

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

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Gloucestershire.**

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2008, Vol. 126, 83-90

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# A Lead-lined Stone Coffin Cremation Burial from Harnhill, Gloucestershire

By NEIL WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2003 metal detectorists working on land at Lower Farm in Harnhill, in the parish of Driffield near Cirencester, uncovered a stone box inside which was a lead container and cremated bone. They excavated to the level of the box's broken stone lid, which they removed along with the lid of the lead box within it. Subsequent to this Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service was contacted and commissioned to recover the box, investigate its contents and establish its archaeological context.

### Background

The coffin was found in a field used for organic pig farming located *c.*5.7 km east of Cirencester town centre and *c.*1.5 km east of Harnhill village (Fig. 1). Situated *c.*300 m west of the Ampney brook on limestone of the Cornbrash Formation (British Geological Survey 1998), the site, at OS Nat. Grid SP 081005, was *c.*96.51 m above OD. The top of the stone coffin was at *c.*96.30 m above OD.

The coffin was within a complex of cropmarks (Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Record, hereafter SMR, 2024) aligned approximately north–south and east–west. The linear features form a rectangular enclosure, measuring at least 130 × 90 m and covering an area of *c.*5 hectares, and have been identified as a Roman villa. Interpretation of aerial photographs (S. Crutchley pers. comm.) suggests a central building with several surrounding enclosures, the villa itself defined by areas of presumed compact ground, considered to be either mosaics or *opus signinum* floors. Previous excavation of a platform within the villa complex revealed evidence of two rooms, one with *in-situ* tile hypocausts and the other with a concrete floor, which were interpreted as part of the main villa buildings (Phillips 1985). Large areas to the west may represent associated buildings, such as barns with threshing floors. A sub-rectangular ‘annex’ to the main villa compound, to the immediate west, has also been suggested. The coffin appears to have been situated immediately outside the north-west corner of the main villa complex.

Enclosures and linear features (SMR 3079) have also been identified from cropmarks to the west and north-west of the villa. While three have been identified as modern field boundaries (OS 1884, 1903 and 1921), examination of the field during harrowing produced quantities of Roman pottery, tile and flint, suggesting activity associated with the villa. Aerial photographs show a sub-square double-ditched enclosure, possible small fields/paddocks, an irregular curvilinear enclosure, possibly representing an Iron-Age farmstead, and a ring-ditch, suggesting a possible barrow (S. Crutchley pers. comm.).

Additional cropmarks (SMR 26501), *c.*80 m to the south of the villa, also comprise linear features aligned approximately north–south and east–west. They form a rectangular enclosure with a

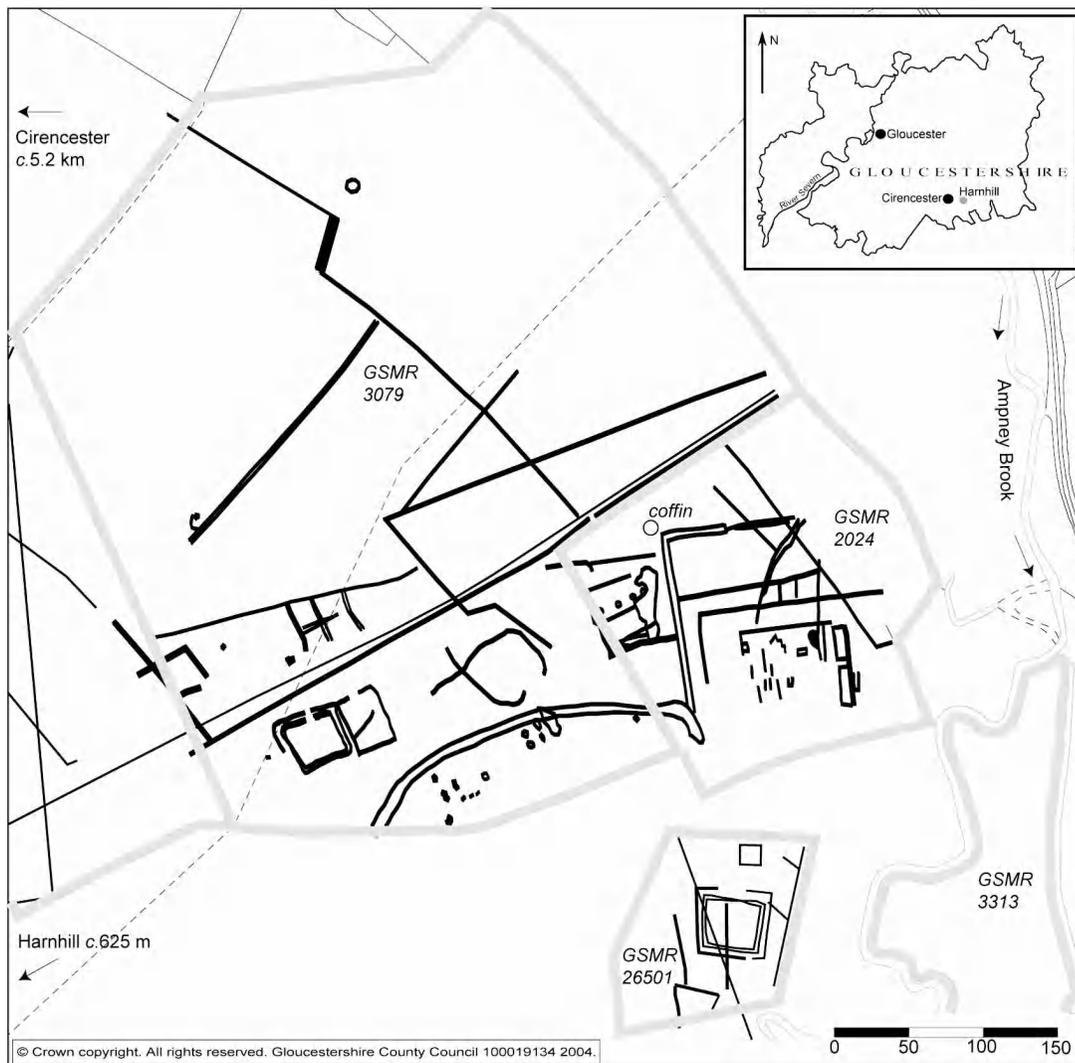


Fig. 1. Location plan of the coffin (circle), cropmarks (dark lines) and Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Record (GSMR) sites (grey lines).

double-ditched boundary and entrance to the north. On the same alignment as the main villa complex, it has been likened to a Romano-Celtic temple (S. Crutchley pers. comm.). However, other cropmarks on the same alignment may represent water channels and thus suggest a bath-house complex associated with the villa. The area between the cropmarks denoting the villa site and the possible temple/bath-house has been described as an area of dark soil south-east of the inner ditch yielding 'sherds of late 1st-century samian ware, coarse pottery of the 3rd–4th century, and part of a box tile' (RCHME 1976, p. 47). This perhaps represents an extension of the villa complex south towards the possible temple/bath-house.

During fieldwalking on the villa site in 2003 (Timby), 48 sherds of pottery and 17 fragments of ceramic building material (CBM) were collected. These were accompanied by 14 stone tesserae

and one fragment of painted wall plaster. This material was abraded, commensurate with finds that have been in a ploughsoil environment for some time. The pottery largely dated to the Roman period and comprised imported, regional and local wares. Imported wares included one sherd of Spanish Dressel 20 olive oil amphora and two pieces of samian, of which one was from a dish of Dragendorff type 31 with a rivet hole drilled through the wall. Regional wares consisted of Oxfordshire colour-coated ware and Dorset black-burnished ware, whilst the local wares appear to be mainly products of the North Wiltshire industries. In addition to the Roman pottery was one piece of medieval Minety ware and two post-medieval fragments. The CBM appears to mainly comprise fragments of Roman roof tile (*tegulae* and *imbrices*).

## THE EXCAVATION

### Methodology

The metal detectorists had opened the coffin prior to archaeological excavation, which covered an area of 2 m<sup>2</sup> around the burial site. The ploughsoil (101) was removed by hand to reveal the natural undisturbed subsoil and expose fully the edge of the sub-rectangular pit [102] in which the stone coffin had been buried. The fill of this pit (103) was hand-excavated and recorded. In order to remove the coffin a slot was excavated alongside it and a wooden board was slid underneath. The board and coffin were then lifted and removed from the site. The contents of the lead box were investigated when the coffin had been removed. The larger pieces of bone were retrieved by hand and the smaller fragments were recovered by sieving the remaining soil using a 0.5 mm mesh.

### Stratigraphy

At the base of the slot was the natural limestone brash, set within a yellowy orange clay matrix (108). The pit, in which the stone coffin had been buried, cut into the natural brash. It was a rectangular in plan and measured *c.*950 mm in length, *c.*850 mm in width and 500 mm in depth. It had sides angled at *c.*70–85° and it was aligned approximately NE–SW. The fill of the pit was a mid-orange brown silty clay (103), containing frequent small stones, and was sealed by a mid-grey brown silty clay ploughsoil (101) *c.*210 mm deep.

## THE FINDS

### The Coffin

The coffin is rectangular and has been manufactured from a single block of limestone (Fig. 2). Externally it measured 510 mm in length, 410 mm in width and 360 mm in height. Claw-chisel marks could be seen on most of the faces. Two sub-circular depressions were present on one of the external long sides of the coffin and measure between 20 and 30 mm in diameter and 10 and 20 mm in depth. Fragments of a stone lid were found *in situ* on top of the box and nearby in the ploughsoil (101). After reconstruction the lid measured 530 mm in length, 440 mm in width and 70 mm in thickness. It had a chamfered top edge and a lipped bottom edge to seal the stone. A cuboidal recess had been cut into the top of the stone block, measuring 350 mm in length, 260 mm in width and 200 mm in depth. Set within this recess was a lead box.



Fig. 2. Photograph of the stone coffin and lead box (scale: 20 cm in total). © Gloucestershire County Council.

### **The Lead Box**

The lead box within the stone coffin measured a maximum of  $310 \times 240$  mm and was 190 mm high. Almost filling the recess (Fig. 3), it was formed from one or more sheets of lead folded and possibly welded together. The accompanying lead lid was constructed out of a single sheet, which measured  $330 \times 270$  mm and was 1.25 mm thick and enclosed the top of the box. This sheet probably had its edges folded in a  $90^\circ$  angle, but over time it splayed out due to the weight of the stone lid. Inside the lead box was a quantity of cremated human bone weighing 414.4 g and consisting of approximately 250 fragments.

### **The Cremated Bone**

An assessment of the cremated bone by Simon Mays (2003) revealed that the remains appeared to be those of an adult female aged between 20 and 40 years.

The cremation of an adult female corpse may be expected to yield *c.* 1.5 kg of bone (Trotter and Hixon 1974). The remains from the Harnhill burial represent approximately one quarter of this. The fragments were in good condition, with even fine pieces of poorly-fired trabecular bone

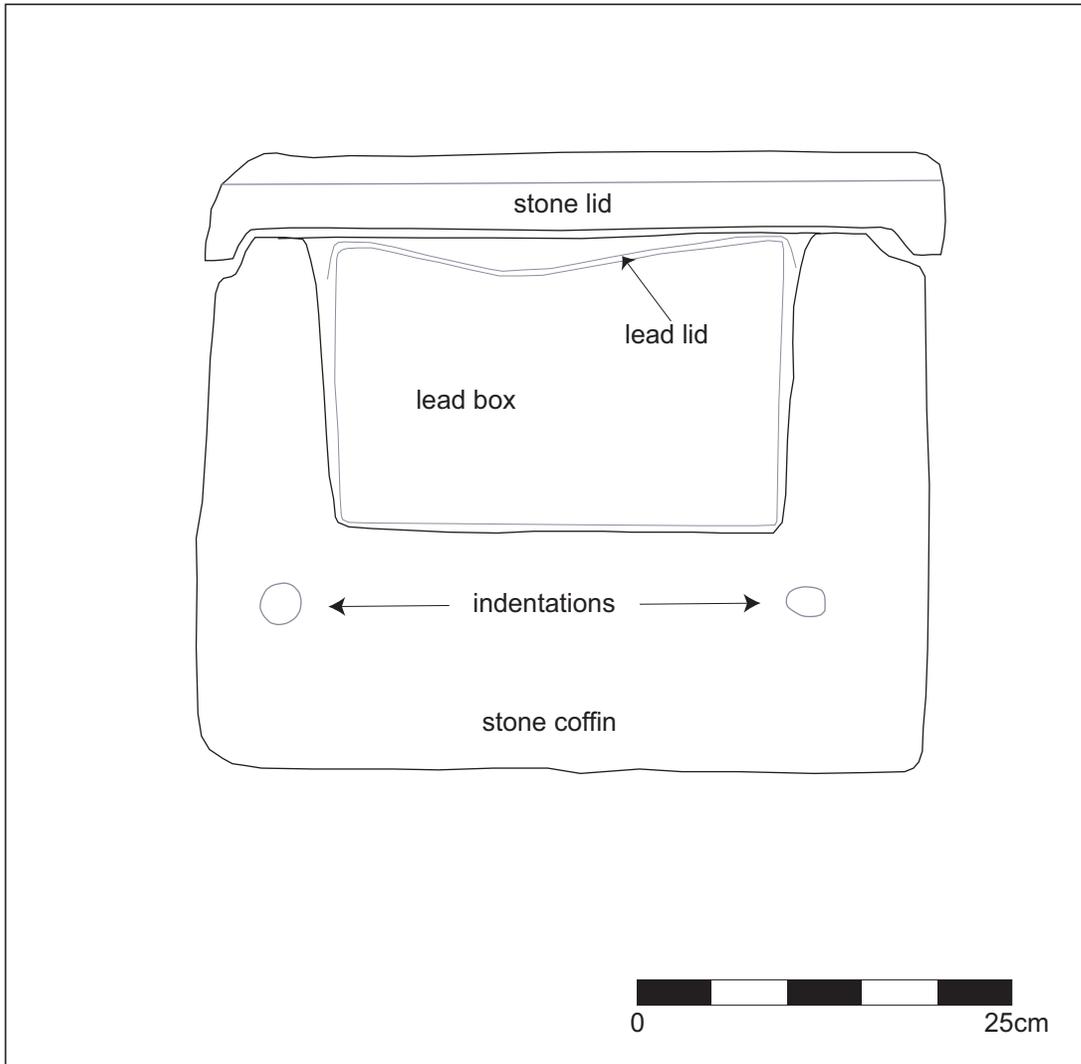


Fig. 3. Profile through length of stone coffin and lead box.

showing little damage. The size of the fragments in the cremation were mostly more than 5 cm long and very few small fragments (less than about 2 cm) were present. These observations testify to the protective environment enjoyed by the bone within the lead box. It seems reasonable to argue that the relative paucity of remains does not reflect post-depositional destruction, but rather that only a proportion of bone from the pyre was selected for interment. From this can be inferred that it cannot have been an important part of funerary practices either to retrieve all the bone for burial or to fill the container with bone. There are parallels with another group of Romano-British cremated remains examined by Mays from the cemetery at Godmanchester, Cambridgeshire. There it was inferred that collection of more than a token amount of remains was necessary, but it cannot have been important to try to collect all the bone for burial or to fill the cinerary vessel (Mays 1998, 220–4).

Identifiable fragments belonging to hand and foot bones were absent from the Harnhill burial and very few fragments of vertebrae, teeth and leg bones were present. The paucity of teeth and hand and foot bones would be consistent with failure to retrieve small bones and bone fragments from the pyre during collection of remains. The paucity of leg bone fragments, when substantial remains from the upper limbs were present, is more puzzling, although it may simply be a chance occurrence associated with partial collection of remains rather than a deliberate selection of pieces from certain skeletal elements.

The colour of the remains can be used to infer approximate firing temperatures (Mays 1998, 216–17). Experiments (*ibid.* table 11.1) suggest that a black colouration corresponds to sustained exposure to temperatures of about 300–400°C, grey to about 400–650°C and white to above 650°C. The presence of all three colours in the Harnhill example suggests that there was no apparent patterning in degree of firing by skeletal element. Adjoining fragments of the same bone might show very different colouration and some fragments are less well fired on internal than external surfaces. The implication is that there was significant movement of the fragments during cremation as the skeletal elements fragmented, some pieces falling to cooler parts of the pyre.

Two animal bones and one tooth, all of which were burnt, were found with the remains. These were identified as a femur and a sternum from a chicken-sized bird (*gallus/phasianus*) and probably a fourth premolar of a sheep or goat (identifications by S. Payne).

### Other Objects

Within the lead box, and mixed with the cremated bone, were a small quantity of charcoal and three iron nails. Analysis of one of the nails by Vanessa Fell (Archaeological Conservator, English Heritage) revealed it to have become attached to the bone by ferrous corrosion products and/or calcareous deposits. There was no evidence of haematite, usually found on burnt ironwork. However this does not mean that it was not in the funeral pyre. The origin of the nails is uncertain, but they could have been embedded in the firewood or swept up with burnt bones.

## DISCUSSION

From the limited excavation it has not been possible to date the coffin and its contents, but its location adjacent to a villa complex, the finds collected locally and the nature of the burial all suggest a Roman date. The two main burial practices within Roman Britain were cremation and inhumation. Cremation was the more common rite during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, with inhumations gaining dominance in the 3rd to 5th centuries (Salway 1998, 693; Collingwood 1996, 146). Although cremation did not cease to be used as a burial practice (Heighway *et al.* 1980, 57), it may suggest an early Roman date for the coffin.

A typical Roman cremation burial usually comprised the burnt ashes deposited within a pottery or glass urn (Collingwood 1996, 147) or lead canister (*ossuaria*) (Adkins 1998, 142). These urns were then either buried simply in a hole in the ground, placed in tile, stone or wooden cists (Collingwood 1996, 147), in masonry *mausolea* or under barrows (Adkins 1998, 142). The deposition of urns within cists and *mausolea* would certainly aid their preservation and the materials used for the Harnhill burial fit well with Romano-British cremation practices.

The Harnhill coffin may be categorised as a Type 2 cist (Philpott 1991, 9–10). Examples of this type are described as ‘taking the form of a solid block of stone, either cylindrical or cubic, hollowed out to take a cremation and separate lid’. They occur more commonly in the west of England, where easily workable stone is more abundant. Examples have been found locally in Gloucester

(Heighway 1980, 63) and Cirencester (McWhirr *et al.* 1982) and further away in West Sussex, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Chester and Carlisle (VCH 1914, 153; Philpott 1991, 9).

Fourteen Type 2 cists have been recorded at several sites adjoining Roman Cirencester and were described as blocks of limestone with a scooped-out hollow to take either ashes or an urn containing the ashes (McWhirr *et al.* 1982, 207). The re-use of column sections and blocks cut from nearby quarries has been noted in the construction of these stone coffins (Buckman and Newmarch 1850, 111). All were located in the general area of the amphitheatre and quarry, immediately outside the western wall of the Roman town (McWhirr *et al.* 1982, 206–7). Five of the examples found at The Querns were recorded in detail. Three were hewn from cylinders of stone and two from square limestone blocks (Philpott 1991, 247). Of the cylindrical forms, two were recorded as containing an urn and a jar and two were covered with a stone lid. Of the square forms both contained burnt bones and one held a pot containing the cremated remains of an adult female (Philpott 1991, 247), similar to the Harnhill coffin. The only example from Cirencester containing a lead lining was found in a cemetery outside of the south gate of the Roman town. The cremation was placed within a glass cinerary urn, which was wrapped in lead and placed within a cremation stone (McWhirr *et al.* 1982, 207).

In Gloucester, a 2nd-century pot containing a cremation was found within a hollowed-out stone column base in London Road, near St Catharine's church (McWhirr 1981, 163), and cists and urns were recorded from Hillfield Gardens in the mid 19th century (Fullbrook-Leggatt 1968, 66). An example from Woodchester (Clarke 1982) was described as a circular stone block with a pail-shaped cavity. It had been robbed-out, but glass fragments were found inside.

Elsewhere, an example from Harpenden, Hertfordshire, comprised a hollowed-out circular stone block lying on a flat slab, with a part hollowed flat lid and containing a probable bottle urn. A cist found at Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire, was described as a 'small sarcophagus'. An example from Chester was a hollowed-out empty 'monumental' tomb block, whilst two cists from Carlisle were constructed from a hollowed-out Corinthian capital and a sandstone trough, one with an inner lid inscribed 'RIB 956' and containing a glass bottle urn (Philpott 1991, 247).

Although none of the examples discussed above matches precisely the techniques and materials used in the Harnhill burial, the construction principles are similar. As with the Harnhill coffin, the other examples had been buried in two protective casings, offering a high and seemingly unnecessary level of protection. The presence in the Harnhill example of a relatively shallow hollowed-out niche (just over half the total height of the coffin) may imply its former use as a building stone. The indentations on the sides of the coffin support this theory, although they may simply indicate a means of lifting or lowering.

### *Acknowledgements*

Thanks are due to Jo Vallender for managing the excavation and editing the report; Jan Wills for commenting on the draft copy of this report; Kim Watkins and Richard MacPherson Barrett for assisting on site; Paul Nichols and Toby Catchpole for helping with the removal of the stone coffin; and Simon Mays for assessing the cremated bone. Thanks are also due to Vanessa Fell, Simon Crutchley, Fiona Roe and Vanessa Straker for offering their comments; David Ebbage and colleagues of the Wyvern Historical and Detector Society for informing us of their discovery and assisting with the recording; Oldacre Property Services for allowing us to excavate the coffin; English Heritage for funding the work; and the staff of the Royal Agricultural College Farms for cooperating in the project.

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