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ROMAN SEPULCHRAL REMAINS

DISCOVERED IN THE  
CHURCHYARD OF ST. STEPHEN,  
NEAR ST. ALBAN'S, HERTFORDSHIRE,

A.D. 1848.

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BY

MATTHEW HOLBECHE BLOXAM.

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READ AT A MEETING OF THE ST. ALBAN'S ARCHITECTURAL SOCIETY,  
JUNE 20, 1849.

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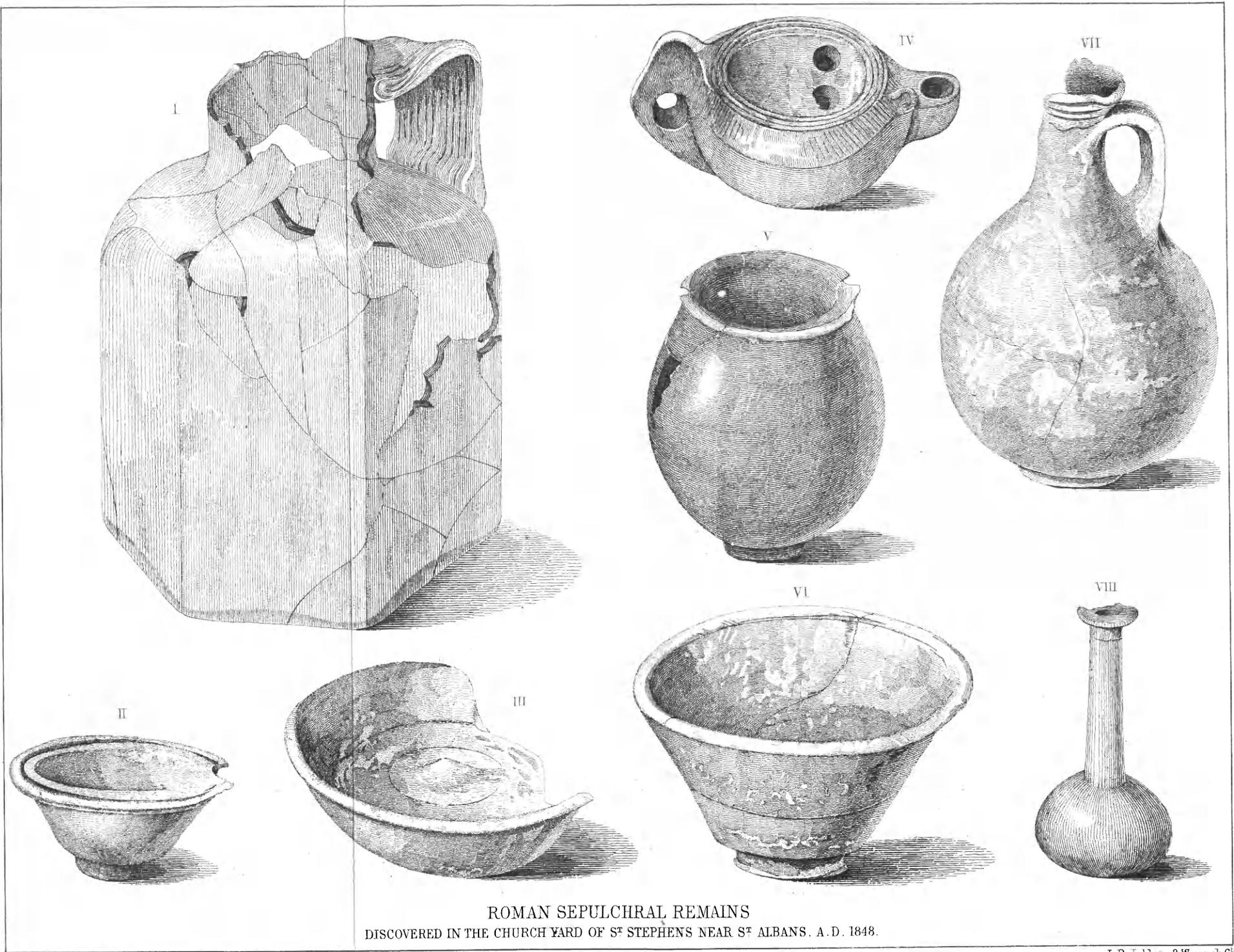
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MDCCCXLIX.







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## ON SOME ROMAN SEPULCHRAL REMAINS

DISCOVERED IN THE CHURCHYARD OF ST. STEPHEN  
NEAR ST. ALBAN'S, A.D. 1848.

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WHEN the Romans colonised this island, their occupation of it was, in one sense, analogous to that in which we now hold India. They retained bodies of native auxiliaries in their forces, but they never appear to have amalgamated with the aboriginal inhabitants, or the Britons with them, so far as to adopt the same manners and customs, many of which were perfectly dissimilar. There may have been individual instances where some of the natives adopted altogether or partially the habits and fashions of their conquerors, who, as Tacitus tells us, taught them the arts of civilisation; but whilst the Britons undoubtedly acquired much knowledge, the effect of Roman colonisation, they retained many of their own peculiar practices, essentially differing from those of Rome, even to the departure of the Romans. And nowhere can more striking evidence be adduced illustrative of this fact, than from the various sepulchral deposits of early ages which are from time to time brought to light. For by the contents of these we are able to discriminate the people and, to a certain extent, the period, or about the period, to which they belong. We can hardly lay down a general and positive rule without exceptions, but this general distinction occurs between the sepulchral deposits of the Britons and Romans, that whilst the practices of simple inhumation, or burial of the body in an entire state, and of cremation, where the body was burnt, were common to the Britons and Romans, both the ancient Britons, and later, or Romanised Britons, were accustomed to inter with their dead ornaments and arms, differing indeed in material and fashion, according as civilisation had advanced amongst them. But the practice of the Romans was very different; for we neither find orna-

ments nor arms in their funeral deposits,—I am speaking of general, not of exceptive cases,—but the ashes of the dead, when cremation was used, were simply deposited in the cinerary urn, and that alone, if the interment was of a common person, appears to have sufficed; but if the deceased was of a higher grade, we find round or about the cinerary urn vessels used for the funeral sacrifice.

At some short distance from many of the Roman colonial cities in this island, the site of the general burial-places, for those cities, of that remarkable people has been discovered; for the Romans were not accustomed to bury their dead at any distance below the soil. With regard, however, to that once-celebrated city, one of the two municipal cities of Roman Britain, on the site whereof the plough now annually passes, and the visible remains of which consist of a few massive fragments of rubble-wall masonry and a fosse, which latter may have been a work anterior to Roman domination, I have yet to learn that the site of the necropolis, or general cemetery, has been discovered. It may have been centuries ago. It may have been in those early times, when materials were collected from the ruins of the Roman city for the construction of that noble conventual church, dedicated in honour of the protomartyr of this island, whose venerated name is given to this place. It may have been on the very site of that church; but wherever it was, or may hereafter prove to be, the recent discovery, in St. Stephen's churchyard, within a short distance of the walls of the ancient city, but without its limits, and close adjoining the Roman road, of some Roman sepulchral relics, those now presented to view, and preserved by the Rev. M. R. Southwell, of, as it appears to me, a single interment only, by cremation, of some eminent individual, most probably of one of the governors of Verulam, is illustrative of the fact, of which instances occur elsewhere, of a single interment at a distance from the common cemetery.<sup>1</sup> It is, indeed, remarkable that, in a somewhat crowded Christian cemetery, used as such for at least nine centuries, this sepulchral deposit should not have been disturbed long ago.

<sup>1</sup> Since the reading of this paper, some other sepulchral remains, consisting of cinerary urns of ordinary pottery, have been discovered in St. Stephen's church-

yard; but as these were unaccompanied by any other deposit, they were probably the interments of persons in the lower ranks.

The articles found in this funeral deposit consisted of a *glass cinerary Urn* (fig. 1), accompanied by a *glass Unguentarium* (fig. 8), together with a *Præfericulum* (fig. 7), a *Patera* (fig. 3), two *Cymbia* (figs. 2 and 6), and a *Lamp* (fig. 4), all of red glazed fictile ware, though perhaps not of that coralline description called Samian,<sup>1</sup> and a small vase or cup of black pottery (fig. 5).

The *glass cinerary Urn* (fig. 1), which has a reeded handle, and a neck about half the diameter of the body, is, in one respect, the most singular of any that have been hitherto noticed as discovered in this island, from the body being hexagonal in shape, whereas all the glass cinerary urns found in this country,—and, though undoubtedly confined to persons of distinction, they are numerous enough to constitute a class,—are of a square or jar-like form, with a reeded handle. This glass vessel is of a greenish hue, and such, indeed, we generally find to be the colour of the Roman glass in this country. The height is fourteen inches, the diameter nine inches and three quarters. In this urn were found calcined bones and ashes. When first discovered, it was unfortunately broken by the pickaxe or spade; but the fragments, with some few exceptions, have been most skilfully reunited by Mr. Doubleday, of the British Museum, to whom it was entrusted by the Rev. M. R. Southwell, to whom we are deeply indebted for the preservation of these remains.

The *Unguentarium* (fig. 8), or small glass ampulla, with a globular-shaped body and long narrow neck, is one of those vials not unfrequently found in Roman sepulchral deposits such as this, and commonly but erroneously termed “lacrymatories,” from a mistaken notion concerning their original destination; for in them were enclosed either perfumes, unguents, or lustral waters used for purification. This is nearly six inches in height.

The *Præfericulum* (fig. 7), or small pitcher-shaped vessel, of light-red pottery, with a narrow neck and bowed

<sup>1</sup> Some years ago, I picked up on the site of the ancient city of Verolam a very curious fragment of pottery, of the same texture and colour as that of the lamp and cymbia, but evidently not of the coralline Samian ware. This fragment of pottery, which is still preserved in my collection, has upon it, embossed in relief, the repre-

sentation of the angular pediment of a doorway, or front of a temple, supported by two pilasters with capitals. In the centre of the pediment is the profile of a human head. I have never met with a fragment of embossed Roman ware at all similar to this.

handle, was the vessel used at the funeral sacrifice for pouring out the libations of milk, blood, and wine. The height of this is six inches and a half, the diameter four inches and a half.

The *Patera* (fig. 3), or shallow saucer-shaped vessel, and the *Cymbia*, or cup-like vessels of red glazed pottery, were used to receive these libations, and the meats offered at funerals; as such they are alluded to by Virgil:

“ Inferimus tepido spumantia *cymbia* lacte,  
Sanguinis et sacri *pateras*.”

For some one of these purposes the small cup or vessel of dark-coloured pottery (fig. 5) appears also to have been used.

The *Lamp* of fictile ware (fig. 4) is the most beautiful specimen of the kind I have met with or know of in a funeral deposit in this island. Lamps are not of common occurrence in Roman sepulchral remains, though they have been found sufficiently often to render them not particularly rare. They have been discovered of iron and bronze, as well as of earthenware. The sepulchral lamp was regarded as allegorical of the cessation of mortal life. Hence Polynices is represented as inferring his own approaching death from seeing in a vision,

“ Conjugis Argeiæ lacerâ cum lampade mœstam  
Effigiem.” *Stat. Theb.* xi. 112.

The absence of ornaments and arms is one clear indication of these being Roman, and not British sepulchral remains; for whilst Pomponius Mela, in treating of the doctrines of the Druids, declares that they maintained the souls of men to be immortal, and that there was another life after this, wherein they existed amongst spirits, and that they did for this reason burn and inter with the dead such things as suited them when alive, we accordingly find in British sepulchral remains articles of personal decoration and arms. But it was unusual, and contrary to the Roman custom, at least during the ages of the higher empire, to bury ornaments or arms with the dead of that people; the implied construction of the laws of the twelve tables was against such a practice; and both Papinian and Ulpian, the celebrated civilians who flourished in the third cen-

ture, have on this subject expressed their opinions. "The inconsiderate desires of the dead respecting their sepulture ought not," says the former, "to be carried into effect; as if, for instance, any one should wish for garments, or any other superfluities, to be expended on his funeral."<sup>1</sup> And Ulpian declares, that "ornaments ought not to be buried with the dead, nor any thing else of the kind."<sup>2</sup>

Although in this funeral deposit there is nothing, with the exception of the form of the glass cinerary urn, which is very peculiar, it exhibits altogether so complete a funeral deposit for a single individual, and that individual one of high and undoubted rank, no less a personage, in my belief, than a governor of the once great and flourishing municipal city of Verulam, long ago razed to the ground, that I cannot but regard it as one of the most interesting discoveries of the kind which have been made. It was probably an interment of the third, or early part of the fourth century, for at the close of that century we are told by Macrobius that the practice of burial by cremation had fallen into general disuse. Of a somewhat subsequent period is the Roman stone coffin preserved in St. Michael's Church, and discovered in that parish in 1813.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ineptas voluntates defunctorum circa sepulturam (veluti vestes aut si qua alia supervacua ut in funus impendantur) non valere.—*Papinianus*, lib. iii

<sup>2</sup> Non autem oportet ornamenta cum corporibus condi, nec quid aliud hujusmodi, quod homines simpliciores faciunt.—*Ulpianus*, lib. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *May* 13, 1813.—John Brown, Esq. F.S.A. communicated, in a letter addressed to Nicholas Carlisle, Esq., Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries, the following account of the discovery of an ancient stone coffin in the neighbourhood of St. Alban's.

"As some labourers of Mr. Stephen Smith, in March last, were digging for gravel on the edge of a field abutting on an old road leading toward Redbourn, from the back of the ancient manor-house of Kingsbury, in the parish of St. Michael, adjoining to St. Alban's, they discovered an old stone coffin, enclosing a skeleton. It was found lying at a considerable depth under a bank, and nearly on a level with the road, in a direction almost due east and west. The coffin is in the form of a great oblong trough, perfectly plain and unornamented, without any circular enclosure for the head, as has sometimes ap-

peared in more modern stone coffins, and does not grow narrower toward the feet. It is six feet three inches and a half long in the inside, twelve inches deep, and eighteen inches wide; the sides three inches and three quarters thick, and the lid five inches. Besides the skeleton, the coffin contained three glass vessels of different forms, which were found standing in different parts of it. These vessels, one of which is broken, are now at Gorhambury, in the possession of Lord Viscount Grimston, lord of the manor; and the coffin has been removed to St. Michael's Church, in a corner of which it now lies.

"The place where the coffin was found was probably a cœmeterium of the Romans; and as I apprehend that it was the acknowledged custom of the Romans to bury their dead by the sides of their highways, and as there is reason to believe that several coffins, though not of stone, have been discovered in and about this very spot, I should suppose that this road, though now a mere green lane or back road, must have been in their days a road of more importance. It has always been supposed that the ancient Watling Street ran along the brow of the opposite ridge of hills from

But of the individual who, in the plenitude of power, once animated these dry and scattered particles of bone, the name is sunk in oblivion, and his imaginary rank is open to speculation; for to apply the words of the gifted author of the *Hydriotaphia*, "When the funeral pyre was out, and the last valediction over, men took a lasting adieu of their interred friends, little expecting the curiosity of future ages should comment upon their ashes; and having no old experience of the duration of their relics, held no opinion of such after considerations. . . . . These are sad and sepulchral pitchers, which have no joyful voices, silently expressing old mortality, the ruins of forgotten times. . . . . Unto these of our urns none here can pretend relation, and can only behold the relics of those persons who, in their life giving the laws unto their predecessors, after long obscurity, now lie at their mercies. But remembering the early civility they brought upon these countries, and forgetting long-passed mischiefs, we mercifully preserve their bones."

Edgware and Elstree, round the outside of the south-westernmost part of the wall of the city of Verolam, as laid down by Dr. Stukeley in his 'Vestigia Verolamii,'

published in 1721 in the first volume of the *Vetusta Monumenta*."—*Archæologia*, vol. xvii. p. 335.