Title:

Magical Places: An archaeological exploration of magic and time at Stanway, Essex.

Abstract

Past research has highlighted how the definition of ancient magic is situationally specific, both in terms of its social and cultural context and between different time periods. However, there have been few attempts to understand how the meaning of magic in the past transformed over time. This paper argues that the concept of 'place', defined as a focus for past social action, can form a useful linchpin onto which our interpretation of magic can be situated and explored. In Britain, the Late Iron Age to Early Roman transition was a period of dramatic socio-political change. Using archaeological evidence from the burial site at Stanway, Colchester (200 BC – AD 75), this paper demonstrates how the exploration of this place can reveal the evolution of magical practices over time. This approach uncovers the time depth of magic across this transition period and explores how 'magical places' came into being.

Key words

magic, place, landscape, burial, prehistory

Introduction

The concept of 'magic' has taken on many different social and cultural interpretations over time, the culmination of which depend on a delicate mix of social context and geographic location. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the contrasting interpretations of magic between prehistory and history, where differences in the available evidence and approaches to key concepts (i.e. religion and ritual) have led to different trajectories of archaeological

investigation. This paper argues that the concept of 'place', defined as a focus for social action in the past, can form a useful lynchpin onto which the sometimes-conflicting interpretation of magic can be situated. By using 'place' as the mode of exploration for past magical practices we can explore the time-depth of magic and ritual and discover how in the past the concept of 'magical places' came into existence. This paper explores the role of magic in prehistoric and Roman studies, highlighting the conflicting and complementary insights that can be utilised to explore the past. Following a definition of magic, the concept of 'place' is introduced alongside a consideration of the importance of burial spaces. A consideration of magic and place is utilised to investigate the archaeological evidence from the burial site at Stanway, Colchester, a case study than spans Iron Age and Roman Britain. The conclusion provides some reflections on the impact of exploring magic and place in this context and considers how 'magical places' came into being.

Prehistoric and Roman Magic

Magic is a situationally and temporally specific concept. What may be viewed as 'magical' transforms over time, leading to, in each period, a hybrid invention that combines both traditional practices and introduced beliefs. This research focuses on the Iron Age-Roman transition period in Britain (approx. 300 BC – AD 100). To determine the changing nature of magic across this transition period we must first explore the sometimes-contradictory nature of prehistoric and Roman scholarship over time.

In the past, the Iron Age has been classified as unknowable or even barbaric in comparison to the civilising effect of the Roman Empire. This dichotomous view, borne originally from the theory of Romanization (Haverfield 1906; Millett 1990), originally viewed the role of the Roman Empire as dominant over those regions later incorporated as provinces. This binary view of the diversity of people across these periods has been

thoroughly critiqued (Freeman 1993; Woolf 1997; Hingley 2000), but continues to impact archaeological discourse (Hingley 2012; Garland 2018b; González Sánchez and Guglielmi 2017), leading to the continuing use of simplistic identity categories, such as 'Romans' and 'natives'. This unsophisticated approach to past identities has equally been linked to other dualistic notions, such as the difference between 'rational' and 'irrational' acts or between the 'scientific' and the 'mystical'. These binary assumptions have partly been related to differences in method and evidence. Earlier interpretations have viewed the absence of historical texts as making prehistory 'unknowable'; a period where social or religious beliefs cannot be fully revealed due to lack of descriptions by contemporary or later authors (Hutton 2013, 161; Jaspers 1953, 28; Trigger 2006, 80). The continuation of these problematic notions in some archaeological spheres aid in erroneously simplifying the complexities of the past and directly affect the view of ritual, religion and magic in modern discourse (See Garland 2018a, 86–89). These challenges are visible in the significant scholarly debate about whether we should define magic (or not) as being "aligned with broader religious strategies" (Graham 2021, 178–179)[1], leading to some to dismiss magic entirely as a useful concept in academic discourse (Otto 2013, 316–318). This division between magic and religion has in past academic discussion sometimes led to the inference that magic is inherently negative, viewing these practices as illicit or deviant, in contrast to the positive associations attributed to religion and divinity (Fowler 2004, 283; Graham 2021, 179).

These divisions are forged partly through the dominance of western post-enlightenment thought and have led to a weaker understanding of magic and ritual in the past. This conflict is particularly apparent when it comes to transition periods (Garland 2018a), where the practice of each discipline converges and sometimes overlaps. The trajectory of prehistoric and Roman studies has together made great advances in how we can begin to understand past ritual and magical practices, overcoming these past divisions to demonstrably

affect the study of magic in other periods. For more than twenty years prehistoric scholarship has challenged purely functionalist explanations of ritual practice. In previous research ritual practices were considered purely as non-functional or symbolic, however, in a seminal paper Brück (1999, 325–326) argued that the separation of rational and ritual practices was in fact a false dichotomy, a product of projecting our modern sensibilities onto the prehistoric past. Since then Brück (1999, 336), among others (Bradley 2005) have called for new explorations of practical and symbolic aspects of prehistoric life, reasoning that these facets should instead be considered in tandem rather than opposition (Brück 1999, 324–325). As a result of these earlier debates current academic discourse recognises the complexity of terms such as ritual (i.e. Insoll 2004; Insoll 2011). Today archaeologists acknowledge that rituals are contextually specific (i.e. that they could be both routine and odd) and that, in many cases, these practices fall within a wide religious framework (Insoll 2004, 11–12). The important overlap between ritual and domestic life has been demonstrated in several prehistoric contexts across Europe, as well as anthropological studies (e.g. Bradley 2005), and has recently been recognized in the magical practices of Iron Age and Roman Britain (Chadwick 2012; 2015). An important precursor to this concept is the theory of structured deposition (Richards and Thomas 1984); the notion that ritual activity is linked in some instances to the meaningful deposition of material culture. The study of structured deposition has been prevalent in prehistoric studies, including the Iron Age (Hill 1995) and has been expanded to other periods, drawing parallels to Roman and early medieval contexts (Gilchrist 2019, 385–88). The sometimes indiscriminate use of this concept has led to some recent critique, particularly the use of the term to describe vastly different types of archaeological deposits (Garrow 2012). Garrow (2012, 104–106) argues that when describing and interpreting structured deposits we should be clear as to where such deposits lie on a sliding scale from "odd deposits" (i.e. a deposit that defies a functionalist explanation) to "material culture patterning" (i.e. subtle differences

in the distribution of material culture). Incorporating these critiques, it has been demonstrated that this approach can be useful to understand what we might deem past magical practices. Chadwick (2012, 293–295) argues that if differences in the depositional record can be drawn between ritual practices and mundane discard (e.g. everyday refuse from domestic activities or waste products from industrial activities), without resorting to a distinction of what is 'normal' and 'unusual', then we can better appreciate past magical practices in both domestic and ritual arenas.

For Roman studies, the breakdown of dichotomies in prehistoric scholarship has been useful in reconsidering interpretations that viewed magic as in direction opposition to religion. Recent research has challenged this stark and arguably unhelpful division by breaking down and reanalysing how we define 'religion' and 'magic', highlighting instead the vast similarities between these concepts (Otto 2013, 319–323). In part this reanalysis has benefited from the exploration of whether past definitions were etic (externally observed) or emic (internally observed) viewpoints (e.g. Otto 2013; Stratton 2013), which may have led to differences in how magic was perceived (Graham 2021, 180). Others have instead turned their focus to understanding the "coexistence of magic and religion" (Graham 2021, 179). Exploring and defining magic as different degrees of activity (i.e. folk magic in domestic contexts to formal religious ceremonies) within an indistinct and fluid relationship to religion (Gilchrist 2008, 123), has been particularly useful for providing a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of magic in the past. Roman scholarship has also explored the role of materiality in magic (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015b; Parker and McKie 2018b), reflecting a wider trend in the exploration of the materiality of ritual and religion (Insoll 2011). It is argued that that the ephemerality of magic makes it one part of society that cannot be fully understand without the consideration of material culture (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015a, 4). This 'material turn' of magic (Bremmer 2015, 7), explores the explicit study of material

remains as evidence for the use of magic in antiquity as part of their central role in interpreting all facets of society (i.e. class, status, gender) (Parker and McKie 2018a, 4–5). Exploring the physical attributes of material culture, the manner of their construction and the way that were used, allows us to elucidate the beliefs and/or customs of people in the past (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015a, 3–5).

Defining 'magic'

While archaeologists and historians continue to debate the definition of magic, it is important to outline the definition used in this research. There is insufficient room here to discuss the multitude of approaches, however, after considering the overlapping approaches of prehistoric and Roman studies and their effect on transition periods, I adopt a wide reaching and all-encompassing term that provides sufficient leeway for the variety of techniques from different archaeological periods and disciplines (Parker and McKie 2018a, 2–3). As such, this paper defines magic as coexisting with, and deeply intertwined to, religion in the past, folding magical practices within a wider spectrum of ritualised activities. In these terms, magic acts as a "pragmatic and instrumental subsystem of religion meant to alleviate situations perceived to be crises by the individual" (Alvar Nuno and Alvar Ezquerra 2020, 49). In part, it may be useful to view magic as a form of ritualization, defined as a "way of acting which reveals some of the dominant concerns of society, and a process by which certain parts of life are selected and provided with an added emphasis" (Bradley 2005, 34). By considering the concept of magic within a wider set of ritual practices, this approach could be criticised as hiding magic amongst a greater body of 'unknowable' past beliefs. However, this method recognises that magic and ritual are deeply interconnected and allows us to build, from the bottom up, a better appreciation of past magic practices within belief systems of both and Iron Age and early Roman date.

Very few studies of ancient magic have sought to explore the similarities and difference of magical practices between different periods, including between Iron Age and Roman Britain[2]. While many previous studies have begun with "documented associations between objects …. and their magical powers", this research focuses on the potential contribution of archaeological remains to the study of magic (Gilchrist 2019, 387–388). Archaeological approaches can provide both a deep time perspective and aid in identifying non-traditional practices (Gilchrist 2008, 153). However, we should proceed with caution. Any approach to a transition period must also address the complexity of past magical agency[3], particularly within a wider system of ritual and religious belief that is currently in a state of social and political flux. A detailed contextual understanding of the evidence, with room for self-critical analysis of possible alternatives, will be the only possible way to illuminate the complexity of human behaviours in the past (Chadwick 2012, 296).

Most importantly the view of magic explored here is specifically governed by action or agency and its "lived practice" for people in the past (Graham 2021, 180). In part this can be investigated by studying the role of material remains (materiality) and exploring the meaning behind the construction and use of specific objects. However, this magical agency is also expressed through the specific practices of people via the medium of highly structured performances (DeMarrais 2014). Whether or not past magical practices were intended to have a positive or negative outcome is determined by both by situation and context. The structure of the arena for action, defined here as 'place', plays a significant role in how magical practices were formulated and carried out in the past.

Place

The concept of 'place' stems from extensive research in the fields of humanistic geography and philosophy (e.g. Tuan 1977; Casey 1993; Malpas 1999) and has since seen widespread

use in archaeology , particularly the sub-discipline of landscape archaeology (e.g. Thomas 1993; Thomas 1996; Ashmore and Knapp 1999). Simply put a 'place' is defined as a meaningful location (Cresswell 2004, 7), however, rather than just a literal geographic position it is also a dynamic arena of action. Places are transformed from simple spaces into meaningful locales or 'lived spaces' by the actions of past actors (people) (Thomas 1993; 1996). As such to correctly understand the broader concept of 'place' in the past we need to explore the agency of people and how these practices contributed to wider societal structures (Giddens 1984, 118–119).

In archaeological literature an experiential examination of the past has been key to exploring the concept of 'place'. Experiential approaches, by which I mean one which is rooted in our sensory engagement with the world, have a strong theoretical background in the premise of phenomenology (Moran 2000, 1–4), which sought to challenge rationalism and has been somewhat successful in deconstructing dualistic thinking across landscape based studies (i.e. the split between nature/culture, subject/object). Although phenomenological archaeology has received some critique for its methods, it has borne some useful analytical approaches to the study of place[4]. Embodiment, defined here as experiencing the world through our corporal form, is central to an experiential understanding of past places. Archaeologists attempt to understanding place and landscapes in the past from the inside, in contrast to an outside or external experience of the landscape that may be derived from maps or aerial imagery (Tilley 2010, 25). Understanding places in the past requires us to equate our human-centred understanding of the world to comprehend the social practices and identities of past societies (Garland 2016, 79–81). Places and people are, and were, dramatically intertwined: considering one requires the attention of the other. Places are transformed from passive to 'lived' spaces through the actions and performative practices of people, instilling meaning and importance to previously unconsidered parts of the landscape. Conversely, the

identity of past peoples is also transformed through accepting the importance of meaning-laden 'places' in the landscape, whether that be due to a prolonged tradition or via a single significant event. Understanding and exploring past places approach allows us to break down the barriers between nature/culture, space/place and the ritual/rational (e.g. Bradley 2000; Bradley 2005; Tilley et al. 2000) and highlights the relationship between people and things in the past.

'Magical' Places

There has been limited consideration of specific 'magical' places in archaeological literature[5], however, there has been considerable discussion of the different forms of ritual or religious places. For Iron Age and Roman Britain this includes formalised architecture, such as small shrines or larger temple sites, so-called 'natural' places, such as rivers, lakes or caves (Bradley 2000) or areas of structured deposition (discussed above). For these periods one such locale that has received limited attention when exploring past magical practices are places of burial[6]. This oversight is unusual as cemeteries within prehistoric and Roman Britain have often been interpreted as liminal 'places' that bridged this world and the next (i.e. Parker Pearson 1993, 203–204).

Places of burial can be both geographically specific and deeply interconnected to social norms and taboos. Burial spaces have in the past been rejected from domestic spaces as they viewed as 'unclean' (e.g. Roman urban cemeteries), while others represented political boundaries where criminals were executed and discarded (e.g. Anglo-Saxon execution cemeteries - Reynolds 2009). Burial spaces have been shown to reflect attempts at community integration (e.g. Iron Age cremation cemeteries - Fitzpatrick et al. 1997) or as areas of powerful traditions that encouraged people to revisit and revere locations for thousands of years (e.g. burial mounds - Semple 1998). The composition of the cemetery can

equally inform us of the social practices and activities that constitute and define these places. For medieval contexts it has been demonstrated that the examination of individual burials, from the treatment of the deceased to the grave goods deposited alongside them, can help us to distinguish between the practitioners and recipients of magic[7] (Gilchrist 2008, 147–153; Gilchrist 2019, 395–396). Moreover, burial contexts can reveal different magical burial rites, whether to provide protection for the deceased or for the living to defend against evil forces (Gilchrist 2008, 147–148). Places of burial, whether through location or form, were highly interconnected with belief systems and other facets of ritual and religious activity and as such provide an excellent opportunity to identify and understand magical practices.

In prehistoric contexts the burden to understand ritual or religious practice is usually placed on grave goods. However, the manner in which we can identify and examine magical practices in burial places is in fact two-fold: exploring the material remains of the burials (materiality) and the specific and choreographed activities associated with burial rites (performance) (Garland 2018a, 90; Gilchrist 2019, 388–392). Examining the archaeological evidence of the burial, by which I mean both the remains of the deceased and any grave goods deposited alongside them, allow us to examine how graves may have been created and manipulated in the past and thus provide evidence for contemporary rituals and religious belief systems. Although sometimes interpreted as purely the belongings of the deceased, we should be cautious and recognise the diverse meaning behind the objects within a burial context (Parker-Pearson 2003, 94). Grave goods may reflect the motivations of those who participated in the burial rite, perhaps to emphasise the importance of the deceased (Giles 2012, 171) or to provide some symbolism to the witnesses present (Ekrengren 2013, 175). The biography of these objects[8] is important and we must not assume their role in 'life' and 'death' was the same (Garland 2018a, 90).

Materiality is engrained in our modern interpretation of magic, invoking imagery of potions or magical amulets to ward off evil spirits. However, our understanding of magical places is more ambiguous. Examining the performance of past mortuary practices can help to combine material, people and place. The 'Archaeology of Performance', as it is known, encompasses both human action and the 'things' of the material world (DeMarrais 2014, 161). By exploring the interaction between people and places archaeologists have in the past been able to reconstruct mortuary rituals (e.g. Fitzpatrick et al. 1997; Fitzpatrick 2000) and have explored how the choreography of death may have had wider implications for society (Giles 2012, 175–213). Although burial places can often be viewed as static or unchanging places, occasionally disturbed by the internment of the deceased, there are a host of different performative activities that necessitate examination. Different social practices, such as the preparation of the dead, the rites of burials and repeated visits to the grave, may have been undertaken at a single place of burial. While each act represents specific experiences and memories, together they help us to define the role of those places in the past. However, contextual analysis of the burial context and the practices undertaken is vital for understanding magic practices over time. The ever-changing nature of place means that no ancient experience of ritual or religious place was pre-determined or fixed but was situationally and temporally specific (Graham 2021, 46–47). As such the remainder of this paper specifically examines the Stanway burial enclosure to better illuminate our understanding of magical practices within burial contexts and how they transformed over time.

The Stanway Burial enclosure

The Stanway burial site, located on the western edge of the town of Colchester, Essex (Figure 1), was excavated between 1987–97 by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (Crummy 2007,

7–14). The archaeological investigation revealed a long and complex period of occupation, which changed in focus over time.

<Figure 1>

The well documented nature of the site (Crummy et al. 2007) has enabled us to closely chart the temporal order of activities throughout its lifetime (Table 1). This level of accuracy is important, archaeological speaking, to trace the temporal flow of the ritual activities occurring on the site, which together culminate in the overall meaning of this place to those who interacted with it. A short summary of the site development is provided below.

<Table 1>

Around 200 BC a small farmstead and cattle droveway was constructed (Enclosure 2 - Figure 2), which was used for arable and pastoral farming, and continued in use until around 50BC (Crummy et al. 2007, 26–68). In the second half of the mid-1st century BC, the use of the site changed, and a large burial enclosure was built to the north of the farmstead (Enclosure 1 – Figure 2). All the burials found at Stanway were represented by cremated human remains. While the farmstead had fallen out of use by this period the relative position of each suggests it was likely still visible in the surrounding landscape during the construction of Enclosure 1 (Crummy et al. 2007, 69). Two burials were interred within Enclosure 1; a large underground mortuary chamber lined with wooden planks and a roof, and a small urned cremation burial. A third enigmatic feature contained broken funerary goods including strips of copper alloy but no human remains (Crummy et al. 2007, 162–170). At some point in the early 1st century AD, three other enclosures were built on what was the eastern side of the farmstead droveway (Enclosures 3-5 – Figure 2). The enclosures were built in a row in two stages, from north to south, facing the existing burial enclosure (Enclosure 1). Enclosure 3 was built between c. AD 35–45, while Enclosures 4 and 5 were

constructed as a pair between c. AD 40–50. In each of the enclosures a series of burials were interred in a similar manner to those uncovered in Enclosure 1. They included a large underground mortuary chamber and a number of cremation burials, several of which contained distinctive grave goods. In addition, there were several areas of burning that likely represented the location of funeral pyres and a series of small pits that contained pyre debris and broken grave goods, but no cremated human remains. An unusual array of grave types and grave goods suggest a wide range of diverse and complex mortuary and ritual practices.

<Figure 2>

A contested landscape

The site, which was occupied for almost 400 years (300 BC to AD 50-60), occupied a changing but ultimately contested landscape. In the Middle Iron Age the landscape was sparsely populated by a series of farmsteads, intermixed by large fields and areas of grazing. However, by the late 1st century BC the population had grown, and an *oppidum* (a place of central political and social importance) was founded to the east, defined by the construction of an extensive complex of linear earthworks (Figure 1). The foundation of the *oppidum* coincided with the foundation of the burial site at Stanway, which operated throughout the Late Iron Age and beyond the invasion of Britain in AD 43 by the Roman Empire. Colchester, or *Camulodunum* as it was known, was one of the first areas occupied by the Roman Army who took over the *oppidum* and constructed a large legionary fortress in its place. By the late 1st century AD the fortress had been transformed into one of the earliest Roman towns in Britain. The occupation of the Stanway burial continued during this period of unrest, which ultimately led to the transfer of power to from indigenous groups to Imperial colonisers, eventually falling out of use at some point in the mid-50s AD.

The Doctor's Burial

The burial site at Stanway has previously been highlighted as having a connection to magical rites and practices due to the presence of one significant interment, known as the Doctor's Burial[9]. This cremation burial contains a varied array of grave goods, some of which could be seen as 'medical' in nature (i.e. a surgical kit, strainer bowl) as well as those that had magical properties of functions (i.e. divination rods, jet bead, rings). Together these items reflect the overlapping nature of ritual and rational practices in the past (i.e. medicine and magic). Through a considered examination of the function and purpose of these objects, it was possible to place the burial within a wider context of the surrounding landscape, by reconstructing some of the mortuary rituals involved (Garland 2018a). The discussion below follows the structure of this previous research to reveal different magical practices, whether they be associated with burial or ritual activities, and position this agency within the wider concept of place and landscape. The following three sections; burial, ritual and space, additionally draw a distinction between the changing nature of magic over time.

Burial

The burial evidence at Stanway represents a diverse range of preferences indicating individual attitudes to death, however, the close similarity between burial practices, such as the cremation of the dead and the deposition of grave goods, indicates a generic and shared belief system (Garland 2017, 96–97). Although the number of individual burials is low, the abundance of cremated human remains and pyre sites suggests the site was used extensively for different burial practices. Each of the burials that contained unusual grave goods (Table 2) may represent one mortuary event but also provides a detailed breakdown of the changing nature over time of both individual burial practices and the ritual and religious belief systems of the wider community.

<Table 2>

The grave goods represent a diverse array of materials, which were in Britain somewhat rare in burials of the period (Brun 2018, 15–16). Presumably, the burial context in which they were deposited suggests the goods represent some specific meaning, however those intentions may have been multi-faceted. Some may represent the belongings of the deceased, others gifts from mourners, but each chosen for a specific reason that may aid the passage of the dead, although to what afterlife is currently unknown. The earliest cremation burial (AF18) is relatively modest in comparison to each of the later burials (see Table 2) although contains an interesting addition, a small textile bag containing an inorganic compound described by the excavators as a medical or cosmetic compound, known as 'Verdigras' (Crummy et al. 2007, 169–170). Composed of a copper oxide substance, Verdigras was used for as a medical remedy for wounds, ulcers, sores and as an eye salve (La Niece et al. 2007, 170). This material was placed on the funeral pyre with the human remains and was likely a specific part of the transformation of the deceased. Similar organic remains were found within the spout of a bowl in the Doctor's Burial. Identified as Artemisia (common name mugwort/wormwood), it was argued to represent a herbal remedy that required specialist knowledge to prepare (Wiltshire 2007, 395–397). Other uses include the flavouring of wine or beer, possibly related to feasting (see below). The artemisia and the items used to prepare it were deposited alongside other items that may have been used for mystical healing including a jet bead, which has been argued to have been used in some instance for divination (Allason-Jones 1996, 15). These items suggest that the participants were eager to provide some sort of supernatural assistance (albeit undefined) to the departed, perhaps to heal their body or assist them in transferring from one state of being (life) to another (death) (Garland 2018a, 97).

The later cremation burials contain a wide range of elaborate grave goods, some of which may have greater meaning within this mortuary context. The so-called Brooches burial

(CF72) was unique in containing six individual brooch types. Iron Age and Roman brooches have been argued to represent deeply personal items that in some contexts were akin to medieval pilgrim badges (Chadwick 2015, 51). The deposition of six individual items suggests a powerful display of personal connection to the deceased but potentially also a form of protective magic, designed to safeguard the deceased. The remains of game boards (with associated glass counters) appear in three different burial contexts (the Doctor's and Warrior's Burials, Chamber BF6). Past research has suggested a symbolic association between board games and eschatological beliefs, drawing parallels between the progression of a game and journey of the individual through life and death (Whittaker 2006, 106–108). The presence of counters, and in one occurrence the laying out of opening moves, suggests close participation between a mourner(s) and the deceased, perhaps in order to assist their journey into the afterlife (Garland 2018a, 96). One of the later burials (CF115) contained a fragment of a Late Iron Age mirror. A relatively rare item, it has been argued that the reflective surface could have could have held "powerful properties" that required covering for protection (Joy 2011, 481). As such, the burial of this item may have been purposefully undertaken to protect the living from this possibly magical item. The presence of weaponry, specifically a shield boss and spear, may equally have protective properties. It has been argued elsewhere that a spear may have been used to pierce both the grave and the deceased to separate the dead from the world of the living (Stevenson 2013, 172–173). Several of these magical practices may relate to the safe travel of the deceased into the afterlife, to both preserve their legacy in death and protect the living from their unintended return. The presence of a full dinner service in several of the burials (i.e. the Warrior, Doctor and Mirror burials), each set up right to hold food and drink, likely relate to a funerary feast, possibly to sustain the deceased either in the afterlife or as they travel towards it. Equally the distinctive experiential elements of the cremation process (i.e. the visual spectacle, smell etc.) process

may have been interpreted by mourners as part of the transformative process of the deceased remains (Williams 2004).

Ritual

At Stanway ritualized practices, as defined above, are those activities that reveal some societal concerns through the emphasis of certain parts of life. These ritualised acts are demonstrated at Stanway by actions that occurred within the burial ground in addition to the specific burial practices themselves. The long tradition of structured deposition at Stanway originated at the site in the Middle Iron Age. Two leaf-shaped currency bars were deliberately placed on the inner side of the farmstead enclosure ditch as an early deposit in the infill (Crummy et al. 2007, 33). Currency bars are found in western Europe and have been argued to have a dual function as trade iron and, through ritual deposition, as significant votive objects (Hingley 2005, 183). A small pit (CF250), also located within the farmstead contained an iron disc and an iron saw fragment, which were also likely placed as a structured deposit (Crummy et al. 2007, 30). Initially used as tools the function of these items was transformed into votive deposits once their utilitarian function had expired (Garland 2017, 91). The significance of the deposition of iron objects may be related to the production process, which may have been viewed as magical or alchemistic practice that transformed one material (ore) violently into another (iron) (Budd and Taylor 1995; Giles 2007, 396). Alternatively others have argued that deposition of certain objects may have been related to the ritual association of agriculture; the 'killing' of certain important objects (by placing them out of use) acting in parallel to death and the regeneration of life seen each year with the annual harvest (Bradley 2005, 174–177; Williams 2003, 244–245)

Following the construction of the burial enclosures in the Late Iron Age, specific ritual practices were connected to mortuary activities. The form that these activities took

changed over time but initially was interconnected partly to the full dinner services deposited in several graves (see above). The remains of broken flagons, beakers and amphorae were also recovered from both burials and within the enclosure ditches (Crummy et al. 2007, 72). This material suggests that feasting and drinking were a major component of these rituals, with the remains broken and cast out following significant events. The excavators of the site have interpreted this evidence as representing the remains of specific funeral events (Crummy et al. 2007, 430–431), however, these activities could represent different episodes of repeated commemorative events (Garland 2017, 118). This interpretation is supported by the presence of what I have termed 'non-burial' features, a series of pits that were dug in each of the burial enclosures and contained a variety of artefacts and, in some cases, burnt material (Table 3). The excavators saw these as functional features, namely areas of buried pyre debris. While this is probable in some cases, Pit AF48 in Enclosure 1 contained a series of broken funerary objects and could be interpreted as a votive deposit (Garland 2017, 119). As such these pits may also represent commemorative events, perhaps linked to earlier burials.

<Table 3>

One of the features, Pit BF17, found in Enclosure 3 was represented by a wooden barrel that had been filled with successive layers of ash (Crummy et al. 2007, 157–159). This feature appears to be filled with material produced from cremation pyres and could be a physical record of each of the events undertaken within the burial enclosures. In medieval contexts, ash was used as a lining in inhumation burials as a form of purification and protection for the living (Gilchrist 2008, 145–147). At Stanway the close association between the cremation process and the transformation of the corpse to dust could suggest equally suggest a strong importance for ash and perhaps its apotropaic use in this context. One of the latest features on the site, and evidence for continued practice of structured deposition, is Shaft CF23, dug through the corner of Enclosure 5. The shaft was two metres deep and

contained a single sherd of pottery (Crummy et al. 2007, 265). Bands of ash throughout fills of the feature suggests that it served a similar function to Pit BF17 in Enclosure 3. Although Shaft CF23 was later in date, it may possibly served as a replacement to BF17.

Space

The magical practices outlined above were undertaken within a specifically designed environment, stemming initially from the domestic and arable function of the site in the Middle Iron Age. The earlier evidence for ritual deposition, undertaken to support the normative and everyday (agriculture), instilled meaning into this place, which was fostered and amplified as a ritual practice during the Late Iron Age. The burial enclosures were constructed to mirror the earlier farmstead and were aligned to respect this now abandoned space. The construction of the sacred enclosures themselves, required communal effort to build (Garland 2017, 119–120) and this shared activity may have expanded the importance of this place to the wider population, who were amassing during the establishment of the *oppidum* settlement to the east. The burial enclosures each shared a strategy of ritual practice, demonstrated by the similarity between the individual features constructed in each (i.e. underground chambers, pyre sites, mortuary enclosures). In alignment with a shared belief system this approach was designed to support the transformation of the deceased. Different spatial zones of the enclosure hosted different activities – mortuary enclosures to display the deceased prior to cremation, pyre sites for the cremation process itself and chambers to deposit the selected cremated remains of the individual (Crummy et al. 2007, 424–427).

The possible magical and religious significance (defined here as intertwined concepts) of these processes is visible partly through the cremation process itself. Cremation requires temperatures greater than 800° Celsius to efficiently cremate a human body over a period of six to seven hours (McKinley 2013). This temperature rivals that undertaken during metal

work production and would have effectively destroyed most substances placed on the body'

Experimental archaeology has determined that cremation activities would produced

approximately 2kg of cremated bone (McKinley 2013), however, the recovered evidence

from Stanway suggests that only part of these cremated remains was deposited in the burials

at the site (Table 4). The remaining material may have been either discarded or taken and

deposited in associated domestic spaces (Armit 2018, 4). This intensity of the cremation

process may have been interpreted by people in the past as a dramatic transformative process

that turned the deceased into a new state of being (Garland 2018a, 97). Moreover, it would

have been a visually recognisable and highly memorable display (Williams 2004, 271–274),

visible to those people in the surrounding landscape including the *oppidum* located 1km to

the east. The pyre would have been lit for an extended period and left to cool (possibly

overnight), extending this process to several days in length.

<Table 4>

The context of the site is articulated by its position in the landscape and relationship

to the Late Iron Age *oppidum*. As discussed above, the *oppidum* was enclosed partly by an

extensive earthwork system (Figure 3), each defined by an extensive ditch and bank that

inhibited movement across the landscape. The burial site at Stanway lay outside of this

system, which meant that any movement to and from the site had to pass through a gap in the

earthwork system at Gosbecks Dyke. In the early 1st century AD a second line of earthwork

was constructed in this location called Kidman's Dyke (Hawkes et al. 1995, 53). This new

earthwork reinforced and aggrandised the entranceway and dramatized the pilgrimage

between the *oppidum* and the burial site at Stanway (Garland 2017, 134). The movement of

the people from inside the settlement to the external burial site at Stanway, formed part of a

ritual performance associated with the mortuary rites discussed above. The processional

routeway, which funnelled people through a highly specific route, formed part of the wider

performance of the burial and informed the meaning of place by linking the settlement (the world of the living) to that liminal burial place at Stanway, where the dead resided.

<Figure 3>

These highly curated spaces and purposeful interactions with both magical objects and practices transformed this farmstead into a magical place in the landscape. Moreover, the structure and intention of the place changed over time, reflecting the needs and desires of the participants and practitioners of these ritual and magical activities.

Making Magical Places

The interpretations above demonstrate the long history of ritual and magical activity present at Stanway. Stemming initially from structured deposition on the Middle Iron Age farmstead, potentially to assist the fertility of the agricultural cycle, these ritual practices were reformulated as this place was repurposed to focus on burial. The meaning behind this place in the landscape continued but the ritual and magical practices focused instead on assisting the dead and facilitating their journey into the afterlife. Some earlier traditions continued at Stanway; whether that was ritual deposition associated with burial events, such as feasting or the deposition of grave goods, or as specific votives, possibly associated with commemoration and/or providing or enhancing protection for the dead. Over time mortuary and ritual activities increased with a greater number of burials each with a larger number and variety of grave goods. Following the invasion of the Roman Army in AD43, the populace sought solace in an escalation of their beliefs by undertaking magical practices to improve their perceived crises. Following the invasion and the takeover of the *oppidum* by the Roman military, this place and the surrounding landscape become contested, and the populace (whether living or dead) fell under threat. Changes in magical and ritual practices over time are in part due to the availability of new materials obtained via Roman trade routes. However,

this greater diversity of practice may also reflect societal panic to the changing circumstances that were out of the control of the local population. To protect the sanctity of this magical place greater resources and divergent practices were employed to assist.

How did this and other magical places come into being? Landscape locales held a great importance for those who interacted with them. The continued and sometimes revitalised use of these sites for significant rites, led to these places as being absorbed with magical purpose, designed to act as foci for different practices that were used to alleviate crises or improve circumstances for both the living and the dead. In some cases social and political circumstances outside of societies control led to the contested nature of the landscape and to a greater reliance upon the ritual and/or magical properties of those places. It was through these practices that the place gained meaning, while the place itself gave meaning to these ritual and magical practices.

Exploring the materiality and performance of magic in a burial context not only informs us about burial customs and belief systems in the past but also wider societal changes, especially in transition periods where change can be distinct in the archaeological record. An exploration of archaeological remains demonstrates the complex relationship and intertwined nature of magic, ritual and religion in the past, particularly across the transformative Iron Age – Roman transition period. These interpretations are only possible by exploring the role of magic in how people, things and place interact and change over time. This approach provides context to both traditional beliefs and emerging ideas as they transform over time and has wider applicability for examining similar burial and ritual sites from this period and beyond.

Figure list

Figure 1: Location plan of Stanway burial site, Colchester, Essex.

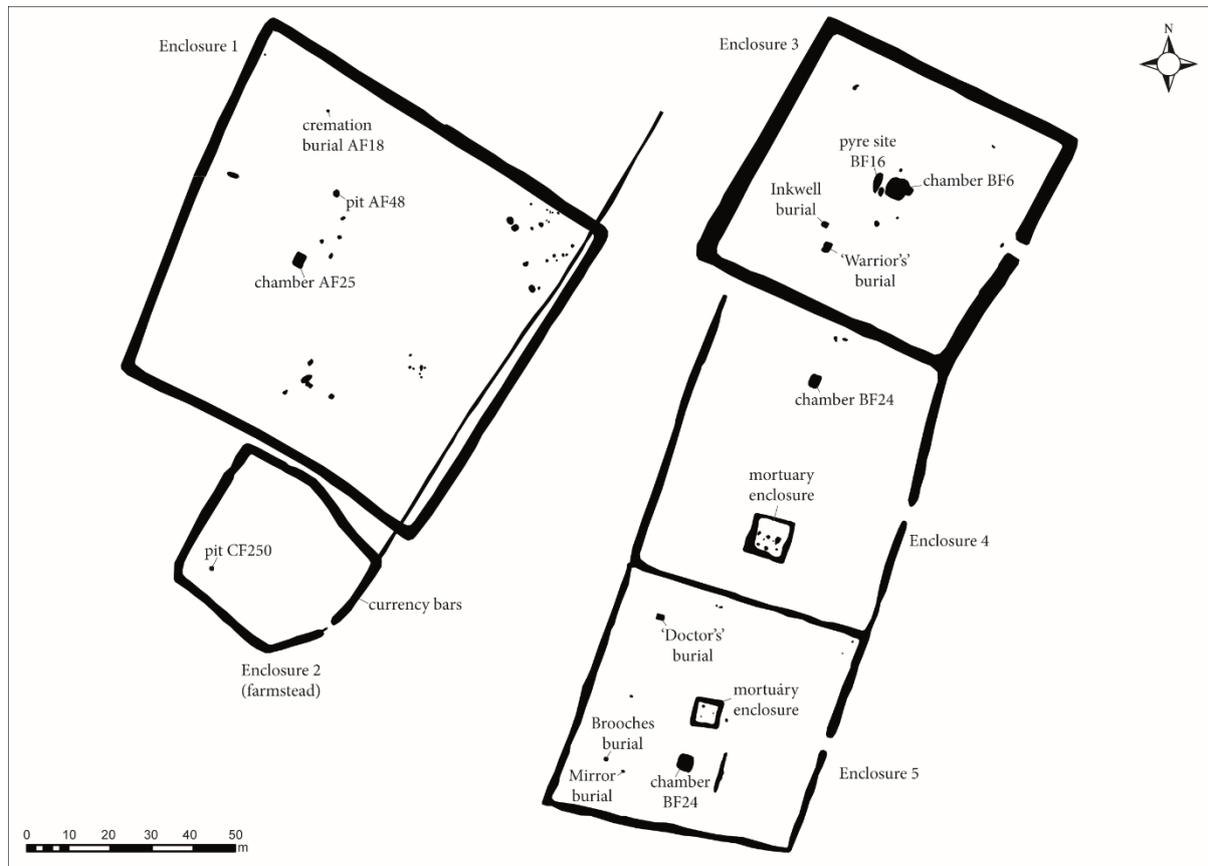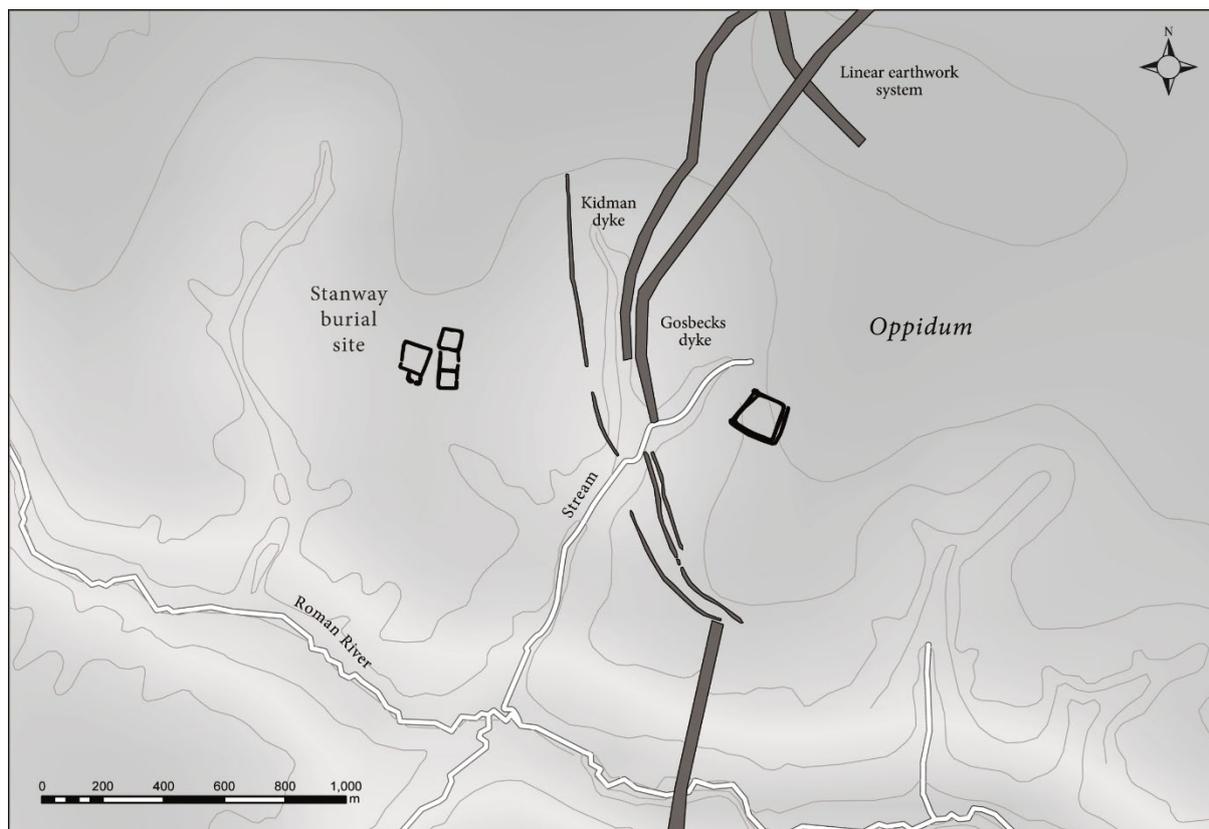Figure 2: Plan of the Stanway Burial site including key features.

Figure 3: Plan of Stanway Burial site in the wider landscape.

Table list

Table 1: Chronology of events – Stanway burial site (Adapted from Crummy et al 2007, 440-441. Table 79 and 80)

Action	Date (approx.)	Comments
Enclosure 2		
Middle Iron Age farmstead - construction	200 BC	
Deposition of iron currency bars in enclosure ditch	200-150 BC	Date uncertain but likely early after construction of enclosure
Pit (CF250)	200-150 BC	Approximate date. Contains broken metalwork.
Abandonment of farmstead	50 BC	Approximate date
Enclosure 1		
Enclosure 1 - construction	50-1 BC	
Chamber (AF25)	50-1 BC	
Cremation burial (AF18)	50-1 BC	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Pit (AF48)	50-1 BC	Contains broken funerary goods
Enclosure 3		
Enclosure 3 - construction	AD 25-50(?)	Could be as early as 10 BC
Pyre site (BF1)	AD 25-50(?)	Cut by Chamber BF6
Pit with pyre debris (BF17)	AD 25-50	Contains wooden barrel
Chamber (BF6)	AD 35-50	Cuts Pyre site BF1
Pyre site (BF16)	AD 35-50	
Warrior Burial (BF64)	AD 40-50/55	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Inkwell Burial (BF67)	AD 40-55	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Enclosure 4		
Enclosure 4 – construction	AD 40-50/55	Likely occurred at same time as Enclosure 45
Pyre site (BF32)	AD 40-50/55	
Chamber (BF24)	AD 40-50/55	
Deposition of broken pots in enclosure ditch	AD 40-50/55	Occurred weeks/months after digging of enclosure ditch
Deposition of broken pots in pyre site (BF32)	AD 40-50/55	Occurred weeks/months after digging of enclosure ditch
Enclosure 5		
Enclosure 5 – construction	AD 40-50/55	Likely occurred at same time as Enclosure 4
Pyre site (CF43-6)	AD 40-50/55	
Doctor's Burial (CF47)	AD 40-50/55	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Chamber (CF42)	AD 40-50/60	
Broken pots deposited in enclosure ditch	AD 40-50/55	
Broken pots deposited in pyre site (CF43-6)	AD 40-50/55	
Brooches Burial (CF72)	AD 40-50/55	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Mirror Burial (CF115)	AD 40-60/75	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Cremation burial (CF403)	AD 45-60	For list of grave goods see Table 2
Shaft (CF23)	AD 40-60	
Slot (CF96)	AD 65-75	10m long trench containing 2x Roman coin, flagon sherds, iron nails. Latest feature on site

Table 2: Cremation burials at Stanway with significant rave good assemblages (Note: all page references relate to Crummy et. al 2007)

Name	Location	Grave goods	Date	Page Ref
Cremation burial AF18	Enclosure 1	Complete grog-tempered ware jar, small textile bag containing ?verdirgas	50-1 BC	pp.167-170
The Doctor's Burial (CF47)	Enclosure 5	Full dinner service (samian ware), amphorae, brooches x2, game board and counters, jet bead, surgical kit, divination rods x8, cu alloy rings x 9, textiles, cu alloy saucepan and strainer bowl	AD 40-50/55	pp.201-253
The Warrior's Burial (BF64)	Enclosure 3	Full dinner service (samian ware), amphorae, glass vessels x3, brooches x2, glass bead, cu alloy arm ring, shield boss, spear head, metal containers x3, game board and counters, wooden box x2	AD 40-50/55	pp.170-196
The Inkwell Burial (BF67)	Enclosure 3	Inkwell, cu alloy brooch, flagon, wooden box	AD 40-55	pp.197-200
The Brooches Burial (CF72)	Enclosure 5	Flagon, cup/bowl x2, brooches x6, glass jar, glass bead, pin with glass bead, iron knife blade, nail shank, textiles	AD 40-50/55	pp.254-260
The Mirror Burial (CF115)	Enclosure 5	Cup, flagon, glass bottle, cu alloy mirror fragment, iron stud	AD 40-60/75	pp.260-262
Cremation burial CF403	Enclosure 5	Moulded platter, jar	AD 45-60	pp.262-264

Table 3: Non-burial features (source Crummy et. al. 2007)

Feature	Description	Artefacts	Date	Page Reference
Pit AF48 Enclosure 1	Pit containing broken funerary goods, small amount of cremated bone	Pottery, metal alloy strips, part of a wooden object, metal earrings	50-1 BC	p162-167
Pit BF17 Enclosure 3	Pit containing wood barrel - filled with charcoal and ash, no bone (possible pyre debris?)	Iron stud, cu boss, iron fitting (heat affected), burnt metal fragments	AD 25-50	p157-159
Pit CF7 Outside Enclosure 5	Pit containing pyre debris, some cremated bone present in low quantity	Pottery (local), brooch, iron pin/needle, iron fragments (poss chain)		p160-161
Shaft CF23 Enclosure 5	Circular deep shaft, dug in SW corner of enclosure. Bands of charcoal	Pottery (single sherd of storage jar)	AD40-60	p265-266

Table 4: Weight of cremated human remains per feature - burial and non-burial features

source (Crummy et. al. 2007)

Feature name	Location	Weight (grams)	Page ref
Cremation burial (AF18)	Enclosure 1	639.7	pp.167-170
Pit (AF48)	Enclosure 1	3.4	pp.162-167
Chamber (AF25)	Enclosure 1	11.8	pp.101-103
The Warrior's Burial (BF64)	Enclosure 3	137.5	pp.170-196
The Inkwell Burial (BF67)	Enclosure 3	225.6	pp.197-201
Chamber (BF6)	Enclosure 3	45.0	pp.104-127
Chamber (BF24)	Enclosure 4	62.5	pp.127-141
The Doctor's Burial (CF47)	Enclosure 5	158.1	pp.201-253
The Brooches Burial (CF72)	Enclosure 5	73.7	pp.254-260
The Mirror Burial (CF115)	Enclosure 5	1.0	pp.260-262
Cremation burial CF403	Enclosure 5	167.0	pp.262-264
The Doctor's Burial (CF47)	Enclosure 5	158.1	pp.201-253
Chamber (CF42)	Enclosure 5	None	pp.142-157
Pit (CF7)	Outside Enclosure 5	55.8	pp.160-161

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Endnotes

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[1] A detailed summary of this debate is provided by Graham (2021, 178-182).

[2] A notable exception is provided by Merrifield (1988).

[3] Agency is defined as the active involvement of human actors in past and present practices, whether conscious (e.g. deliberate acts) or unconscious (e.g. routine). See Gardner (2007, 43-45).

[4] Critiques of the archaeological use of phenomenology include, among others, the suggestion that practitioners can infer a knowledge of the past through engagement with ancient monuments or landscapes in the present. A detailed explanation is provided by Brück (2005, 45-72).

[5] Several notable exceptions include Hutton (2013, 2015).

[6] Several notable examples can be seen in medieval contexts including works by Gilchrist (2008) and Gordon (2014).

[7] Although not explicitly defined by Gilchrist, I define a practitioner as someone who undertook the specific practice of magic and recipients as those who were affected by, whether positively or negatively by the results of magical practice.

[8] In this context I define the biography of an object as considering the complete life cycle of that object (birth, life, death), which accumulates a distinct history over time. See Gosden & Marshall (1999).

[9] A fine-grained analysis of the Doctors' burial is presented in Crummy et. al. (2007) and Garland (2018a). Relevant details of the burial from these publications are presented are referred to the text.