

SHORTER PAPERS

NEW RADIOCARBON DATES FOR EARLY MEDIEVAL SOMERSET

Introduction *Mick Aston*

When Professor Philip Rahtz wrote about ‘The Dark Ages 400-700’ in 1982 (Rahtz 1982) he said ‘we must regard cemeteries as fundamental to dark age studies’ ... ‘new radio-carbon techniques could provide both precise dating, and from that, the period of use, and the mode of development of the cemeteries’. In addition ‘All this cemetery data will not only inform us on mortuary practice and demography, but also on the location, date and character of deserted settlements’. Thirty years later seems a good time to review what progress has been made with this period in our study of Somerset’s past.

The county has a number of famous sites of the so-called Dark Ages (Fig. 1) with Glastonbury, South Cadbury, Cannington and Congresbury all being key high-status sites. Many of these sites are well known nationally, indeed most were excavated by Philip Rahtz himself and it is remarkable that so little has been done since. Nowadays most archaeologists think of the time between the Romans and the Normans (400–1100 AD) as early medieval, with 1100 to 1550 as late medieval, and it is still a very exciting and interesting period to work on. Cemeteries are a particularly important aspect of this research. While it has proved very difficult to locate the more ordinary rural settlements of this period (as we know only too well from the research on the Shapwick project! (Gerrard with Aston 2007), the identification and dating of cemeteries can be crucial for the reasons which Philip Rahtz gives.

Following the strategy proposed by Philip Rahtz,

one route seems to be to obtain as many radiocarbon dates as possible for burials from cemeteries where the excavator has suggested that the burials are of late or post-Roman date. We should not assume that burials that appear to be in a late-Roman context from the archaeological evidence do not date in fact from the 5th or 6th century. A number of such post-Roman/early medieval dates already exist for cemeteries that have been excavated in recent decades in Somerset. These include Brean Down (Bell 1990), Lamyatt Beacon (Leech 1986), Shepton Mallet (Leach with Evans 2001), Stoneage Barton in Bishops Lydeard (Webster and Brunning 2004), and most importantly Cannington (Rahtz *et al.* 2000). But there are other places where excavations produced burials before radiocarbon dating was available or where the technique was not used at the time of discovery. In some cases where the burials were retained in various museums, dates could still be obtained, and it is a tribute to the museums in the Somerset area (Axbridge, Bristol, Taunton and Weston super Mare) that so much burial material has been conserved.

A programme to obtain radiocarbon dates from such burials held in these museums and elsewhere (called provisionally ‘The Somerset in the Ages of Arthur and Alfred 400-900AD Project’) has begun under the auspices of the Society, using funds in the Maltwood and Aston Funds. This is being run in association with Jackie McKinley of Wessex Archaeology and as a collaborative project with Professor Gordon Cook of the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre where the radiocarbon dating is being carried out.

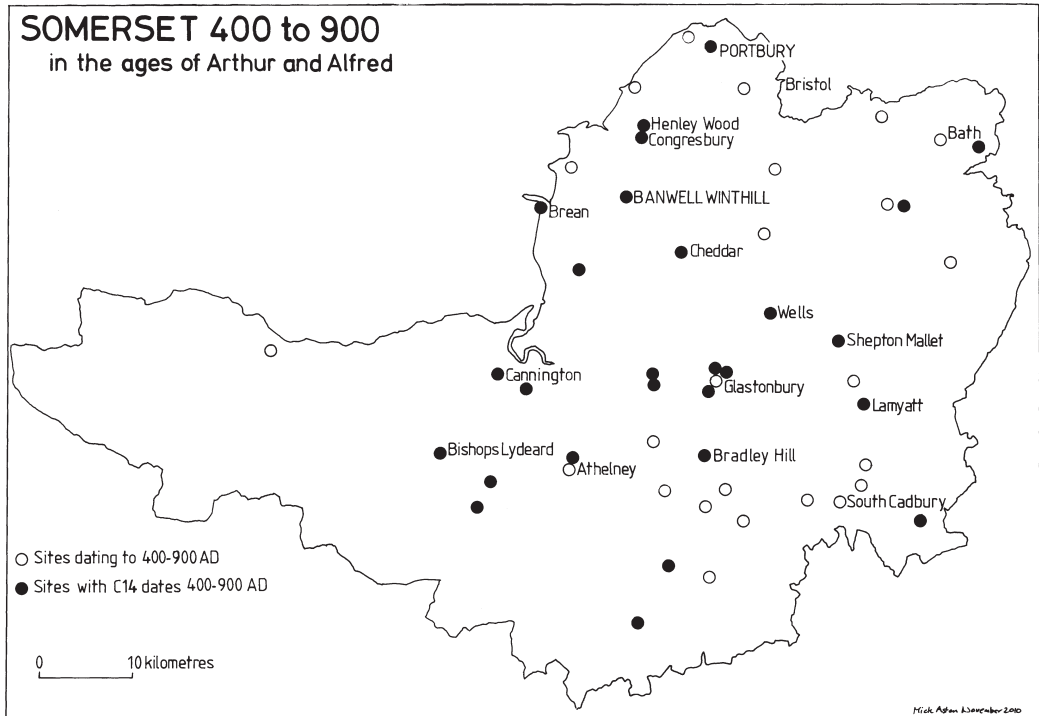


Fig. 1 Somerset 400–900 AD in the ages of Arthur and Alfred

The first two sets of dates are discussed here; it is hoped that in future, samples will be dated from Portishead, Weston super Mare, Ilchester and elsewhere.

Banwell, Winthill *Mick Aston, John Chapman and Jackie McKinley*

The Roman site at Winthill between Banwell and Winscombe extends over several fields, and has good earthworks. It is magnificently sited on a south-facing slope below Banwell Hill and above the Lox Yeo River, between the 10m and 75m contours. It is likely to have been the main Roman settlement in the valley of the River Lox Yeo, the wide valley probably indicated in the nearby place-name Winscombe. Few other Roman sites are known in this area although recent fieldwork suggests they remain to be discovered in what is mainly a pastoral landscape. Roman pottery has been found near Sandford Batch and at Max Mill Farm, and, recently, probable Roman pottery has been found in test pits in Winscombe village. Otherwise the nearest Roman

sites, probably villas, occur at Star further up the valley where there is a big spring, the Pyle well feeding the Towerhead Brook, and at Banwell itself on the other side of the hill from Winthill.

The site has been excavated on several occasions since 1950 but it still does not seem to be generally well known. Excavations were carried out from 1954 to 1956 by members of the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society (Hunt 1955; 1957). The excavation was run by the Axbridge Society's Museum and Excavation Committee, mainly by Jim Emmerson and Percy Baker, with advice from Professors Palmer and Rahtz. A lot of stone-built buildings were unearthed and near to one of these was found a late Roman glass bowl – of a type made in the Cologne/Rhineland area of Germany in the 4th century. Such prestigious bowls probably remained in use for some time only to be lost or broken in the 5th century and beyond. They sometimes display Christian iconography though several have a hunting scene as does this example from Winthill (Harden 1957). The discovery of the glass bowl was the cause of the excavation being abandoned. It was originally displayed in Axbridge

museum and the Society tried but failed to prevent the landowner from selling the bowl to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (it was purchased with a grant from the National Art Collections Fund!) where it is now on display. However there is a fine modern replica in Axbidge museum.

Cutting through the foundations of the Roman buildings were a number of human burials in orderly rows. All were aligned east–west, without evidence of coffins, though some were circled with stones, and with no grave goods. Only one of the burials, a complete skeleton, was kept and this is now on display in Axbidge museum; it was covered in PVA and so is not suitable for radiocarbon dating. The bones from the other burials were disposed of, along with a lot of soil, down an old mine shaft or adit (for lead mining?) found on the site, by one of the principal workers at the site who was uncomfortable about having so many bones about! Other artefacts such as bronze brooches, bone combs, spindle whorls and around 30 Roman coins are in Axbidge museum, and John Chapman has in his possession a site notebook of the late Percy Baker, though no plan seems to survive. Much of the recording and description of the site was carried out by the late Jim Hunt, apparently accurately, though he seems to have been given to fanciful explanations at times.

Recently however John Chapman, who was a young man at the time of the excavations, found a box of bones from the site in Axbidge museum and it was decided to try to get radiocarbon dates from them. Jackie McKinley of Wessex Archaeology selected two humerus bones from two female skeletons and they were sent to Glasgow for radiocarbon dating. The results were as follows:

SUERC 30967 (GU 22223) 430–610 AD at
95.4% probability

SUERC 30966 (GU 22222) 660–810 AD at
95.4% probability

Other than the fact that these bones are from burials at the Winthill site, they have no specific context of course. They do however give us some indication of what might be happening at Winthill in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries. We should perhaps see them as indicating the long use of an inhumation cemetery, potentially over a 400 year period, from the Roman occupation through to a time when the Saxon monastery came into existence in Banwell village itself. This is now called the ‘Abbey’ and is in the valley on the north side of Winthill. Perhaps burial activity was moved down to the monastery

site in the 8th century, as seems to have happened at Cannington. The context for this could be a change of religious site following the takeover by the incoming Anglo-Saxons of religious sites that were previously Christian but British. If so, was there a pre-Saxon site (a monastery?) on Winthill or nearby for which this was the cemetery? Indeed was there a contemporary high-status secular site nearby on Banwell hill, to the east, within the earlier hillfort? A number of such sites are known in the west country. A comparable relationship seems to have existed between the settlement on Cadbury Hill at Congresbury and the Roman and early medieval cemetery on an adjacent hill at Henley Wood in Yatton and between the hillfort at Cannington and the cemetery excavated nearby. At Winthill a chapel seems to have marked the position of the cemetery in later times as there are field names which include ‘chapel’ on the Banwell tithe map of 1834 (Chapel Yard, Chapel Close and Chapel Leaze). That the settlement may have gone on into post-Roman times might also be indicated by the three Walcott names on the Banwell tithe map (Aston 2010, 82, note 30). This is a place-name which incorporates the element ‘walh’ – ‘a foreigner, a Welshman, a serf’ (Smith 1956, 242) – in other words a low-status, local farmer recognised as such by the incoming Anglo-Saxons.

But this is speculation at the moment. What is needed is further work, in and around Banwell to put the Winthill site, the early medieval cemetery, and their relationship to the later Banwell, into some sort of context. Such research could include re-opening some of the 1950s excavation trenches on Winthill to clarify the sequence suggested above and obtain more dating material, though the current landowner will not allow any excavation at the site. Nearby in September 1994 a trench was excavated when a water pipe was put in from the Banwell water works to the River Lox Yeo. The trench cut through tens of metres of Roman stone buildings. Full analysis and publication of this report would considerably amplify what we know about the Winthill site (Hunt 1964). Finally there needs to be a full study of the ‘Abbey’ in Banwell village. This stands next to the parish church and may well be the site of the 9th-century minster or monastery given to Asser by King Alfred at Christmas around 886–8 AD (Stevenson 1959, 67–8, 320). Around it is a rectangular enclosure, shown on the Banwell tithe map as tithe-free, which is similar to those around other early Wessex minster sites, as discussed by Teresa Hall (Hall 2009). A building survey of the ‘Abbey’ itself, garden collections and geophysical

survey in the grounds around, and perhaps test pits or small-scale excavations to retrieve dating material, would all be needed.

Portbury primary school *Mick Aston, Jackie McKinley, Andy Young*

Excavations by Andy Young and the Avon Archaeological Unit were carried out in 2004 and 2005 on the site of an extension to St Mary's Church of England voluntary-aided primary school in Portbury not far from the medieval parish church which is probably the site of the early medieval minster (Young 2005). Burials and other material had been found when the school was constructed in 1972 but no report on these was made. These were clearly part of a cemetery as a further 15 burials were found in the later excavations. Within the cemetery was a pit containing three skeletons of young men, one with a cut wound made by a sharp implement. It was assumed that these were later, perhaps post-Roman burials, inserted into a late Roman cemetery.

No radiocarbon dates were obtained at the time of excavation and so it was decided to obtain dates for the three skeletons, and one from a burial in the 'main' cemetery, which it was assumed would be earlier, of Roman date.

The results were as follows:

Burials in the pit

- SUERC 30963 (GU 22219) 605–685 AD at 95.4% probability
- SUERC 30964 (GU 22220) 575–660 AD at 95.4% probability
- SUERC 30965 (GU 22221) 530–650 AD at 95.4% probability

Burial in the cemetery

- SUERC 30962 (GU 22218) 530–650 AD at 93.8% probability

While Jackie McKinley was selecting bones for radiocarbon determination she noticed that a second of the burials from the pit also had a cut wound.

The results of this radiocarbon dating are of great interest and importance. We appear to have a post-Roman 6th and 7th-century cemetery within which there is at least one special grave. Because it has been recently excavated to a high standard it would be possible to retrieve a lot more information about the people buried here. This could include isotope

analysis to see where the people came from, whether local, Wales, Ireland, or eastern England. It is also the only recent excavation of such a cemetery since work at Shepton Mallet by Peter Leach (Leach with Evans 2001) and the large excavation at Cannington by Philip Rahtz (Rahtz *et al.* 2000). From the radiocarbon dates, the people are likely to have been British, that is successors of Romano-Britons living in Somerset in the 4th and 5th centuries as there is little Saxon influence in Somerset until the late 7th century. They are not likely to be Anglo-Saxons in the 6th and 7th centuries this far to the west in England, though further work could clarify this. The (at least) two sword cut wounds to two out of three of the young men buried in the pit perhaps suggests local conflict or, more romantically, fighting with incoming Saxons, Irish or whoever.

At the time of writing there seems to be no source of funds to pursue the study of what is clearly one of the most important sites in Somerset dating from the 'Arthurian' period.

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- The Shapwick project: Postscript – a Roman radiocarbon date** Mick Aston, Chris Gerrard and Jackie McKinley
- In the volume published about the Shapwick Project there is a reference to a burial found in a Roman ditch (Gerrard with Aston 2007, 368–71, figs 8.8, 8.10 and 8.11). Since this burial (3836/T) had been cut into the fills of the ditch and pottery indicated that the ditch had been backfilled in the later 3rd century or later, it was decided to obtain a radiocarbon date from skull fragments, the only parts of the skeleton removed, in case the burial was in fact late or post-Roman in date.
- The result was:
- SUERC 30961 (GU 22217) 220–390 AD at 95.4% probability
- This seems to demonstrate quite clearly that this is a Romano-British burial of the third or fourth century and is not one of post-Roman or early medieval date.
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