

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

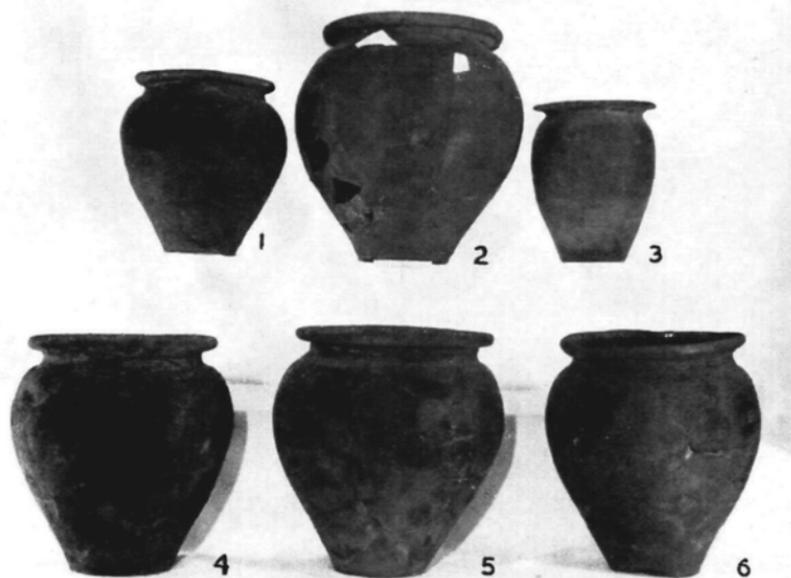
By I. NOEL HUME

CONTINUED work on the Upchurch Marshes has resulted in the discovery of further evidence relating to the group of "puppy-burials" reported in *Archaeologia Cantiana* in 1951 (pp. 170-1) and 1955 (pp. 198-9). In 1950, three Romano-British ollæ were found buried within an area of twenty-five feet, each containing the inhumated bones of a single puppy along with a quantity of charcoal. It was then thought that the vessels (Pl. I, Nos. 1, 3 and 5) may have represented foundation deposits beneath structures, all traces of which had been eroded by the sea. More recent discoveries have shown that this assumption was incorrect.

A fourth pot containing puppy bones and charcoal was found by Mr. Michael Webb in February, 1953, and in October, 1955, three others were found by the writer. All seven pots were found within the same small area and six of them were almost certainly products of a single kiln. The example illustrated in Plate I (No. 6) is clearly a waster, having a wide crack through the base which had occurred during firing. In February, 1956, fragments of yet another olla of the same type were found crushed in the mud within the area enclosed by the previous finds (Fig. 1, No. 1). Although, in this instance, neither bones nor charcoal were present, it is reasonable to assume that the sherds represent the remains of an eighth "puppy-burial."

The similarity between seven of the pots and the presence of the waster suggests that they were obtained from a local kiln, probably on a single occasion. Although it will be noticed that the vessels vary considerably in size, this factor would appear to be of no significance, for the largest pot proved to contain the bones of the smallest puppy.

The three ollæ recovered in October, 1955 (Pl. I, Nos. 2, 4 and 6) have provided the most useful evidence, for not only were the contents more intact than in the previous finds, but the pots having been found on a single occasion, it was possible to determine their relationship one to another. They were buried on the north south line at intervals of three feet seven inches, and at a depth of approximately five feet seven inches below the existing land surface. The fragments of the eighth pot were found at the same depth at a point eight feet south of the three complete vessels and nine feet six inches to the east. The five similar ollæ illustrated in Plate I were all found in an area of organic matter consisting largely of sedge which had either grown or been deposited in a roughly rectangular hollow in the alluvial clay. It is extremely



Ollæ containing puppy-burials from the Upchurch Marshes  
*Numbered in text from top left to bottom right.*

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

likely that Mr. Webb's example also came from this hollow. But unfortunately there is no record of the type of ground in which it lay. The cavetto-rimmed olla (Pl. I, No. 3), however, did not come from this organic deposit, but lay at a point slightly outside it to the south. On the existing evidence it seems probable that most of the "puppy-burials" were interred in rows within the hollow. It is not impossible, also, that there were originally others which have since been found by clay-diggers or which have been carried away by erosion.

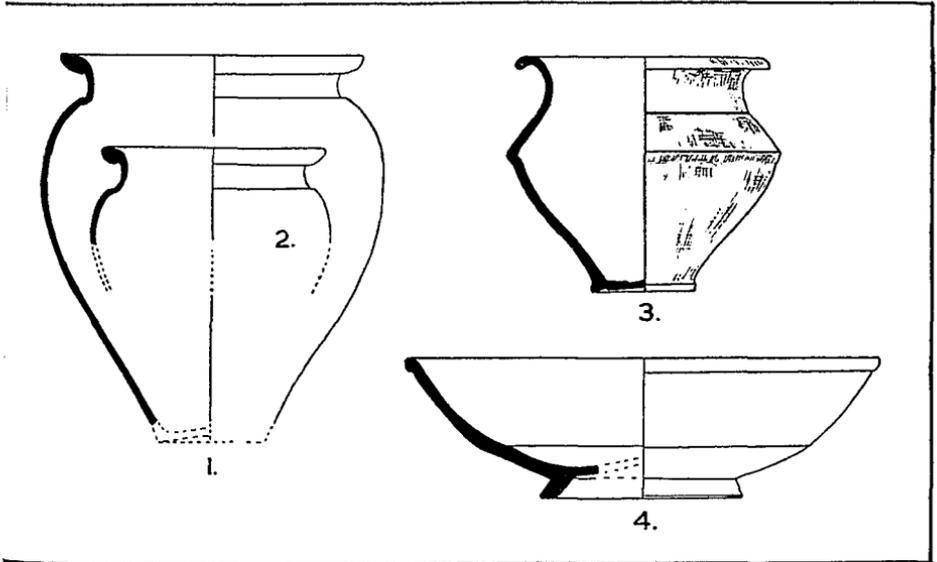


FIG. 1.

The dating of the pots presents a problem of some complexity, for the seven similar ollæ are of a type which appeared in the late second century, but which continued in common use until the fourth. The burials were found at a point between two areas of Romano-British occupation both of which appear to have been abandoned at the end of the second century. Furthermore, the second occupation area yielded the contents of a domestic rubbish-pit of Antonine date, which included, along with a mass of small sherds, rim fragments of a small olla of the "puppy-burial" type (Fig. 1, No. 2), part of a Samian Drag, Form 31 (Fig. 1, No. 4) and the base of another Form 31 with the stamp of Namilianus (NAMILIANI), a well-known Lezoux potter, some of whose products were present in the wreck from Pudding Pan Rock. On the evidence of this rubbish-pit it seems reasonable to attribute the majority

of the burials to the late second century A.D. The cavetto-rimmed pot, on the other hand, presents a more difficult problem. The vessel is of a type (*Arch. Cant.*, 1951, p. 169, No. 1) which one would normally expect to find in a third- or even fourth-century context. A not very convincing parallel appears in the Report on the Excavations at Viroconium, 1936-37, by Miss K. M. Kenyon (*Archæologia*, LXXXVIII, p. 214, Fig. 10, No. 8), where it is attributed to the late second or early third century. The position of the Upchurch pot, situated as it was slightly apart from the rest of the burials, may indicate that it was interred at a later date. If that suggestion is to be accepted, then it must also be presumed that the burial area was marked in some way so that further interments could be added from time to time. This would suggest that the ritual was well known and much practised. But if this were the case, then it is curious that only one extra burial seems to have been added.

While the pots are valuable in that they provide dating for the burials, it is their contents which are important. The charcoal from the three associated vessels was examined by Mrs. F. L. Balfour-Browne of the Department of Botany at the British Museum of Natural History, who stated that the first pot contained charcoal from birch, the second from hazel and ash, and the third from birch and ash. "There is little to be said about the material," she writes, "except that it was apparently a matter of indifference as to what kind of charcoal was included in the pots." Mrs. Balfour-Browne had previously examined the charcoal from the pot found by Mr. Michael Webb in 1953 and had found it to be of oak and willow.

It must be assumed that the charcoal was itself significant, and not the wood from which it came. All the pieces recovered from the various pots are alike in that they are derived from twigs and light branches, and are not small chips from large timbers. This may indicate that the charcoal was not collected haphazardly from household hearths or kiln furnaces, but was deliberately prepared for the purpose to which it was eventually put. It may also be deduced that the charcoal was no longer hot when placed in the pots, for there is no indication of burning on any of the extremely fragile puppy bones.

The second of the three pots found in 1955 (Pl. I, No. 6) contained, along with the bones and charcoal, a small nodule of sandstone which, from its position at the bottom of the vessel, could not have intruded at a later date. (See Appendix II.)

Before discussing the puppy bones it should be explained that it is impossible to identify the breed of a dog from bones of very young puppies. Nevertheless, the bones were submitted to Miss J. E. King of the Osteological Section of the British Museum of Natural History, who has very kindly reported as follows:

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

“ Each pot contains the skeletal remains of a single puppy, fairly complete in pots 1 and 2, but more incomplete in pot 3. The skeletons are all much of the same size, that in pot 2 being the largest and that in pot 3 the smallest. They have been compared with the skeleton of a fortnight-old puppy in the Museum collection (1925.4.7.19, breed unknown), scapula height 29 mm., length of lower jaw 51 mm., and are of similar size. Teeth are missing from the skeletons in pots 1 and 3, but in the animal in pot 2 one of the upper milk canines, an upper premolar and a lower premolar are present. These teeth erupt at about 3-4 weeks, and as they are not fully erupted it is thought that the puppy could not be more than about 3 weeks old. The other two animals are probably of approximately similar ages.”

Although it was not possible to identify the breed from the burials alone, further evidence was luckily forthcoming from a pit located in a third area of occupation approximately three hundred yards east of the interments. This pit contained a single carinated beaker (Fig. 1, No. 3) which can be dated to the first half of the second century A.D., and the bones of an adult bitch and two newly-born puppies. The absence of any other refuse in the pit would seem to infer that the adult and young dogs were physically associated. The mandibles of the two puppies compared very closely with those from the ritual burials, although the latter were probably from a fortnight to three weeks older. The skeletal remains of another adult dog were encountered in a second century pit approximately a hundred and fifty yards to the south of the “puppy-burials.” There was no doubt that this animal was of the same breed as the bitch. It may therefore be suggested that a correct identification of the two adult dogs may also be put forward as an identification of the breed of the puppies from the ritual burials. (See Appendix I.)

The significance of the “puppy-burials” is still in some doubt. No parallels have been traced in Britain, nor indeed are they known to those Continental archaeologists who have been consulted on this subject. However, it is at least certain that the burials represent something more than the last rites administered by Romano-British dog-lovers.

The association of dogs with the underworld is a well-known feature of classical religion. It could, for example, be suggested that the puppies were sacrifices to Hecate, the goddess of darkness, of child-birth, the underworld and of magic. She also possessed power over fishermen and the sea—the latter attribute perhaps being of particular significance to the inhabitants of the low-lying Medway Marshes. Sacrifices to Hecate took the form of young dogs, preferably black puppies. In the same connection the gall of black puppies was considered a potent charm against misfortune.

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

Mr. Frank Jenkins has very kindly put forward various valuable suggestions, of which the following is certainly the most interesting:

"It is possible," he writes, "that the burials are connected in some way with agrarian ritual. Ovid claims to have witnessed the Robigalia ritual held in honour of Robigus the god of rust (mildew) in wheat, in order to avert this disease in the crops. The ritual took place on 25th April and followed Cerialia which was held in honour of Ceres, giver of corn. Persephone, her daughter, was thought to represent the life of the crops. All these deities are in a class collectively known as 'chthonioi,' earth spirits. Hence these puppy burials may well have been dedicated or offered to the earth deity who was connected with the promotion and growth of the crops. If these burials are in fact offerings to an agrarian deity, then perhaps a much later custom in Devonshire may be cited. It seems that there was a belief which was current in that area until the nineteenth century at least, that to rid a field of weeds, one should bury three puppy-dogs in the field 'brandiswise.'"

It should be added that sacrifices to Robigus also took the form of puppies, but in this ritual they were not black but sorrel-coated. With regard to the validity of putting forward an agrarian association for the Upchurch "puppy-burials," it must be explained that no evidence has been found to show that the Romano-British inhabitants of this particular area were concerned with anything other than potting. However, the conditions on the sites are such that the absence of evidence cannot be used to prove or disprove anything.

### THE POTTERY

1. Olla of fumed, sandy grey ware, with a thick and slightly undercut, everted rim. The vessel has a distinct neck with a central ridge and which terminates at its lower extremity in a slight offset. The body is pear-shaped and incurves to a gently rising base, the latter marked by "pulling" whorls. Ht. 8.75 in. (Pl. I, No. 5.) Drawn *Arch. Cant.*, 1951, p. 169, Fig. 8, No. 2. T. May, in his *Catalogue of the Roman Pottery in the Colchester and Essex Museum*, Pl. LIV, No. 237, illustrates a cinerary urn with similar characteristics which he attributes to the end of the second century.

2. Olla of similar type, but without undercutting beneath the rim and with less pronounced neck ridge and shoulder angle. Pronounced "pulling" whorls on the base. Ht. 7.25 in. (Pl. I, No. 1.) Drawn *Arch. Cant.*, 1951, p. 169, Fig. 8, No. 3.

3. Olla of similar type, without undercutting beneath the rim and with no ridge on the neck. The surface of the pot is unevenly fumed, being pink in patches on the exterior. This vessel is a waster, having

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

a wide crack, which occurred in firing, across the diameter of the base. Marks of "pulling" are prominent. Ht. 8.5 in. (Pl. I, No. 6.) This is pot No. 1, of the group of three found in 1955.

4. Olla of similar type, but with rim more sharply cut in cavetto style and markedly undercut. The shoulder angle is pronounced and comparable to that of No. 1. "Pulling" marks are present on the base, as also is a skirting of smeared clay which should have been trimmed after removal from the wheel. The interior and exterior of the pot are coated with a skin of carbonized material. Ht. 8.25 in. (Pl. I, No. 4.) This is No. 2, of the group of three found in 1955.

A sample of the carbonized material was submitted to Dr. G. F. Claringbull, Keeper of Mineralogy at the British Museum of Natural History, who has reported as follows:

"The specimen is difficult to interpret but contains a good deal of volatile material which is given off on heating, together with sulphur dioxide. The sulphur dioxide appears to derive from pyrite (iron sulphide), the presence of which is proved by an X-ray diffraction photograph."

5. Olla of similar type, with gently undercut rim, but with no neck ridge. Marks of "pulling" on the base. This is the largest of the group. Ht. 9.75 in. (Pl. I, No. 2.) It is also No. 3, of the group of three found in 1955.

6. Olla of similar type, with undercut rim and slight neck ridge. This vessel also shows "pulling" whorls on the base. Ht. 8.6 in. (Not illustrated.) Found by Mr. Michael Webb in 1953. (See *Arch. Cant.*, 1955, p. 198.) There are traces of carbonized material on the outside.

7. Fragmentary olla of similar type, with very slightly undercut rim and pronounced shoulder angle. Base missing. Both the interior and exterior are coated with a brittle skin of carbonized material. Approx. ht. 7.75 in. (Fig. 1, No. 1.) This pot was found within the burial area in February, 1956.

8. Small olla with cavetto rim, decorated on the body with an incised latticed zone 5 cm. in width. The body slopes to a flat base and is polished over-all above and below the decorative zone. Ht. 6.75 in. (Pl. I, No. 3.) Drawn *Arch. Cant.*, 1951, p. 169, Fig. 8, No. 1. Presumably third century.

9. Rim fragment of olla with everted and undercut rim comparable to Nos. 1-7. Similar fumed, sandy grey ware. (Fig. 1, No. 2.) From domestic rubbish pit. Late second century.

10. Carinated beaker of grey ware with pale to slate grey slip. Principal characteristics are a spreading rim, a rising base within the foot-ring and a cordon below the body angle. (Fig. 1, No. 3.) This pot represents the dating evidence for a pit containing the skeletal

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

remains of an adult bitch and two puppies. First half of second century.

11. Incomplete Samian dish, Drag. Form 31, with stamp missing. (Fig. 1, No. 4.) This dish was recovered in association with No. 9. Antonine.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to all those authorities who have so generously contributed to this paper; also to Mr. N. C. Cook, B.A., F.S.A., Mr. R. Merrifield, B.A., F.S.A., Miss E. Rutter, B.A., Mr. P. De Brant and Mr. D. Walton.

My especial thanks are due once more to Mr. Francis Webb for permission to work on the site. I should add that it is in fulfilment of his special wishes that the exact locations of the discoveries are not disclosed. These details are, however, known to the Editor who agrees, under the circumstances, that they should not be made public.

The canine bones have been given to the Museum of the Royal Veterinary College and the pottery evidence to the British Museum.

### APPENDIX I

*A Note on the Dog Bones from the Upchurch Marshes*, by R. MERLEN,  
Lecturer in Anatomy at the Royal Veterinary College.

Each of the urns which were unearthed on the Upchurch Marshes were found to contain the more or less complete skeleton of a puppy dog in a state of disarticulation. The exact age of the puppies is very hard to determine.

The bones of puppies of the most dissimilar breeds have a very close resemblance to each other in the first few weeks of life; for example it is almost impossible to distinguish between those of the Greyhound, Foxhound and Beagle, and consequently no attempt could be made even to hazard a guess at the type of dog these puppies would grow into.

Fortunately, however, later excavations brought to light one full-grown skeleton and another skull,<sup>1</sup> and while these were not found in urns and were merely close to the site of the ritual burials it seems, nevertheless, reasonable to assume that both they and the puppies came from the same breed.

Comparison with the bones of modern breeds of dogs shows that these adults stood somewhere about 16-18 inches high at the shoulder and that they had a head roughly equal in size to that of a Sealyham. From these anatomical facts and from the complete absence of any

<sup>1</sup> The rest of the skeleton of this dog was present in the pit, but was not submitted to Mr. Merlen.

## RITUAL BURIALS ON THE UPCHURCH MARSHES

traces of hair, little can be done to form any clear idea of what these animals looked like except to say that the comparative smallness of the skeletons and the fact that the limb bones are stout and sturdy rule out the possibility that any kind of hound or coursing dogs are under consideration.

It does, however, seem worth while cautiously advancing the view that these Romano-British dogs may have borne some resemblance to the Russian Laika—a small type of husky—which has been domesticated in the northern parts of Europe from remote times and where its all round qualities—as a sheep dog, sledge dog, guard and hunting dog—have endeared it to the inhabitants of the up-country districts where it is found.

### APPENDIX II

*A Report on the Small Rock Specimen from a Roman Ritual Interment on the Upchurch Marshes*, by R. W. ELLIOT, of the Petrographical Department of the Geological Museum

The rock is a poorly sorted coarse-grained, slightly calcareous feldspathic sandstone. Microscopic examination of a thin section (ENQ.1542) cut from the specimen shows it to consist essentially of subangular and rounded grains (generally 0·12 to 0·96 mm. diameter) of quartz, granulitized quartz, microcline, orthoclase and albite-oligoclase. The interstices are infilled locally by calcite and elsewhere by a clay mineral, probably kaolinite sometimes with some illite. Occasional flakes of muscovite occur.

We have been unable to match the thin section at all well with thin sections, in our collection, of rocks from this area. It does, however, in hand-specimen tend to resemble some specimens from the Lower Greensand. It can be closely compared with one of the rare pebbles (E.20144) derived from the Chalk but unfortunately this specimen is not properly located. As the interment site is in the alluvium it is conceivable that the pebble may be derived from this last formation. Since, however, we have no record of material of this type occurring in the local alluvium, it is possible that it may have been artificially transported, though whether its inclusion in the interment is accidental or not is another matter.

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© Kent Archaeological Society