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INFANT BURIALS IN IRON AGE BRITAIN

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Abstract: *Analysis of the method of burial and the spatial placement of infants in Iron Age Britain, concentrating on settlement and burial grounds in southern England, has revealed that infants were important within their communities and were regarded as a separate group from older children and adults in burial practice. Assessed were burial dimensions and skeletal orientation, relative care of burial, location of burial with respect to settlement areas, and evidence for regionalisation in burial practices. The resulting account of Iron Age infant burials will form the basis for an investigation of infant burial practices in Roman Britain.*
Key-words: *Iron Age, Britain, infant, burial*

Résumé: *L'analyse de la méthode pour l'ensevelissement et le placement spatial de bébés dans l'Âge de fer la Grande-Bretagne, se concentrant sur les sites de cimetière et d'habitation dans l'Angleterre du sud, a révélé que les bébés étaient importants dans leurs communautés et ont été considérés comme un groupe séparé aux enfants plus vieux et aux adultes dans la pratique d'ensevelissement. On étaient évalué des dimensions d'ensevelissement et l'orientation squelettique, le soin relatif d'ensevelissement, l'endroit d'ensevelissement en ce qui concerne les régions d'habitation et l'évidence pour régionalisation dans les pratiques d'ensevelissement. Le compte s'ensuivent d'ensevelissements de bébé d'Âge de fer formera la base pour une enquête de pratiques d'ensevelissement de bébé dans la Grande-Bretagne romaine.*
Mots Clefs: *L'Âge de fer, la Grande-Bretagne, l'enfant, l'enterrement*

Burials are perhaps one of the most bountiful sources of information for an ancient society when no written language exists. One such society was that of the Iron Age inhabitants of the British Isles henceforth referred to as the IA Britons. Through the study of infant burial practices for this society, in community groups identified by settlements, it can be demonstrated that the differential treatment of this age group reveals significant information about how they were perceived by their community.

The sites used for this study are Gussage All Saints (Dorset), Owslebury (Hampshire), Danebury (Hampshire), Poundbury (Dorset), Suddern Farm (Hampshire), and Yarnbury (Wiltshire) (Fig. 19.1). These sites were chosen on the criteria of the accessibility of field reports and detailed records of infant burials. Only burial information gathered from published excavation reports has been included. The data collected includes the following categories relating to burials: age, orientation, body position, burial dimensions, grave goods, and number of individuals per burial. The other categories relate to the burials in the broader context of site location, burial location with respect to settlement, associated features, and care. Analysis was primarily aimed at identifying any patterns associated within the above categories that were evident upon visual examination of the raw data, and determining their significance for each site.

In some cases the excavation of sites took place in the early 20th century, which resulted in limited detail for burials other than those with significant grave goods. The publication of early excavations was often limited in their scope and interpretative analysis. Many of the study sites are located on farming land and have been partially destroyed through ploughing. Other aspects limiting the available information from burials are: acidity of soils affecting bone survival; modern structures situated over

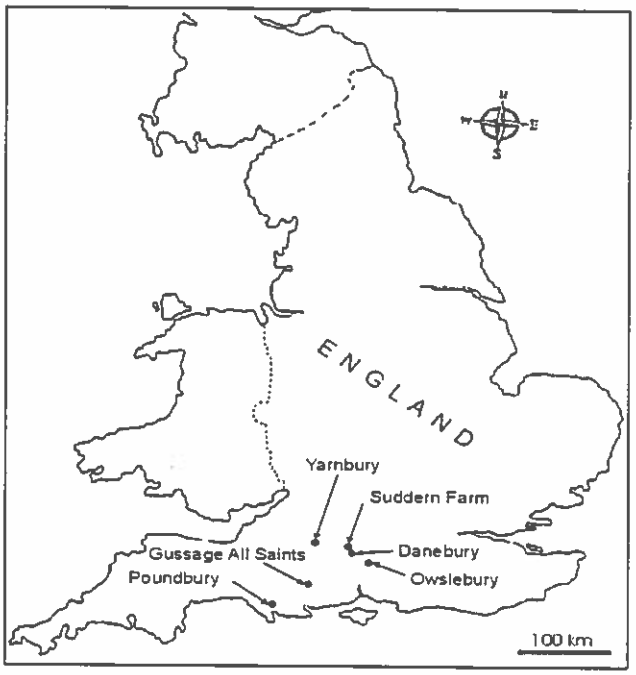

Fig. 19.1. Sites mentioned in text

sites; time available for excavation; data collected during excavation and analysis of excavated material; and excavation method and purpose.

Site occupation is contemporary for all infant burials, with some sites being continuously occupied into the Roman period, as at Poundbury. The burials used in the present study date from the Middle Iron Age to Late Iron Age. Placing infant burials within the chronology of a site relies heavily on datable finds within the burial and also in stratigraphy of associated structures. As the study sites had small, predominantly agricultural populations, it is

Table 19.1. Incidence of burial type

Site	Grave % (actual)	Pit % (actual)	Ditch % (actual)	No. of burials
Yarnbury	-	-	100 (9)	9
Suddern Farm	-	100 (13)	-	13
Danebury	-	92 (12)	8 (1)	13
Poundbury	100 (25)	-	-	25
Gussage All Saints	-	82 (32)	18 (7)	39
Owslebury	100 (20)	-	-	20
TOTAL	**38 (45)**	**48 (57)**	**14 (17)**	**119**

considered that the burials reflect native practices; Roman influence becomes more evident by the late 1st or early 2nd century A.D. Populations of larger urban centres would be expected to display Roman influence earlier than their rural counterparts. Infant burials dating into the 1st century A.D. are considered to be continuous with those of the LIA.

The role of infants within social groups deserves greater attention than it has been afforded in the history of archaeology in this region. Evidence of their importance can be gathered through the study of infant burials. The most significant evidence that infants held some form of social status within IA society is that they were recognised in burial.

The type of burial afforded infants is analysed here for local and regional patterns. Of the 119 infant burials, all inhumations, used for this study, 48% were located in pits, 38% in specially dug graves, and 14% in ditches (Table 19.1). Four of the sites used only one type of burial, while the other two employed both pit and ditch burials; one of which was the dominant type. The number of individuals in each burial appears to be linked with burial type. The grave burials contained single deposits, with one exception, #265a from Poundbury, an infant identified in the burial of a female aged 17 years (Farwell & Molleson 1993, 260f). The infant probably belonged to the female, as there were no other finds of human bone in this burial.

The burials in storage pits and ditches have the highest occurrence of multiple deposits amongst burial categories. The term 'multiple' describes burials that include two to five individuals; both exclusively infants and infants buried with adults. Ditch burials are usually placed in the fill of ditches rather than at the base, and are perhaps more in keeping with pit burials. If the two are combined, there is an equal division between single and multiple deposits. However if pit burials are considered separately, they are slightly more often single deposits (Table 19.2). Ditch burials are almost two-thirds multiple deposits (Table 19.3). Pits that were dug for the purpose of disposing of the dead were usually for multiple burials, such as at Suddern Farm, where infants were in the uppermost layers, being the last additions prior to the pits being sealed; the lower layers contained adult burials.

Table 19.2. Incidence of deposits in pit burials

Site	Single %	Multiple %
Danebury	83 (10)	17 (2)
Suddern Farm	23 (3)	77 (10)
Gussage All Saints	63 (20)	37 (12)
TOTAL	**58 (33)**	**42 (24)**

Table 19.3. Incidence of deposits in ditch burials.

Site	Single %	Multiple %
Gussage All Saints	43 (3)	57 (4)
Yarnbury	22 (2)	78 (7)
TOTAL	**31 (5)**	**69 (11)**

When dominant burial type is considered the sites can be grouped in the following way:

- Group A (all graves) includes Owslebury and Poundbury
- Group B (mostly/all pits) includes Gussage All Saints, Suddern Farm, and Danebury
- Group C (all ditches) Yarnbury.

If these sites are compared regionally, only Suddern Farm and Danebury are closely located and similarities were expected from comparing these sites. The following aspects of infant burial from these three sites are unusual in relation to the other sites in this paper:

- flint included as possible grave goods (also occurs at Gussage All Saints)
- neonatal age
- burial with neonatal calf (Danebury)
- burial sealed with chalk.

The information that can be obtained from the study of infant burials with regard to spatial patterning of burials and their relationship to settlement sites is limited largely by the area excavated at each site. Excavations are often undertaken within very limited time constraints and are designed to retrieve as much contextual information about the settlement as possible. When more extensive excavation has taken place, in some cases the entire area within a settlement enclosure, it is possible to support conclusions regarding the population and their actions based on a larger sample size. While this is evidently beneficial, it does not add to the wider knowledge of burials located outside the settlement area. In the case of Suddern Farm, it was only upon investigation of intersecting ditches that burials were discovered in a disused chalk quarry (Cunliffe & Poole 2000, 166).

By studying excavation plans and comparing spatial placement within and between sites, significant patterns were recorded. The stratigraphy of the infant burials at Poundbury indicates that the majority post-dated the IA huts but predated the Roman buildings. This suggests that the infants were buried after the construction of the IA huts but while the site was still occupied. Although the infant burials have been separated into occupation phases, they appear to demonstrate a continuing burial practice rather than change influenced by Roman occupation. The spatial patterning at this site is often unclear because of overlying settlement structures and numerous foundation features making stratigraphy difficult to interpret with certainty. Only one burial, #1392, is definitely linked with the settlement site in Phase IIG (early to late 1st century A.D.); it is beneath the hut floor beside the foundation (Farwell & Molleson 1993, 13). The majority of infant burials are associated with structures R18 and R21 of the Phase III Early Roman settlement (late 1st century A.D.), which overlay the LIA hut series (Farwell & Molleson 1993, 12). The stratigraphy of this area is complex, and for this paper the infant burials are considered as continuous, rather than representing two separate periods of occupation. The structural evidence supports continuous occupation of this open settlement on the hillside below the main enclosure. Although the settlement structures change in form between Phases IIG and III, from circular IA huts to the roughly rectangular Roman structures, the association of infant burials to houses is maintained, for example in hut IA10 and structure R21. The change in structure shape at Poundbury did not have any significant effect on the placement of infant burials within the settlement zone.

The infants at Poundbury have a separate burial area to that of adults and older children of the LIA and Early Roman phases, with one exception; an adult male aged 45 years, burial #1367. The burial of this adult in the infant group is unusual. Its presence in the group is significant, and with regard to the infants, could indicate familial relationships, social status, or the provision of protection and guidance in the afterlife. The location of the adult burial could well have influenced the placement of infant burials.

Gussage All Saints is one of the few settlement sites that have been fully excavated inside the enclosure ditches. The results show that there were infant burials within the settlement throughout its occupation. In Phase 2 (300-100 B.C.), infants were located in two sections of the enclosure ditch and within the enclosure, but around the inside edges (Wainwright 1979, 22). The majority of infants for this site are dated to Phase 3 (100 B.C.-A.D. 43), and only two infant burials were located outside the ditch on the limits of the excavated area (burials #781 and #769); the rest were inside the enclosure (Wainwright 1979, 26). Most of the infant burials were associated with structures and pits throughout the settlement; nine infants do not have any obvious association with structures. The infant burials occur mainly in the central part of the settlement. Although there is no obvious spatial patterning of infant burials, the contemporary adult burials at Gussage All Saints reveal a significant spatial distribution. The adult female burials were located around the inner perimeter of the settlement enclosure, except for the burial of a female and two neonates, burial #139 (Wain-wright 1979, 32), located within a large trapezoidal enclosure. It is likely that this burial is that of a mother and her offspring. The adult male burials were inside the settlement enclosure and roughly aligned with the entranceway, possibly indicating a pathway through the settlement; perhaps an avenue of burials for those of high social status. The spatial placement of adult burials at Gussage All Saints may be evidence of an intentional order placed on burials or an artefact of the archaeological information available for analysis. This positioning of burials within the settlement area warrants further investigation into possible burial practices resulting in the non-random placement of adult burials.

The IA burial ground at Owslebury had been deeply ploughed prior to excavation, greatly limiting the available information recoverable. Of the infants belonging to the 1st century B.C. – 1st century A.D., 55% are located within the infant burial ground. The others are strongly associated with enclosures and their defining ditches. In the preceding two centuries there are two infant burials and one belonging to a child (burial #69, aged 18-24 months) that are found associated with a banjo enclosure related to the settlement site at Owslebury (Collis 1977, 28). The child burial is located along the external ditch and the two infants (burials #56 and #58) are found alongside each other in the interior of the banjo enclosure. These three burials are considered contemporary but show significant differences in their spatial placement with regard to structures and each other. This placement is unlikely to have been random, although the criteria for such distribution have been lost to time. The action of confining infant burials to the burial ground and other discrete areas within the settlement appears deliberate and was probably linked to a belief system concerning the disposal of the dead, or a form of distinction used by the population to maintain identity after death. Most of the infant burials from Owslebury were in single deposits in specially-dug graves within the burial ground or associated with enclosures.

At Danebury all 13 neonatal infants recorded were buried within the settlement area, 11 of these were single burials and 12 were recovered from pits. The majority of infant burials are associated with circular house structures. There was one double burial of infants, possibly twins (burials #17 and #18) (Cunliffe 1984, 447; Bristow 1998, 300). The majority of infant burials were recovered from the upper half of pit fills (Cunliffe 1995, 73), and those recovered from within the settlement site were all aged under 12 months. This could indicate that older infants and children were placed outside the settlement area, and may have been recognised as a separate grouping to the younger infants.

At Suddern Farm, the disposal of the dead in pits does not appear to have been the normative burial practice (Cunliffe & Poole 2000, 144), and a burial ground was in use at this site throughout the Early and Middle Iron Ages. Suddern Farm is the only site where the infant burials are located outside the settlement site in what appears to be a discrete burial area within an old quarry site. The infant burials recovered were all in the top layers of burial pits within the quarry. The pits often contained multiple deposits with adults (male and female) in the lower fills (burials #C13 and #C18 from Suddern Farm). The occurrence of infants in the upper layers could be explained by the efficient use of the limited space remaining in the burial ground. As there are no infant remains from deeper in the deposits or mixed with adult burials, it would appear that they were not placed in this burial area until the final stages of its use.

Studying the spatial patterning of infant burials at Yarnbury has been greatly restricted by the form of excavation; excavation trenches were only made of the inner enclosure ditch (Cunnington 1932, 202). When compared to sites with similar enclosure formations such as Danebury and Suddern Farm, Yarnbury is the only site with infant burials recovered from ditches. However, these burials were dug into the ditch after it had silted or been backfilled (Cunnington 1932, 206). House structures were built over the filled inner ditch, meaning that the infant burials are connected to the occupation of this site and its houses (Cunnington 1932, 204). The location of the inner ditch would probably have remained apparent after filling, and the location of infant burials suggests that the ditches had some ritual significance. Infant burials were not located in the excavated areas either side of the inner ditch.

Burial grounds, such as Suddern Farm and Owslebury, appear to take advantage of contemporary earth excavation related to a settlement site or the continued recognition of an area as specifically for burial. The Suddern Farm burial ground uses an old chalk quarry, with most burials deposited in existing pits, and containing both adult and infant burials. Of the 13 infant burials, 11 were identified as neonatal. When combined with the Owslebury burial ground, in which only one infant less than 12 months (burial 48) is included with the neonatal infants (Collis, 1968, 19), there is an apparent separation of neonates and infants. Perhaps at these sites there was further age segregation. The neonates may have been recognised as a distinct group to older infants, possibly as a result of their level of development.

Infant burials are predominantly small and shallow in comparison to those of older children and adults. At Poundbury, the burial depths are less than one metre, with 75% less than 30cm. The width is generally half the length, and where the length exceeds 50cm, the burial is extended, with one exception, burial #1214 (Farwell & Molleson 1993, 295). This burial itself is not unusual, but the size of the grave is closer to that of an adult; the infant was aged at approximately 18 months (the upper limit of infant age in this study). Possible explanations include the preparation of the grave for an adult but used for an infant, or that the infant was recognised as belonging to an adult burial category and given a larger grave.

Despite the effort, graves were cut into the chalk for infants, demonstrating the inclusion of this age group in the burial practice for this burial ground. The depth of infant burials is measured from the excavated ground level, which is considered much less that the ground level at occupation. As shallow graves may have been disturbed by animals (Cunliffe 1984, 451), it is unlikely that burials were shallow, yet the shallow burial of infants may reflect a perceived minimal level of pollution associated with the very young compared to that of adults.

Iron Age infant burials do not reveal a strong preference for orientation. If any pattern emerges, it is that the orientation of infant burials is related to site. There is an equal distribution between northern and southern arcs of orientations across all study sites (Table 19.4). Adult burials show a preference for a northern orientation. Many of the infant burials have not been included in this section because orientation cannot be confirmed from the disturbed and fragmentary state of the remains.

Table 19.4. Orientation of infant burials (published)

Site	Northern Arc	Southern Arc
Yarnbury	-	-
Danebury	1	2
Suddern Farm	2	4
Poundbury	10	15
Gussage All Saints	10	3
Owslebury	-	-
TOTAL	**23**	**24**

Fragmentary and disturbed remains also make the determination of body position difficult. Among the surviving remains for which a position has been identified, the

tendency is for a crouched position on the right side. This does not appear to differ from the preferred body position of older children and adults, except for Owslebury where detail is unavailable (Collis 1977, 27). The Owslebury adults were cremated and buried with pottery vessels, while the infants were inhumed without surviving grave goods. The adult burials at Owslebury changed in the 2nd century A.D. to inhumation in coffins, but the infant burials remained the same throughout the occupation of the site. The majority of adult burials at Suddern Farm were placed on their left side (Cunliffe & Poole 2000, 166ff), while those at Danebury, a site considered to have succeeded Suddern Farm, exhibit a pattern of adult males placed on the left side and females on the right (Bristow 1998, 300ff). If this pattern could be confirmed through a larger sample size, it may be possible to identify sex of juveniles based on body position.

The infant burials in this study show a basic level of care beyond the removal of unclean elements from habitation areas. The majority of infants have been arranged in a crouched body position; a significant factor in the burial of all age groups. Body position shows a strong relationship to grave size; extended burial requires much longer graves compared with crouched burial. There are examples of contemporary burials that are extended (burial #311 from Gussage All Saints), and crouched infants that have been placed in graves considerably larger than necessary (burial #1214 from Poundbury). This evidence indicates that body position held some importance above the practical aspects of grave preparation. It is unusual for surviving grave goods to be recovered from infant burials, and where they do occur, they tend to be flint nodules or immature animals. Infant burial #219 from Danebury was placed on a slab of chalk and surrounded by flint nodules (Bristow 1998, 301). The significance of flint nodules is unknown but may be linked to provision after death; flint being a source of tools and a means of making fire.

There is evidence that infant burials were sealed with chalk and that some 'graves' were lined with chalk, for example burial #219 (Danebury) and #1383 (Poundbury). This preparation of the burial indicates that they were afforded substantial care and recognition from their community. Some infant burials are taken to have been left open to silt naturally, for example burials #15, #17, and #18 from Danebury (Bristow 1998, 300). The reality of leaving burials uncovered in pits associated with dwelling huts for an extended period of time is difficult to imagine, especially from the point of view of hygiene; a few days is conceivable. These burials are perhaps the actions of a raiding party dumping the dead. The original occupants may have returned at a later time to correct burials where possible.

The burial of infants in disused storage pits could indicate a lower level of concern for their remains; demonstrated at Danebury and Gussage All Saints. There is evidence, however, of special treatment after death at Danebury (burial #19) where the infant has been buried with a neonatal calf. This special deposit was from the same level of excavation as the infant, indicating contemporary placement within the burial. The burial of animal parts with the dead was a fairly common practice in IA burials (Philpott 1991, 100). Such deposits could have been intended to provide for the dead, who may have resided in the grave for a period before moving on to another 'place', as company for the deceased, or evidence of sacrifice. The calf in this burial does not appear to have been intended as a source of nourishment for the infant, but perhaps could be seen as a companion or as a show of wealth from the family of the infant. There is an historical importance of cattle in the mythology of the Celtic vernacular from Ireland; for example the oral epic of the *Taín bó Cuailgne*. The simplest explanation for these deposits is the availability of a disposal pit at a time when both infant and calf were newly deceased.

Another factor contributing to evidence of care in infant burials is their proximity to house structures. Rather than disposing of the bodies with domestic refuse outside the settlement area, infants are often buried in close association with houses. Such evidence could indicate that the very young required further protection after death. This is supported by the placement of infants in common burials with each other and adult males, or in burial groups. There were no instances of older children buried in close association with houses or with adults. The burial of infants in close association with houses may be related to ensuring the fertility of any subsequent pregnancies, to maintain some form of connection to the mother, or protection from the family.

The infant burials in this study were compared to elucidate any contemporary practices common across the study region. The approximate tribal regions of the contemporary inhabitants contain Gussage All Saints and Poundbury (Durotriges), and Suddern Farm, Danebury, Owslebury and Yarnbury (Atrebates). There is little support for tribe-specific infant burial practices when these groupings are studied for similarities. But when the variables are compared across all sites, two groups can be identified: Poundbury and Owslebury, with Gussage All Saints as a probable satellite; and Suddern Farm, Danebury and Yarnbury (Table 19.5).

This grouped distribution separates the southern settlements from the northern, and may have some connection with the trading linkages of the settlements and their proximity to the coast. Geographical features could be a contributing factor to site differences; Suddern Farm and Danebury share a river system, and Poundbury, Gussage All Saints and Owslebury are separated from the northern sites by higher ground. These features, however, are unlikely to be a determinant with respect to infant burial practices.

The infant burials in this study show that the following aspects were common across most sites: formal burial,

Table 19.5. Variable comparison across sites (initials signify sites, e.g. D = Danebury)

Variable		Group 1	Group 2	Detail unknown
Burial type	Grave		P, O	
	Pit	S, D	G	
	Ditch	Y		
Settlement type	3-ditch	D, S, Y		
	Single-ditch		P, G, O	
Age of Infants	60% neonate		P, G, O	
	85-100% neonate	S, D, Y		
Associations with structures	Dwelling	D, Y	P, O (infants)	
	Pit		G	
	Burial ground	S	O (neonates)	
Orientation	Northern arc		G	O
	Southern arc	D, S	P	

crouched body position, shallow depth, burial within the settlement area in association with houses (except for Suddern Farm), and burial in an area not used for older children and adults (except for Suddern Farm). The differences evident at Suddern Farm may be related to an earlier date for the burials; other burial aspects at this site were common across all sites. Although it is not possible to draw unequivocal conclusions from the above information, it is clear that, at all sites infants were treated separately to older children and adults in burial, either in positioning or burial practice. A perceived separate age-related social identity would result in such differential treatment. Infant burials from the above Iron Age sites demonstrate that they had a separate status relating to age. They also provide evidence that infants might have been buried according to social status, with burials exhibiting varying degrees of effort and care.

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