of Building 2, also a dwelling, revealed a similar story. The paved floor in this building sealed two coins of *c*. 330–345 and a coin of 364–378. Occupation debris over the floor contained a coin of 388–402. Building 3 was a large addition to the west end of Building 2. In its early phases it seems to have functioned as a barn or storehouse but in its later phases it may have become the focus for ritual activities (see below). A burial in this building contained a coin of 341–348 and was sealed by occupation layers containing three coins of 388–402. These coins provide only *a terminus post quem* of 388, the earliest date at which they could have been dropped (Barker 1993, 205–6, 224–9), for the latest occupation on the site. This date is likely to be too early and Ryan's (1988, 135–7) statistical analysis of 4th-century coin groups suggests that the average age of a 4th-century coin at deposition was almost 22 years. Furthermore we can assume that copper-alloy coins circulated as part

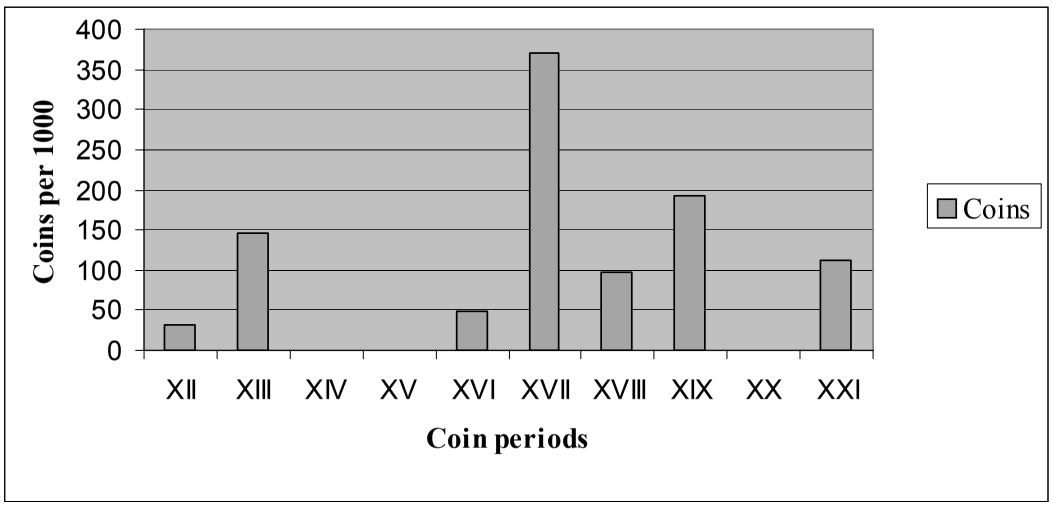

Fig. 3 The pattern of coin loss at Bradley Hill

of a money-using economy until the cessation of gold and silver importation into Britain. This occurred after the usurpation of Constantine III in 407 (Burnett 1984). Thus from the coin evidence alone it seems highly likely that the site remained occupied into the 5th century. Leech (1981, 210, 238) argued that this evidence, coupled with the presence of a small quantity of handmade, shell-tempered pottery, argued for occupation to *c.* 450. Given this the following quotation seems to be taking a foreshortened view of the evidence from Bradley Hill:

> … some sites in the south such as Bradley Hill (Somerset), *seem* to have continued for a time after the introduction of the latest Roman artefacts (Esmonde-Cleary 1989, 159, added emphasis)

Surprisingly, Dark, an archaeologist predisposed to a 'long' chronology, has a similar view:

> The buildings [at Bradley Hill] *may* have been occupied into the late 4th, or 5th century … (Dark 2001, 119, added emphasis)

The following discussion attempts to demonstrate that the possibility of 5th-century activity at Bradley Hill is not a possibility at all, but a likelihood.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE 5TH CENTURY

The most obvious starting point for any discussion of possible 5th-century activity at Bradley Hill is the finds recovered in the excavations. The coin evidence has already been mentioned briefly and it seems logical to begin with this group of material. Seventy-seven coins dating to between 260 and 402 were recovered (Leech 1981, 207–10). Nine of these coins (260–305) formed a small foundation hoard and are not considered further here. The remaining 68 coins (260–402) were converted into a coins per one thousand histogram in line with the methodology outlined by Reece (1991) (Fig. 3). This enables statistical comparisons to be undertaken between sites and reveals general patterns in coin use and deposition as well as variants from the norm. The Bradley Hill coins show a typical 4th-century pattern with peaks in loss of types which circulated in large numbers. These peaks are, as is common with most British sites, Periods XVII (Constantinian II) and XIX (Valentinianic). A smaller peak in Period XXI (Theodosian II), the latest coin period, is also relatively common, although it should be noted that many sites across Britain do not produce any Theodosian coins.

Only two of the Bradley Hill coins are unusual as site finds, a *siliqua* of 361–363 and a clipped *siliqua* of Arcadius (392–402). *Siliquae*, given their silver content, are rare discoveries outside of hoard groups and it has been argued that clipping is an ultimately late or immediately post-Roman phenomenon (Burnett 1984; Guest 2005, 123–9). Therefore the clipping of the Arcadian coin might have occurred in the early decades of the 5th century (Leech 1981, 210).

Pottery is usually seen as typologically stagnant in the later 4th century and of limited use in dating the 'end' of Romano-British settlements. Some significance, however, was placed on 17 sherds of poorly made of shell-tempered pottery imitating late-Roman Black-burnished forms. These sherds, Leech (1981, 238) thought, might point to 5th-century activity. Our knowledge of this material is still limited and its chronological implications are poorly understood. It is not represented in any of the late pottery assemblages associated with Theodosian coins at the nearby site of Catsgore (Leech 1982, 149–74) and no stratified sherds were recovered from excavations at Ilchester (Leach 1982, 143). The absence of post-Roman pottery dating to between 475 and 550 at Bradley Hill (Leech 1981, 183–4) need not be significant as its distribution is largely restricted to high-status hilltop sites such as Cadbury Castle (Rahtz *et al*. 1993, fig 171). Thus it could be claimed that pottery is of little use in this attempt to demonstrate 5th-century activity at Bradley Hill.

Despite the negative conclusion advanced above there is still hope that pottery might help us to identify the 5th century. Two sherds of unusual South-East Dorset Black-burnished ware bowls were published from Bradley Hill. These vessels are globular, with an everted rim and decorated with diagonal burnished lines (Fig. 4). At Greyhound Yard in Dorchester these were recovered from Period 10 (350–450) deposits and classified as 'Type 18' vessels (Seager-Smith and Davies 1993, 232–3). Similar vessels occurred in 'collapse' deposits in the Dorchester bath-house (Andrews forthcoming) as well as in very late 4th or 5th-century deposits at Bath (Green and Young 1985, 158) and Poundbury (Davies and Hawkes 1987, fig 88.41). It seems likely that this type of Black-burnished vessel represents a late 4th or 5th-century form and should be taken as a good indicator of very late and early post-Roman activity (Gerrard 2004).

It is not just pottery that points to possible 5th-century activity at Bradley Hill. North of Building 3 a small copper-alloy penannular brooch was recovered in an area of rubble and occupation debris (Leech 1981, 193). It was 30mm in diameter and had in the excavator's words 'turned over terminals with incised line decoration' (Leech 1981, 214) and was tentatively dated to the 1st century. However, the description and illustration strongly suggest that this brooch can be classed as a Fowler Type D7. The majority of examples of this class of brooch have been recovered from very late Roman contexts on Hadrian's Wall. This led Snape (1992) to suggest

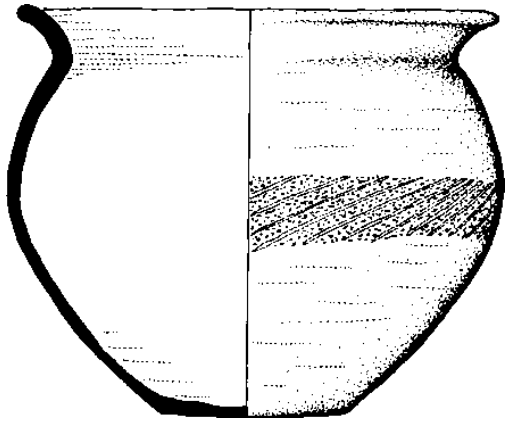

Fig. 4 A Type 18 vessel similar to examples from Bradley Hill (after Davies and Hawkes 1987, fig. 88.41).

that the Fowler D7 brooches could be used as an indicator of sub-Roman occupation. Interestingly, an example of this type of brooch has been identified at Woodcutts in Dorset (Snape 1992, 159). Therefore the Bradley Hill example may not be the isolated south-western outlier it first appears to be.

Two glass beads, one from a burial (discussed more fully below), and another from an area outside of the buildings were thought by Guido to be of 4th or 5th-century date (Leech 1981, 216). Glass beads are relatively common finds on sites occupied in the post-Roman period. There are examples from the 5th and 6th-century sites of Cannington (Guido 2000, 311) and Cadbury Congresbury (Guido 1993, 143–4) and there are further examples of possible post-Roman beads from 'late-Roman' contexts at Ilchester (Guido 1982, 232–3), Worgret (Hearne and Smith 1991, 92) and Ower, both in Dorset (Guido 1987, 100–2). It seems likely that the Bradley Hill beads, coupled with the evidence from the coinage, pottery and the penannular brooch, point firmly to activity on this site beyond 410.

THE INHUMATION BURIALS

The above discussion has shown that there seems to be artefactual evidence from Bradley Hill that points to 5th-century activity. A number of authors have drawn attention to the fact that Bradley Hill is an unusual site because it has associated burials. This is an uncommon feature of 'Roman' period sites and it has been suggested that the burials may be of 'Dark

Age' date (Dark 2001, 119; Esmonde-Cleary 1989, 159).

The burials at Bradley Hill are divided into two main groups. The first of these groups includes a series of inhumations within and around Building 3. These burials at first glance (Fig. 2) look as if they postdate the building (Dark 2001, 119). If the burials did postdate Building 3 then they would provide a stratigraphic sequence that demonstrated post-Roman activity. All of the burials would, if that were the case, cut an internal layer which contained Theodosian coinage. Furthermore the insertion of post-Roman burials into disused Roman structures is a relatively common phenomenon attested at Shepton Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001, 96) and elsewhere (Lucy 2000, fig 5.1d). However, the stratigraphy of the site does not allow this interpretation to stand.

Burial F110 appears to cut, and thus postdate the wall of Building 3 (Dark 2001, 119). Leech (1981, 189) noted the unusual position of this burial but commented that most of its bones were missing and argued that it was a reburial of an inhumation disturbed during the construction of Building 3. Of the burials within the walls all appear to have been sealed by the internal occupation layer. It is possible that the grave cuts were missed during excavation (Leech 1981, 189), but this seems unlikely because very little material culture was recovered from the lower grave fills. If they had been dug through the occupation layer one might expect some of the 900 pieces of Black-burnished ware (personal observation) from that deposit to have found their way into the graves when they were backfilled (Leech 1981, table 1). Thus if these burials postdate the use of Building 3 we would have to postulate the demolition of the building followed by the insertion of the burials. The burials would then be sealed by an occupation layer. If this was the case then we have to ask how and why the layer of occupation debris was deposited. In short this sequence seems implausible and it is better to accept, no matter how unusual it may be, that the burials were contemporary with the use of the building as a standing structure during the late 4th century.

The second group of inhumations were buried south-west of the building complex. Twenty-one individuals were buried in east–west graves, arranged roughly in rows with their heads to the west. This may suggest that the inhabitants were Christians (Leech 1981, 203). Only four burials were accompanied with dateable artefacts, these included coins and a glass bead. Significantly, the date of these artefacts suggests that the cemetery moved south over time (Fig. 2). Thus the most northerly burial contains a coin of 330–335 while a grave in the southern part of the cemetery contained a dark blue facetted bead of a type 'commonly found in Gallo-Roman burials of the 5th–6th century' (Leech 1981, 216). As there are graves further south of this burial then it seems likely that people continued to be buried on this site well into the 5th century. Indeed, by comparison with similar cemeteries dated by radiocarbon analysis elsewhere in the county, such as Cannington (Rahtz *et al*. 2000), Henley Wood (Watts and Leach 1996) and Shepton Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001) it seems likely that burial on this site could continue into the 6th century.

INTERPRETING BRADLEY HILL IN THE 4TH AND 5TH CENTURIES

On its own no one strand of this argument could be categorically claimed as representing firm evidence of occupation extending into the 5th century at Bradley Hill. However, if we take the coins, the brooch, the beads and the pottery then these threads of material culture amount to a considerable body of evidence. This evidence gains further support from the southward movement of burials in the external cemetery. Furthermore these east–west orientated, unaccompanied burials can be paralleled in 5th and 6th-century phases on Romano-British sites. If the evidence of 5th-century activity is accepted at Bradley Hill then it is relevant to consider the role of this site in the late 4th and 5th centuries. To this end some speculative interpretations are outlined below.

The earthworks of a univallate hillfort, Dundon, crown the summit of a free-standing hill just north of Bradley Hill near Compton Dundon (Burrow 1981, 214). Another hillfort-like enclosure is known from aerial photographs west of the Bradley Hill site at Park, Somerton (Webster and Croft 1990, 215–16) (Fig 1). Unfortunately, neither of these sites has seen extensive or modern archaeological investigation. Nevertheless, their proximity to a major Roman road crossing the Levels (Leach and Leech 1982, fig 8.20), the River Yeo, down which Mediterranean imports are presumed to have been traded during the later 5th and early 6th centuries (Alcock 1995, 151), and a wealthy Romano-British landscape, would suggest that both sites are prime candidates for post-Roman reoccupation. Some slender archaeological evidence for this suggestion

was possibly uncovered in a minor excavation at Dundon in 1997 (Hollinrake and Hollinrake 1997; Webster and Croft 1997, 177). This showed that a clay bank sealed the first stone and timber defensive circuit. Dating evidence was restricted to a few abraded sherds of Iron Age pottery in the stone defences so the clay bank phase is essentially undated. However, it could possibly be a 5th-century refurbishment.

If either Dundon or Park were occupied during the centuries after 400 then it might shed some light on the nature of activity at Bradley Hill. Excavation of a Romano-British temple at Henley Wood showed that a series of burials had been inserted into the ruins in the 5th and 6th century. These, the excavators hypothesised, may have been the inhabitants of the nearby hillfort of Cadbury Congresbury (Watts and Leach 1996, 147). A similar relationship between a late and post-Roman cemetery has been suggested at Cannington where small scale investigation of the hillfort suggested possible reoccupation in the 'Dark Ages' (Rahtz 1969, 66). An interpretation of the burials at Bradley Hill as those of the occupants of Dundon, perhaps burying their dead near the ruins where their 'Romano-British' ancestors had lived, is certainly possible.

An alternative interpretation to the one outlined above can be advanced however. If Bradley Hill was ruinous in the 5th-century and chosen as a cemetery site by the inhabitants of Dundon then why do the burials respect the buildings? We have seen (above) that there is no evidence to support the notion that the burials in Building 3 postdate that building's use. A better interpretation may be to suggest, as the excavator did (Leech 1981, 197), that the burials at Bradley Hill were the inhabitants of the site.

It is usually assumed that most Romano-British sites were abandoned in the early years of the 5th century and that their inhabitants moved to archaeologically invisible sites nearby (Esmonde-Cleary 1989, 179; Faulkner 2001, 175). While this may be true for many sites it is not necessarily true of Bradley Hill. The coins, pottery, beads and the brooch all point to activity on the site in the early decades of the 5th century. Furthermore, what would drive people to abandon such a site? Certainly the 5th century was a period of insecurity but the defences of Dundon or Park, whether refurbished or not, could offer protection in times of trouble. There is no reason to believe that the buildings themselves were either destroyed by hostile action or fell into rapid disrepair and collapsed. The roof of the Romano-British temple at Pagan's Hill seems not to have fallen until the Middle Ages (Rahtz 1951) and a Roman bath-house at Ravenglass in Cumbria still stands to this day.

If Bradley Hill was not abandoned in the early 5th century, when many sites were, then its survival needs to be explained. Discussions of the 'end' of Roman Britain usually focus on rural villas and urban sequences. This is mainly because the archaeological effort of the past century was concentrated on these sites. Very few low or medium-status sites have been extensively excavated relative to the number of investigations of towns or villas. This situation is changing but it will take time to redress the imbalance in the archaeological data that we have accumulated. The implications of this are quite profound because it means that interpretations of the 'end' are predominantly based on the sites that were most sensitive to socio-political change. Elite settlements, whether they be villas or town houses and the artisans that depended on them for their livelihoods, were the most susceptible to change during the turbulent times of the early 5th century (for instance Faulkner 2001, 176).

Bradley Hill, despite being a site with at least three mortared stone buildings, does not have many of the attributes that are usually needed to classify a site as a 'villa'. It lacks mosaic floors, hypocausts, wall plaster, and the bath-house that are usual in high status late-Roman domestic residences. Of course all of these attributes may be present in buildings not yet identified on Bradley Hill. However, if we accept that Bradley Hill is a non-villa farmstead, as the excavator asserted (Leech 1981, 206), then it perhaps represents a site occupied by people who were not members of the late-Roman elite. People who, more importantly, were not reinventing themselves as post-Roman rulers, or targets for 5th-century insurgents, whether they were Christian militants (Dark 1994, 58), left wing revolutionaries (Faulkner 2001, 174–80), or invading Anglo-Saxons. At a site like Bradley Hill we might expect life to carry on as normal. The sheep still needed shearing and the fields ploughing. The customary dues owed to the local *dominus* may have involved cleaning out the ditches of the old hillfort after 410 instead of digging a pit for the new plunge bath as it had before, but essentially little may have changed.

This speculation must, however, be linked to the material remains of the past excavated on Bradley Hill. Two aspects of the site are worthy of note in this context. First, Petts (1997, 103–5) has drawn attention to the modification of Buildings 1 and 2 at Bradley Hill into structures with a three room or unit ground plan. Such buildings are thought to have

contributed to early medieval or sub-Roman architecture and divisions of space (James *et al*. 1984). The divisions first become apparent at Bradley Hill in the late 4th century. Could it be that this arrangement prefigures the changed social circumstances of the 5th century? Second, many high status Romano-British rural buildings such as the 'villa' at Lufton, near Yeovil (Hayward 1952, 1972) saw dramatic changes in the way they were occupied in the last decades of the 4th century. Domestic refuse accumulated above mosaics, partition walls were inserted to divide rooms, and ovens or hearths were cut through floors. This occupation, usually labelled as the work of 'squatters', may in fact represent the transformation of an elite residence into a more economically useful structure. Indeed the modification and subdivision of such buildings is common across the late-Antique world (Ellis 1988). At Bradley Hill there is no 'squatter' occupation however. Instead the barn or byre (Building 3) was transformed into a structure in which people and infants were buried. An economically useful storehouse was transformed into a communal ritual focus. Again can this be seen as a transformation and continuation, not a dislocation, of a late-Roman social trajectory into the 5th century?

CONCLUSIONS

Two interpretations of the Bradley Hill structures and cemetery have been advanced above. This review has shown that there is a body of material culture, small though it may be, at Bradley Hill that points to activity after 400. Furthermore the cemetery has good parallels at other late and post-Roman sites. The interpretations derived from this knowledge are speculative and partial. They serve to demonstrate that the study of a single site can offer new insights into complex and fiercely debated issues. The opportunities that Bradley Hill and other sites north of Somerton offer us to improve our understanding of the transformation of Roman Britain in Somerset are immense. On a site level the nature of Bradley Hill needs to be clarified. Geophysical survey could reveal whether the buildings dug by Leech are part of a larger complex as hinted at by an aerial photograph. Radiocarbon dating of the inhumation cemetery would reveal the chronology of burial at Bradley Hill in absolute, rather than relative terms. Looking beyond Bradley Hill the nature of the Roman landscape north of Somerton needs to be clarified, and the role that the hillforts of Dundon and Park may have played, if any, in the 5th and 6th centuries discovered.

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