

NNAS Lecture, Saturday 4 January in the Town Close Auditorium, Norwich Castle Museum, Dr Adrian Marsden (Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service)

Religion in Roman Norfolk.

Despite initial technical difficulties (which Adrian resolved by racing home and returning with his own projector) the talk was well illustrated with photographs of various recent discoveries in Norfolk which tell us about the various gods and goddesses worshipped and reveal aspects of religious practice in Roman Norfolk. Whilst there are practically no inscriptions on stone (not surprising given the paucity of anything but flint in Norfolk) and wooden items have not survived, pieces of metal exist. A gold piece from Billingford (but unlikely to come from the temple there) has an inscription asking a favour from a Persian cult figure. A lead piece from the banks of the Tas at Caister St. Edmunds, evokes Neptune for help to apprehend a thief and, rather oddly, promises a pair of leggings as an offering. These are standard *defixio* tablets.

Main site assemblages illustrate a range of worship, which fits with Roman polytheism. Objects at Walsingham including a portrait bust of Minerva, a model of a three-horned deity, masks of Cupid and representations of satyrs, suggest a complex devoted to many gods rather than a temple to one god. Animal motifs of goats and cockerels on rings, and small statuettes were given as gifts in honour of certain gods like Mars and Mercury. A goat from South Walsham; a cockerel from Walsingham; sceptre heads from Aylsham including a leopard representing Bacchus; a silver sword from Bracon Ash and small axe heads are all standard votive offerings to the gods. However, there are no figurines in Norfolk unlike those found in Lincolnshire devoted to Toutates worshipped by the Catavolomi tribe – evidently not a Norfolk god.



There are little horse and horse rider brooches which are linked to the Iceni tribe. A wheel from Walsingham and another from Felmingham represent a Celtic sky symbol; other material found in a pot show the crescent moon with solar rays suggesting a god of the heavens linked to these wheels. Also crows or ravens, sitting on globes as sceptre heads, are found in NE Norfolk near the coast but not elsewhere so this seems significant. Brancaster means 'ravens fort', Bran being the name of a Celtic God. Along the border with Cambridgeshire was an Imperial Estate devoted to the Emperor's family where sceptre heads, one with the head of an Empress with distinctive hairstyle, can be dated.



In the Thetford treasure, two spoons, have Bacchic decoration (the first a horn-blowing triton holding a steering-oar and accompanied by a dolphin, the second with a tigress and a tree) with inscriptions to the god 'Faunus' with a Celtic element 'Narus' (possibly meaning powerful or mighty) emphasising that this was a local Norfolk cult.

There are also Bacchic elements in the decoration of the fine gold jewellery, and Faunus may have formed part of a wider Bacchic cult. The jewellery items probably belonged to a rich individual or guild as they are not appropriate

votive items for a temple.

The Great Bowl from the Mildenhall treasure is of similar date, the late 4th century. Decoration on the flat rims shows a variety of animals in hunting and pastoral scenes, themes which fall into the general category of Bacchic imagery. The inclusion of griffins, a mythical species, alongside real animals, is a common feature.



It appears that such treasure was owned and used by committed pagans and may have been hidden as a result of anti-pagan legislation in the final decade of the fourth century AD. The Emperor Theodosius in AD 391/2 began persecuting heretics and pagans and banning both public and private worship of the old gods. The names found – such as Augusticus, Agrestivivas – appear to belong to an elite of late Roman Norfolk. They are covert or nick-names used during worship of a collegian or small group of people.



A gold necklace and rings from Wacton and a 3rd century ring stone from Snettisham reference Bacchus and the local god Faunus who was typically represented as half man, half goat in imitation of the Greek Satyr god Pan, who hangs around with nymphs and fauns in the woods. Faunus was originally worshipped throughout the countryside as a bestower of fruitfulness on fields and flocks but he became primarily a woodland deity. A vessel from Elsing has horns on the head similar to late iron age coins with the implication that a form of Faunus might have been tribal god of the Iceni. Such finds are widespread in central and south Norfolk but not in the coastal regions.

In response to a question from the audience Adrian said there are very few explicitly Christian items from the late Roman period found in Norfolk (a small Roman silver disc, thought to have been part of a signet ring, circa 312 to 410 AD, found near Swaffham 2013, is inscribed 'Antonius, may you live in God') which may suggest that people stubbornly continued their pagan beliefs and worship.