

NEW RADIOCARBON DATES FROM THE CEMETERY AT BRADLEY HILL, SOMERTON

The 'late Roman' farmstead and cemetery at Bradley Hill, near Somerton was excavated by Roger Leech during the 1970s (Leech 1981) and has become an important type site for understanding the form and nature of dispersed late-Roman settlements and their demography (for instance Ward-Perkins 2005, 139–42). In a review of the site published in this journal in 2005 I highlighted the potential evidence for continuous occupation of this site well into the 5th century. That evidence was basically artefactual and concentrated on the presence of very late Roman coins (clipped *siliquae*), pottery, a Fowler D7 brooch and a glass bead (Gerrard 2005, 4–5). The latter

object came from a burial in the adjacent cemetery and it is this cemetery that is the focus of the present paper.

South of the buildings were 21 individuals buried in rows of east–west graves (Fig. 1). Many of the burials were in slab-lined graves and few were accompanied by any significant grave goods. This type of burial practice emerged during the 3rd century AD (Rahtz 1977) and, in the areas beyond the writ of 'pagan Anglo-Saxon' burial rites, it continued perhaps as late as the 8th century, leading David Petts (2004) to dub this burial tradition 'late antique'. In the excavation report Roger Leech (1981, 201) argued that the cemetery formed the last

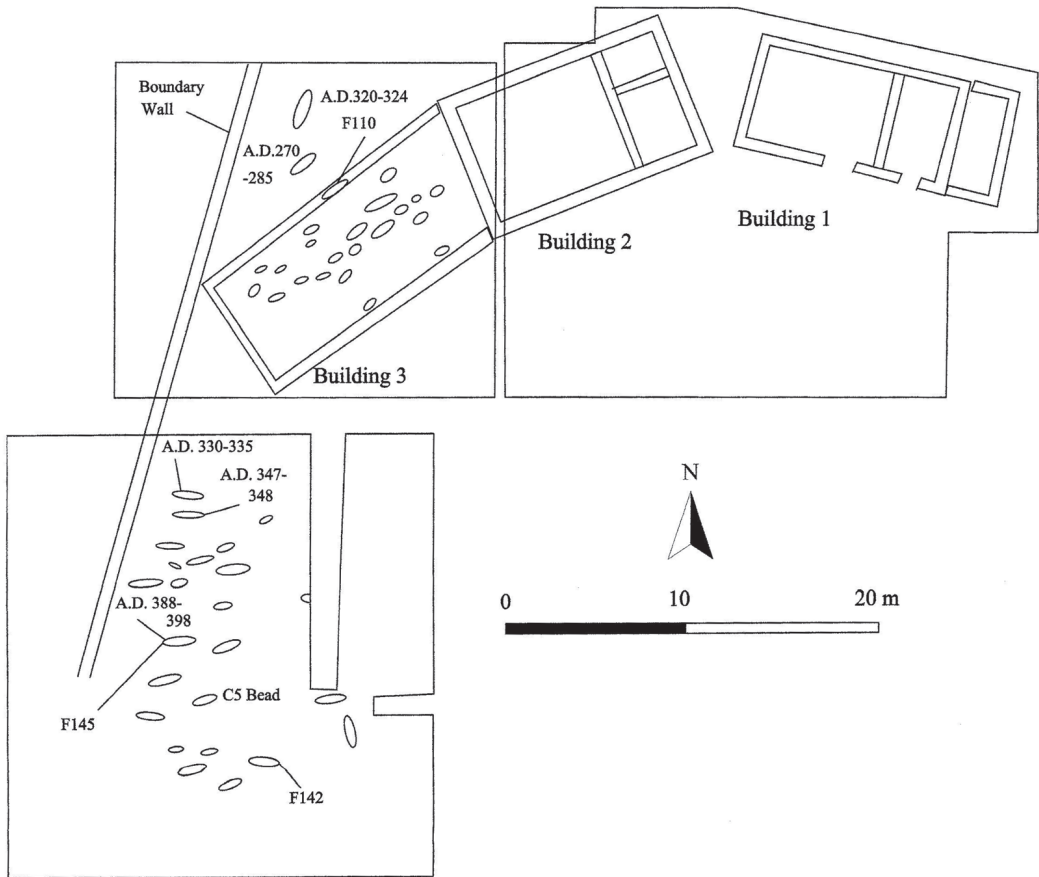


Fig. 1 Location of buildings and cemetery

resting place of the inhabitants of the Roman buildings and that it continued to be used into the 5th century. Other authors have suggested that the cemetery might be of 5th or 6th-century date (Dark 2001, 199; Esmonde-Cleary 1989, 159) and Philip Rahtz, discussing this type of cemetery more generally, has noted that: 'Where a late Roman date is claimed [for cemeteries such as that at Bradley Hill] (*ie* in the 4th or early 5th century), it is usually on the fallacious basis of dating by late Roman coins or pottery, which can only usually give a *terminus post quem* ...' (Rahtz 1977, 55).

At Bradley Hill the only artefacts associated with the graves were three coins and a glass bead (Gerrard 2005, fig. 2). In my review of the site I argued that the distribution of these finds suggested that the cemetery had moved progressively south (away from the buildings) over time. The earliest coins (AD 330–

335 and AD 347–348) were in the two northernmost graves, a later coin (AD 388–398) was in a grave further south, and the bead, of probable 5th-century date (Leech 1981, 216), was further south again with more, undated, burials beyond. The conclusion was that this was a cemetery that originated in the late-Roman period and continued into the 5th and possibly 6th centuries (Gerrard 2005, 6). Furthermore, at the end of the article it was noted that the chronology of the cemetery needed to be resolved in absolute terms using radiocarbon dating (Gerrard 2005, 8).

In 2010 I received funding from the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (University of Cambridge) to undertake a number of radiocarbon dates on seemingly 'late Roman' samples from Somerset and Dorset. The full implications of the results of this small project are still being considered.

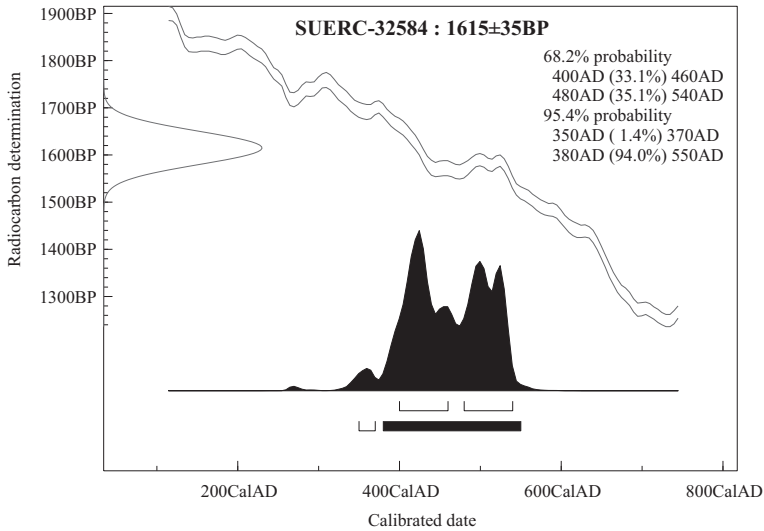


Fig. 2 The radiocarbon calibration plot for burial F145

However, as it included two burials from Bradley Hill it seems useful to take this opportunity to publish those radiocarbon dates.

The two burials selected for radiocarbon dating were F142 (a female in her early 20s) and F145 (a male in his 50s and associated with a coin of AD 388–398). Both were extended inhumations in slab-lined graves (Leech 1981). The decision to radiocarbon date F145, given his association with a coin, might appear unusual. Certainly in a commercial context it would be difficult to justify such expenditure on an individual associated with ‘good’ dating evidence. However, in the light of Rahtz’s (1977, 55) comments it seemed helpful to test how close the burial’s date was to the *terminus post quem* offered by the coin. F142 was one of the most southerly burials and thus presented an opportunity to test the hypothesis that the cemetery moved south over time.

Burial F145 was radiocarbon dated to 1615±35BP (SUERC 32584) (Fig. 2). Calibrated at a probability of 68.2% the date is AD 400–540 and at 95.4% AD 350–550. However, it should be noted that there is only a 1.4% probability of the date being AD 350–

370. Thus the balance of probability suggests that F145 ought to be dated to the 5th or early 6th century. This is consistent with the *terminus post quem* given by the coin that indicates the burial must have occurred after AD 388. However, it ought to give little comfort to those who might be tempted to date this or any other burial to *c.* 400 on the basis of a coin. Burial F142 was radiocarbon dated to 1550±30 (SUERC 32585), calibrated at a probability of 68.2% the date is AD 430–560 and at 95.4% AD 420–580 (Fig. 3). This individual, like F145, appears to be a 5th or 6th-century inhumation. Technical information for both samples is presented in Table 1.

What has long been suspected, that the Bradley Hill cemetery was either of post-Roman date or contained a major post-Roman element, appears to have been clearly demonstrated by these dates. It should be considered alongside other post-Roman cemeteries such as Cannington (Rahtz *et al.* 2000), Henley Wood (Watts and Leach 1996), Shepton Mallett (Leach and Evans 2001) and Stoneage Barton Farm (Webster and Brunning 2004). The possibility that the cemetery had its origins in the Roman period remains likely but its relationship to

TABLE 1: TECHNICAL INFORMATION FOR THE TWO RADIOCARBON DATES

Lab. Code	Radiocarbon age BP	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ relative to VDPB	$\delta^{15}\text{N}$ relative to air	C/N ratio (molar)
SUERC 32584 / GU 22904	1615±35	-21.0‰	11.4‰	3.3
SUERC 32585 / GU 22905	1550±30	-20.6‰	11.1‰	3.3

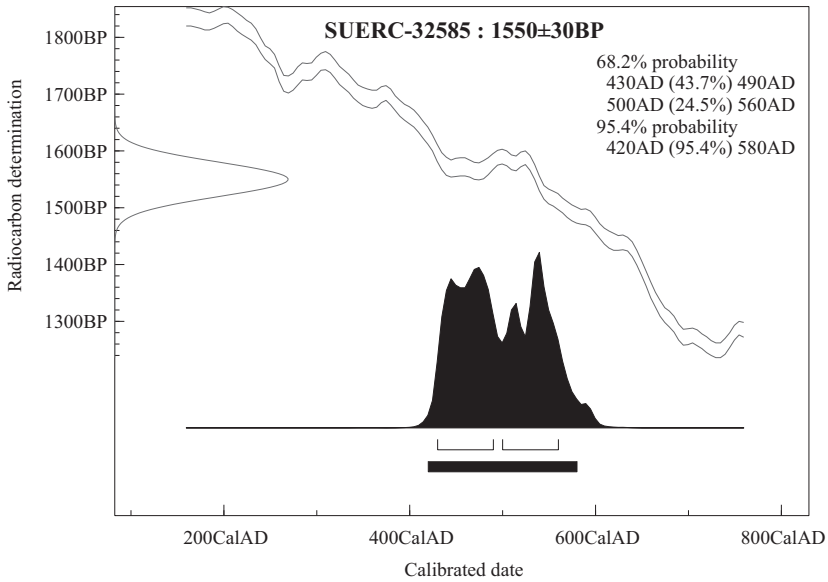


Fig. 3 The radiocarbon calibration plot for burial F142

the buildings to the north is uncertain. Were these buildings occupied or ruinous when these individuals were being buried? The answer to this question can only come with more radiocarbon dates. Finally, it should be noted that the cemetery at Bradley Hill is something of a cautionary tale. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that burials in close proximity to a 'Roman' site must be of Roman date. Yet Bradley Hill and other sites show the necessity of radiocarbon dating inhumation burials to establish their true chronology.

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