

## CDA-7-Lowbury-Hill

### The Archaeology of Hidden Identity: The Case of a Female Burial from Lowbury Hill

How to apply and further details: <https://www.sww-ahdtp.ac.uk/prospective-students/apply/collaborative-doctoral-award-projects-2021/>

#### Supervisors

- Prof. Amy C. Smith (University of Reading, [a.c.smith@reading.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.smith@reading.ac.uk))
- Dr Sophie Beckett (Cranfield University, [s.beckett@cranfield.ac.uk](mailto:s.beckett@cranfield.ac.uk))
- Angie Bolton (Oxfordshire Museums Service [OMS], [Angie.Bolton@Oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Angie.Bolton@Oxfordshire.gov.uk))

Prof. Smith is Professor of Classical Archaeology, Curator of the Ure Museum, and Head of the Department of Classics in Reading). She is a Classical archaeologist who, in her curatorial role, also has extensive experience in the history of archaeology and museums as well as museum display. Dr Beckett is Lecturer in Forensic and Archaeological Biominerals at the Cranfield Forensic Institute (CFI), and is familiar with the osteological material, having already supervised an MSc student who explored some of the osteological evidence relating to this individual. Ms Bolton is Curator of Archaeology at the Museum Resource Centre, OMS, with experience of working previously with HEIs, including Cranfield, Oxford, and Reading. Both academic supervisors have supervised funded PhD students to completion, served on assessment/advisory panels and as internal/external examiners. All the supervisors have worked successfully with non-HEI organisations, including Historic England, national and regional museums (British Museum, Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service), and community archaeology groups (Ogbourne St Andrew History Group and Gloucestershire Archaeology). The research student will also three enjoy the support of other interested and experienced colleagues in these institutions.

#### Subject

This multidisciplinary project seeks to re-interpret the remains of a women discovered in the wall of the Romano-British temple found at Lowbury Hill (Oxfordshire, earlier Berkshire) in excavations by the then University College Reading (now University of Reading) in 1913-14. The original interpretation of her role as a 'foundation' deposit, then as a body inserted in a 'robber' trench, has been brought into question by a 1990s radio-carbon analysis that contextualised her within the early medieval period (c 550-650 CE). The nearly complete female skeleton was displayed by the early 1920s at University College Reading's Museum of Archaeology and History, alongside the male Anglo-Saxon warrior found in the adjacent barrow. While *he* is now prominently displayed in the Oxfordshire Museum (Woodstock), *she* was later boxed, largely forgotten, and eventually stored in the Museum Resource Centre of the Oxfordshire Museums Service (OMS), where she now resides in two separate boxes. We seek an understanding of her deposition and relation to both the Romano-British temple and Anglo-Saxon barrow at Lowbury Hill. Her case is important not only for History and Archaeology but also in Gender Studies, regarding both her role in the Roman and/or

Anglo-Saxon periods and her later history as a ‘forgotten women’ overlooked in favour of her more ‘decorated’ male ‘neighbour’.

### **Research questions and methods**

The project seeks to address the following questions:

- Does the archaeological evidence of the Lowbury female burial indicate the time, nature, and related circumstances of her deposition?
- What can we glean about the life and death of this female?
- What was her connection to the building (Romano-British temple) in which she was interred, the neighbouring barrow, and the deposition in that barrow (the Anglo-Saxon ‘warrior’)?
- How and why has her reception in academic, museum, and non-academic circles fluctuated so greatly in the last century?
- How is her story best represented to contemporary and future audiences?

A PhD student will work across the institutions represented by the supervisory team to thoroughly investigate the evidence for the interpretation of the female burial from Lowbury Hill: osteological remains at the Oxfordshire Museums Service, with technical and laboratory support from the Cranfield Forensic Institute at Cranfield University; and associated archaeological evidence and archives (OMS and Reading). We will harness our relationships also with local history groups, U3A groups, and non-traditional museum visitors (e.g. metal detector users) who are interested in the relevant site and its misunderstood archaeologies, and establish digital and physical displays of her remains and associated story among the partnered museums (Oxfordshire and/or Ure Museums).

Through the project the team will explore the ways in which the female burial from Lowbury was interpreted, reinterpreted, displayed, and eventually forgotten as a means toward understanding the ways in which archaeological material might be more clearly displayed or utilized in and beyond the OMS. The project will help the OMS and earlier ‘owners’ of the archaeological material to confront problems encountered in history of the organisations.

### **Research context**

Forgotten histories, especially those of overlooked women, have become matters of great academic and popular interest. They have begun to draw visitors to museums and archives and encourage researchers to reinterpret archives and other evidence in light of contemporary understandings. Taking the cue from Howard Williams’ *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (2006), in turn influenced by sociological and anthropological approaches, we consider the role of mortuary practices in forgetting as well as remembering. We seek to harness expertise from Humanities (Classics and History), Archaeology and related sciences, as well as Museum Studies, to elucidate the complex story of this forgotten woman and bring her remains back to academic and public consciousness. Her story is a single but fascinating case of a woman who was pushed aside more than once during tumultuous times in our nation’s history. This project will also add to our knowledge of the complicated multicultural landscape and religious context of the period of the Lowbury female’s deposition and further contribute to museological concerns

about the interpretation and display of hidden histories and human remains. A focus on the single burial makes the project manageable as a 3-year PhD project, despite its wide-ranging implications for historic and archaeological interpretation, museology and public archaeology.

### **Main resources/collections in this area**

Relevant resources are:

- Archaeological remains (OMS)
- Archives relating to
  - Lowbury hill excavations (Ure Museum/Classics Department, Reading; OMS)
  - Subsequent display and interpretation at Reading (as above and History/Archaeology Departments)
- Records of scientific analyses (Reading; Cranfield)
- Future laboratory work, e.g. osteology, isotope analysis; forensics, e.g. facial reconstruction (Cranfield; OMS)
- 3D visualization/future museum display (Ure Museum, Reading; OMS)
- Further interested individuals from local history groups, U3A, metal detector users, Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) advocates, etc..

By accessing these resources and relevant techniques and individuals, the student will structure a thorough, informed and comprehensive analysis and develop her/his skills/familiarity with a variety of archaeological, historical and museological approaches, networks, and activities.

### **Skills developed by student and employability enhancement**

This project will provide opportunities for the student to develop a range a career-enhancing skills in historic, forensic and other scientific archaeology, histories (local, museological, and re. past societies of Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain). In particular, the student will gain cross-disciplinary experience by working with historical, scientific, and archival experts; team-working skills from being part of the project team and the team at the OMS; hands-on /in-house instruction in digitisation (OMS / PAS, in collaboration with the digital humanities team at Reading), digital imaging (OMS and Ure Museum), archaeological illustration (Archaeology, Reading), museum display (OMS and Ure Museum). There will be an opportunity to create an exhibition and associated workshop / conference related to the project (OMS and Ure Museum).