

Analysis of the cremated bone

In January 2013 the cremated human remains, excavated from the Mersea Barrow in 1912, were sent to Senior Osteoarchaeologist Jacqueline McKinley at Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury. This analysis was funded by generous local donations and a substantial grant from the Association for Roman Archaeology: detailed reports of the analysis can be viewed in Mersea Island Museum. The bone report confirmed that the deceased was a male aged between 35 and 45. His ethnic/geographic background, as expected, remained unknown. He was 'regularly engaged in strenuous walking/running', but may have suffered a tear in one of the major thigh muscles. Surprisingly, bone evidence indicated that he suffered from the joint disease Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis [DISH], not previously found in cremated remains. An even more significant, unique discovery was a sticky, strong-smelling substance coating the bones, which required separate molecular analysis by Rhea Brettell at the University of Bradford. It was found to be a rare combination of pine resins and, amazingly, precious frankincense from East Africa. This was probably added to the cooled bones as part of a funeral ritual known from Roman literary sources but never until now found in cremations.

Pottery fragments found within the mound

This material, sent by Warren to Colchester Museum in 1912, was located with the help of Steve Yates and analysed by Stephen Benfield on behalf of Ernest Black. It included fragments of prehistoric pottery and flint, probably included in the earth and gravel brought to the site by the barrow's builders. Some of the Roman pottery, described and photographed by Warren for his 1913 Report, now appears to be later than the suggested late 1st century date. Several greyware pieces were from a 'chevron (lattice) decorated jar which appears to have been broken when work on the barrow commenced, and, as such, is almost certainly contemporary with it... This suggests that the Mersea barrow mound was most probably constructed in the late Hadrianic-Antonine period'. Since the Emperor Hadrian ruled from 117-138 AD and Antoninus Pius from 138-161, this suggests a date for the barrow construction nearer to the middle of the 2nd century.

Other specimens collected from the barrow in 1912

Jacqueline McKinley examined small-fraction bone fragments found among fuel ash in the mound, all of which appeared to be of animal origin.

Botanical and geological specimens, collected in 1912 and currently held by the Essex Field Club, are as yet unavailable for inspection.