

Dr Arthur Robert Waddell (1854-1924) and his Australian wife Helena (Dorothy) Henrietta (née White, 1873-1938) lived in a house on the Great North Road called Roseland at Hinxworth, north of Baldock, before moving to Cambridge about 1921. Inspired by Robert Clutterbuck's (1772-1831) account of Roman discoveries in 1724 at Hinxworth (Clutterbuck was Lord of the Manor there), he set out to see if any more antiquities could be found. The earlier historian Nathaniel Salmon (1675-1742) had described the original finds as '*some earthen vessels or large urns, full of burnt bones and ashes... a human skeleton... bodies... not above a foot under the surface... and with urns great or small near them, and pateras of fine red earth, some with the impression of the maker on the bottom*'. As he was writing just four years after they were found, there is every reason to trust his description, which sound as if they included Bronze Age vessels ('*earthen vessels or large urns, full of burnt bones and ashes*') and Roman samian ware ('*pateras of fine red earth, some with the impression of the maker on the bottom*').

Dr Waddell settled on a disused gravel pit to the east of Newinn, the earlier name of his house Roseland, in the southwestern corner of the parish on the north side of the Cat Ditch. Although we do not have Waddell's own account of the work he carried out, there is a paper by W Percival Westell (1874-1943) of Letchworth Museum that seems to be based on Waddell's notes as the style – and some of the conjectures – are quite unlike anything else Westell wrote.

According to the publication, '*The root of the word "Newinn" is of great antiquity... it is suggested that something sacred can be read into the name of the meadow*'. This is patent nonsense (Newinn means exactly what it seems to mean at first sight) and, for all his faults, Westell was not given to such wild conjectures. Indeed, the entire paper is full of strange ideas that are quite foreign to his usually meticulous and down-to-earth accounts. We can probably assume that much of the paper – apart from the catalogue that forms over half of the text – was effectively Waddell's work.

One of Dr Waddell's misapprehensions was that the greater the depth, the older the material found. The publication includes a schematic section through the site, which shows '*No Finds*' 6 inches (0.15 m) below the surface, but '*3 Roman Cinerary Urns, Jugs, Vases, & Samian Ware*' at 1 foot (0.3 m). *There was then a blank zone, followed by 'Seven Cinerary Urns, Native British Ware, circa 50 AD'* at two feet (0.61 m), with '*Fragments of Bronze, Iron, & Pottery*' below at two feet six inches (0.76 m). A '*Bronze Age Food Vessel used as Cinerary Urn*' was recorded at 3 feet (0.91 m), with the skeletal remains at 3 feet 6 inches (1.07 m).

The sequence led Waddell to conclude that the skull that was '*partly embedding itself in the gravel... [and] lay face downwards*' (unpublished photographs show that in reality, it lay on its left side, next to what was clearly a broken humerus), while he claimed that seven skeletons aligned with their heads to the south were '*tens of thousands of years old*'. He also thought that they '*had not been buried until the bones were bare of flesh... [and] may have been killed sacrificially, and buried in a spot regarded as sacred*'. This is again fanciful. All the indications are that most of the burials – the Bronze Age cremation burial apart –

belonged to the Late Iron Age and early Roman periods. The probable cemetery comprised twelve cremation burials and eight inhumation burials in the area investigated.

Unfortunately, if Waddell had kept the pots together as assemblages from individual burials, his notes seem not to have included these details. Westell simply published a list of objects separated into groups according to date and form, assisted by W H Lane and Erik Shimon Applebaum (1911-2008). One of the eight samian vessels - a bi-lobed cup of form Dragendorff 27 - contained 'ten bone counters having concentric rings'. Five of them are illustrated here. Bi-lobed cups date from the first century AD to the 150s (or possibly later in the Rhineland factories); this one was stamped with the potter's name Sabinus. As more than ten potters with this name made samian vessels at one time or another, it is impossible to be more precise about the date of the cup, although Westell suggested AD 80-120.



Bone counters are relatively common finds on sites of Roman date. The earliest were made from glass, but bone types began to dominate during the second century. Their decoration varies from plain (but with an indentation from the lathe used to turn them), countersunk on the upper face, with concentric rings on the upper face or with a domed upper face. The plain types are the earliest (from before the Roman Conquest in AD 43 to the first half of the third century), while those with countersunk upper faces are probably second century and later. Grooved types occur throughout the Roman period, while convex upper surfaces are a late feature that continue into early medieval ('Anglo-Saxon') types. Some plain forms have traces of Roman numerals and letters.

These counters were probably pieces in a board game. We know of several Roman era board games, including *XII scripta* or *Ludus duodecim scriptorum* ('(game of) twelve markings') and *ludus latrunculorum* ('game of robbers'). The first was perhaps like backgammon and involved throwing a die to determine how the pieces moved; each player had fifteen pieces (the 'markings' were on the board, in three rows of twelve). The second was a game of strategy in which one player had to trap their opponent's pieces between two of their own; the trapped piece would be removed, as in draughts.

*Latrunculus* referred to an individual piece in the *ludus latrunculorum*, and eventually came to refer to counters in any game. Unfortunately, none of the rules for any of these games has survived: although you can buy reproduction sets today, the rules have all be 'reconstructed' ('made up' would be a better term!) by scholars in the past century and a half.

There is no consensus about whether board games developed in pre-Roman Britain or if evidence for them before the conquest shows contact with the Classical world (which we know was extensive). Counters often turn up in graves, sometimes just one or two short of a

full set, and occasionally there is evidence for a gaming board, often just in the form of hinges. The burial of a mature or older adult dating from about AD 65-80 found at Clothall Road, Baldock, in 1968 had an opened gaming board, interpreted at the time as a 'folding tray', but no *latrunculi*.

Games were not just for children, then. At Stanway, Colchester, a grave found in 1996 contained a gaming board with its glass pieces still almost in place. The game was played over a grid of perhaps twelve by eight squares, with twelve blue pieces lined up along one edge and twelve white along the other. One of the white pieces had moved forward one square, while two of the blue had also moved; one, opposite the moved white counter, had moved on space, while the other had moved two spaces. A thirteenth, smaller white counter lay near the centre of the board, while the thirteenth blue counter sat upside down a square in front of the second blue counter from the left. The grave also contained a set of iron and copper alloy medical instruments forming a basic surgical kit of Romano-British type. The man who owned the game was therefore likely a doctor about the time of the Roman conquest.

Why would a doctor have a game in his grave? There is a further group of objects that we need to take into account. Eight metal rods with cylindrical sections but flattened triangular heads lay next to the board, with three of them resting on it. The excavators thought that the rods – four copper alloy, four iron, so different colours, with two of each type shorter than the others – were part of a divination set. The rods would perhaps be used to ask the gods about the medical intervention: did they approve or not? We think that the prospective patient would grasp the rods and perhaps drop them, like the traditional Chinese *I Ching*, where the pattern made by fifty yarrow stalks would enable the operator to answer the questioner. Perhaps the patient would take some from the doctor, which may explain why some are shorter, a bit like the method of 'drawing the short straw'.

Medicine in the ancient world was tied up with religion, as were all aspects of life, something we might today regard as superstition. Although evidence-based medicine had a long tradition, especially in the Greek world of the eastern Mediterranean, it was still under the purview of the gods. People would only make many major decisions after consulting oracles. Perhaps the 'game' was less of a pastime than part of the doctor's equipment for asking the gods about what sort of treatment to give their patients and what outcome they might expect.

We have less information about the person whose grave at Newinn contained the ten bone *latrunculi*. Thanks to what seem to have been fairly chaotic excavation techniques, we do not know if the burial contained a gaming board. It is possible that the '*fragment of square belt ornament*' and '*fragment of thin bronze plate*' (Westell though this last might have been part of a shield) could have been elements of one.

What seem to be simple parts of a board game may have had deeper meanings to their user. We will never know anything about the person buried at Newinn: were they a doctor, a priest or simply someone who enjoyed playing the *ludus latrunculorum* or something like it?

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## Archaeology Tuesdays - Bone counters from Newinn

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