

Anglo-Saxon Burials at Postcombe, Lewknor

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SUMMARY

A small group of Anglo-Saxon inhumations was revealed south of Postcombe.

INTRODUCTION

THE discovery of bones was reported on 14 May 1972, by one of the contractors' men during mechanical digging of a drainage ditch on the south side of the M.40, in a field south-east of Adwell Cop. It was found that the machine had cut through two burials, and through a third burial pit (FIG. 1). The skeletons (1 and 3) were removed that day, and the pit was emptied in two stages later. Another pit, some 150 m. to the south-east, was found to contain a Medieval sherd, tile, and ironwork, and so was presumably not part of the cemetery.

The site, no. 7 on the M.40 site plan (page 2), was at G.R. SU 707944. The ground here slopes east-south-east from Adwell Cop, the burials being near the 400 ft. contour, where the slope begins to drop less steeply. A thin top-soil overlies chalk, usually with a weathered crust.

After the removal of the remains of the skeletons, the adjacent stretch of the motorway was mechanically stripped, but nothing further was found. This area was assiduously watched by W. J. Fowler while it was being removed by the contractors, but he saw nothing. The side of the cutting did have a small dark patch in it, which could have been the edge of a pit, but it seems more likely that there were in fact no other burials in the path of the motorway, but of course some may remain in the undisturbed adjacent field.

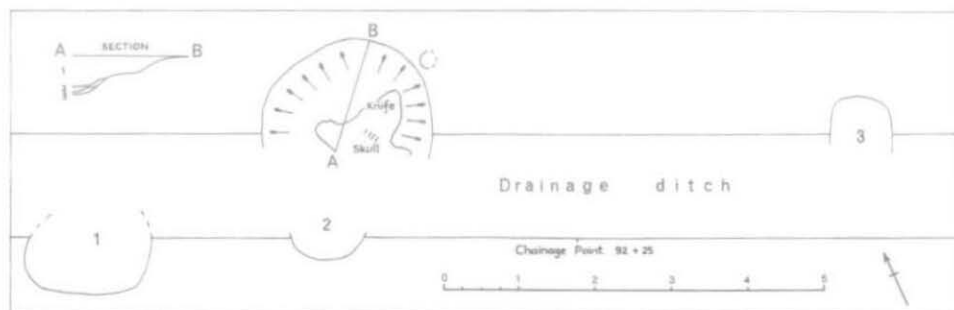


FIG. 1
Postcombe, Lewknor (Site 7). Burial Pits.

THE GRAVES

Skeleton 1 was lying west-east on its right side, with legs flexed. The left arm, ribs, vertebrae, the back of the skull, and part of the pelvis had been shattered by the machine. There was some very decayed bone in the soil above the burial, but no other finds. The sides of the pit were sloping, not vertical, and there was a layer of big pieces of chalk above the burial. It had been back-filled with chalk.

The low brow-ridge of the skull of *Skeleton 1* suggests that it was a woman,¹ and an age at death in the late teens or early twenties is indicated by the third Molar, which had erupted but had not been ground down.

Skeleton 2 was a child, aligned roughly south-east-north-west. Only the skull and a few other bones had survived, and even the skull was crushed into small pieces—although this was the only skeleton not directly damaged by the machine. In the fill immediately above the body was a small buckle, and at the end of the bone spread, on the same axis, was a knife. There were also a prehistoric sherd and a fossil. The pit was very wide, with a gently sloping shelf dipping into the burial area and a possible post-hole on its edge. Its plan (FIG. 1) suggests that more than one skeleton could have been contained in it, but the area west of the section A-B was empty except for one very small bone fragment, and an area of decayed bone in the upper fill. There could have been further remains within the area of the pit removed by the machine. The pit fill was grey-brown and clayey, with flecks of charcoal/organic deposit, but no concentrations. A thin layer of chalk (2 in section drawing, Fig. 1), overlay the burial.

The jaw of the child contained all its milk teeth, and an Incisor was developing, suggesting an age of between three and seven years.

The Finds

Bronze rectangular buckle plate, loop and pin missing; this object was mislaid subsequent to the excavation. The two bronze rivets remained; one rivet hole broke the end of the plate, which was a single sheet of bronze bent double. Corrosion suggested an original iron pin. Buckles of this type are not found in the 5th and 6th century cemeteries of the Oxford region. One from City Farm, Hanborough, is very similar.² Rectangular-plated buckles are regarded as 'a type fossil in nearly every 7th century cemetery'.³

Iron knife (FIG. 2, 1), tanged, with no trace of handle, and with sloping back, the latter a 'late' feature.⁴ Length: 10.9 cm.

The fossil in the grave fill could conceivably have been deliberately included as one of the child's toys. No other fossils were seen in the grave fills.

¹ I am grateful to Mrs. Gwyn Miles for advice on the bones, and to Mr. J. C. McNeill for his comments on the teeth. I should like to thank Mrs. Tania Dickinson for letting me use her suggestions so freely.

² H. J. Case *et al.*, 'Excavations at City Farm, Hanborough', *Oxoniensia*, xxix/xxx (1964/5), Fig. 25, 3, 4.

³ A. L. Meaney and S. C. Hawkes, *Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Winnall* (1970), 42-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43-4.

Skeleton 3 was an extended supine inhumation aligned south-north. The machine had destroyed all the body and most of the skull, leaving only the top of the skull, a fragment of the right side of the pelvis, the right hand, and the legs. The size of these suggests a large male. The only object recovered was an iron (?) pin from behind the head, found lying horizontally, and on roughly the same alignment as the body. The burial pit was almost vertical-sided, showed no lining, and was back-filled with chalk. A layer of bigger pieces of chalk above the body could have been deliberate.

The Find

Iron (?) pin (FIG. 2, 2), with pointed ends, now very decayed, but probably once round in section. Its position at the head of *Skeleton 3* suggests that it was a hair-pin, head-dress fastener, or shroud pin. The last is perhaps the most likely, since it is undecorated and in iron, not bronze. Length : 6.6 cm.

In the digger's spoil heap near this burial was found part of the jaw of an aged adult. The teeth surviving were the second pre-Molar and the very worn third Molar (Wisdom). The other Molars had been missing for such a long period before death that bone had formed over their sockets. There were cavities in both teeth, which had probably caused acute discomfort from sore gums. The general impression was of a female, who may have been well into her seventies.



FIG. 2
Iron knife (1) and pin (2). ($\frac{1}{2}$).

CONCLUSION

The few finds from this small cemetery suggest a date in the late 6th or 7th centuries, and such isolated, poorly-furnished Anglo-Saxon burials, far-removed from any river, are not usual in the Oxford region much before the end of the pagan period.⁵ Sited on the slope of Adwell Cop, on which there may have been a Bronze Age barrow,⁶ and only 150 metres away from South Weston Lane, which until 1840 was the parish boundary, the temptation is to relate the burials to these and to the Roman site at Lewknor (M.40, site 11), and to see the survival of the Roman estate boundaries, on the pattern observed in Gloucestershire and elsewhere,⁷ with the burials on the periphery of the property. Lewknor's importance in the Saxon period is shown by its relative size, and its place as the

⁵ J. R. Kirk, 'Anglo-Saxon Cremation and Inhumation in the Upper Thames Valley in Pagan Times', in D. B. Harden (ed.), *Dark Age Britain* (1956), 125.

⁶ *V.C.H. Oxon*, VIII (1964), 7. MS. Oxford, Bodleian Gough MS. Oxon. 47, 241.

⁷ S. Applebaum, in H. P. R. Finberg, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, I. A.D. 43-1042* (1972), 262-4.

centre of its own Hundred. As late as 1086, 17 of its 20 hides were held as a single estate, suggesting a large territorial unit, so that there is at least the possibility of survival. Mrs. Tania Dickinson has pointed out to me, however, that the real importance of the burials is in their context as the most westerly of a group of small late Anglo-Saxon burials along the Chiltern scarp and in the valley below, that present a very different pattern from those in the Thames valley.