

A Late-Viking Burial at Magdalen Bridge, Oxford?

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SUMMARY

Metal objects and bones found near Magdalen Bridge in 1884 are re-interpreted as the likely remains of a Viking warrior and his horse, buried on an island in the Cherwell around the year 1000. This date, which has seemed improbably late for a 'pagan' grave, makes more sense in the light of evidence from Scandinavia that furnished equestrian burial continued up to c. 1000. The man probably belonged to one of the armies that raided the region from the 990s, or even to Swein Forkbeard's army which attacked Oxford in 1009 and 1013. It is significant that the burial was so close to St. Clement's, the possible site of a Cnut-period Danish 'garrison'.

In 1950 a group of Viking-age metal objects from the River Cherwell at Oxford was discussed in this journal by W.A. Seaby.¹ The present paper, which will add little to Seaby's detailed account of the objects themselves, aims rather to re-state an interpretation of the find which he dismissed too readily: that it may represent the grave of a Viking buried around the year 1000, one of the very last furnished warrior burials to be deposited in England.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE FIND

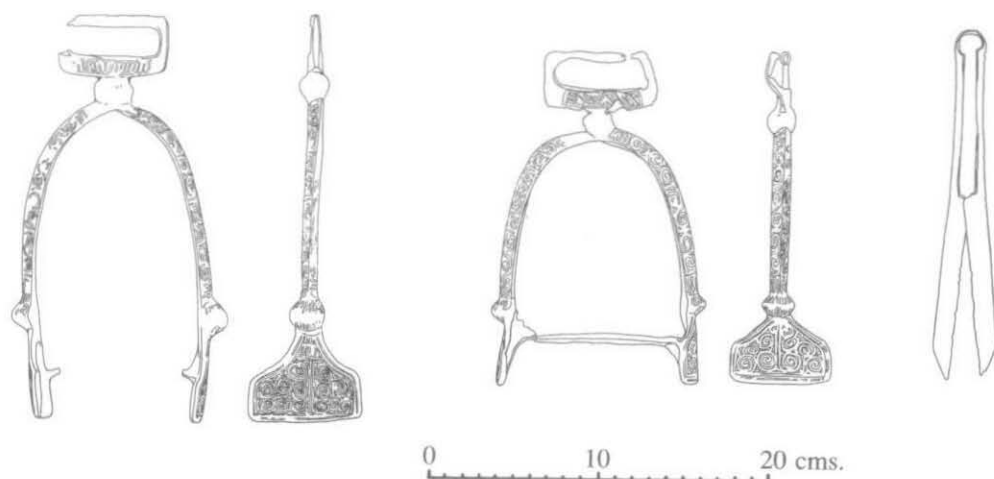
In 1886 the Ashmolean Museum purchased a collection comprising two decorated stirrups, a smaller stirrup, a spur, an iron shears and a horseshoe, which had been recovered together from the bank of the Cherwell in 1884. The Accession Register states that they were found 'by the little stream, the first below Magdalen Bridge, opposite the Botanic gardens, *not in the water* but in the bank above water line, when digging off the angle or corner during the dredging works'; an accompanying sketch-plan marks the spot (SP 5214 0601), as shown in the present Fig. 3.² The Register adds that 'Horses' skulls and other bones were found on the same spot which were sold by the workmen to a dealer in St. Clement's and men's thigh bones were said to have been sold to the Natural Science Museum in the Parks. The [metal objects] . . . were all found on the same site, but the spur was obtained of one of the same workmen later in the year'.³

It is important to note that the objects definitely came from the cut-back corner of the

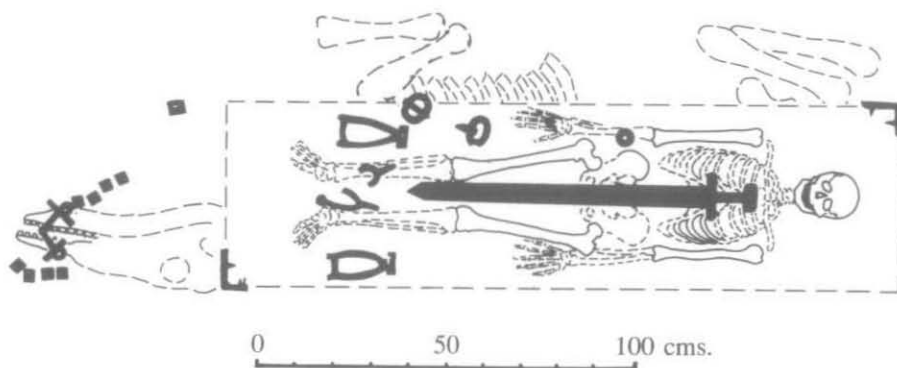
¹ W.A. Seaby, 'Late Dark Age Finds from the Cherwell and Ray', *Oxoniensia*, xv (1950), 29-43. For a preliminary statement of the present argument see J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994), 169-70.

² Seaby op. cit. note 1, 35-6.

³ Ibid. 37.



MAGDALEN BRIDGE, OXFORD



KETTING, DENMARK

Fig. 1. *Above:* The assemblage of objects found near Magdalen Bridge in 1884 (after Seaby op. cit. note 1). *Below:* Tenth-century burial of a man over his horse at Ketting, Denmark (after Brøndsted op. cit. note 23, Fig. 37, reconstructed) to illustrate the possible form of the Magdalen Bridge grave.

island, not out of the river itself. One explanation for this may be that they lay in a silted-up channel: two channels crossing the island which have now disappeared are shown on Agas's map of 1578 (Fig. 3). It is equally possible, however, that they were buried deliberately, though the circumstances of their recovery by dredging means that they cannot be regarded as a reliably sealed group.

THE OBJECTS (Fig. 1)

The bones are now lost.⁴ The account in the Register is explicit that both human and horse bones were found 'on the same spot', and the reference specifically to *thigh* bones is consistent with the recovery of spurs and stirrups in suggesting the disturbance of the lower half of a furnished corpse. This seems to be strong evidence against what would otherwise be the most natural assumption (given the frequency of the practice in the tenth-century Upper Thames), that the items were individual ritual deposits in the river.⁵

The two larger stirrups with brass overlay decoration are of a now-familiar Anglo-Scandinavian kind ('English type C2(iii)').⁶ They are not an exact pair, but they are extremely similar in form and in the character of their decoration: they could perfectly well have been worn by a mounted man as a pair *de facto*. Stirrups of this kind are normally dated to the later 10th century, but they raise an important chronological issue to which we return below.

The prick-spur is also of a type convincingly identified as Anglo-Scandinavian by Seaby.⁷ A fragment of a very similar example has since been found securely stratified in a mid-11th-century Winchester house, and the leading expert on the subject comments that 'a date of c. 1000 is likely to be correct for the Cherwell spur'.⁸

The shears are a simple, utilitarian object, often found in early medieval contexts.⁹ Seaby noted a close parallel from a late-Viking grave,¹⁰ and another pair has been found in Anglo-Scandinavian Thetford associated with a 10th- to 11th-century cobble spread.¹¹ There is therefore no difficulty in regarding this item as contemporary with the stirrups and spur.

⁴ Exhaustive enquiries at the various University departments and collections holding skeletal material, and at the Natural History Museum (which acquired much of the material held by the Oxford Department of Human Anatomy in the 1950s) have failed to locate the Magdalen Bridge finds. We are grateful to Sandra Dudley, Geoffrey Harrison, Robert Kruszynski and Jane Pickering for their help.

⁵ Blair *op. cit.* note 1, 98-9. However, such ritual deposits were normally edged weapons and spearheads, not stirrups or spurs.

⁶ Seaby *op. cit.* note 1, 38-9; W.A. Seaby and P. Woodfield, 'Viking Age Stirrups from England and their Background', *Med. Arch.* xxiv (1980), 87-122, inventory nos. 23 and 26.

⁷ Seaby *op. cit.* note 1, 39-40.

⁸ M. Biddle (ed.), *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester* (Winchester Studies vii.2, 1990), 1038 and Fig. 331, no. 3860. For another, from a disturbed London context, see J. Clark (ed.), *The Medieval Horse and its Equipment* (Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 5, 1995), 130-1, no. 316. Blanche Ellis, to whom we are extremely grateful for her comment, draws attention to other examples in the Museum of London.

⁹ Cf. Biddle *op. cit.* note 8, 861-3.

¹⁰ Seaby *op. cit.* note 1, 40.

¹¹ A. Rogerson and C. Dallas, *Excavations in Thetford, 1948-59 and 1973-80* (East Anglian Archaeology Report 22, 1984), Fig. 126 no. 110 and p. 43.

The small stirrup with copper-alloy casing does not belong to the Viking 'type C', and relates most closely to 11th- and 12th-century stirrups.¹² Its association with the other objects is therefore doubtful.

The horseshoe is the one item which cannot possibly be early medieval: the parallels are unambiguously from the late middle ages onwards.¹³

As already noted, an assemblage recovered by dredging cannot be regarded as archaeologically sealed: the probably intrusive stirrup and the obviously intrusive horseshoe simply underline this, and should not be considered problematic. What is impressive is not the stratigraphical integrity of the assemblage but the striking consistency of most of the objects with each other: all but two of them can happily be ascribed to a relatively high-status context around the year 1000.

This is merely to re-state Seaby's conclusion that 'here is a group of four objects such as may have been carried by one or more horsemen of the early 11th century'.¹⁴ But can he really be right in suggesting that this man or men 'perished crossing the river'? It is surely most unlikely that a well-armed warrior would simply have been left to lie in the shallow current of the Cherwell: his friends would have buried him, or his enemies would have despoiled him. The proposition that not merely the warrior but also his horse lay gently rotting away near one of the main routes into a major late Anglo-Saxon town stretches credulity. The rest of this paper will pursue an alternative explanation.

SCANDINAVIAN EQUESTRIAN BURIALS: THE BACKGROUND TO THE FINDS FROM THE CHERWELL

The finds of cavalry equipment and of horse and human bones from the Cherwell raise several very interesting – and probably unanswerable – questions about the nature of such deposits, as well as the role of Scandinavians in Æthelred's England. The objects are well-known and, despite Seaby's scepticism, were first referred to by Shetelig as remains of a possible Scandinavian interment.¹⁵ The possibility that they represent a late-pagan equestrian burial is worth resurrecting in the light of recent work that has been done on these burials in Scandinavia, and what they may reveal about the religious state of those raiders who over-ran Anglo-Saxon England in the Second Viking Age.

Although there is no doubt that the Vikings were good horsemen even during the First Viking Age, and that they buried horses and horse gear with their dead on many occasions, there are some important changes in this aspect during the 10th century. First there is evidence that stirrups become an item of horse equipment, and this must have had some effects on the horsemanship of the Vikings; secondly, there is 'the rising importance of the equestrian warrior in 10th-century Scandinavia'.¹⁶ The two may of course be linked, and the importance of riding equipment in this era is demonstrated by the archaeological evidence.

¹² Seaby *op. cit.* note 1, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*; cf. Biddle *op. cit.* note 8, 1054–67.

¹⁴ Seaby *op. cit.* note 1, 41.

¹⁵ H. Shetelig (ed.), 'Viking Antiquities in England', in *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, iv (1940), 12; H. Shetelig, 'Viking Graves in Great Britain and Ireland', *Acta Archaeologica*, xvi (1945), 15.

¹⁶ J. Graham-Campbell, 'Anglo-Scandinavian Equestrian Equipment in Eleventh-Century England', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, xiv (1992), 77–89, at 81.

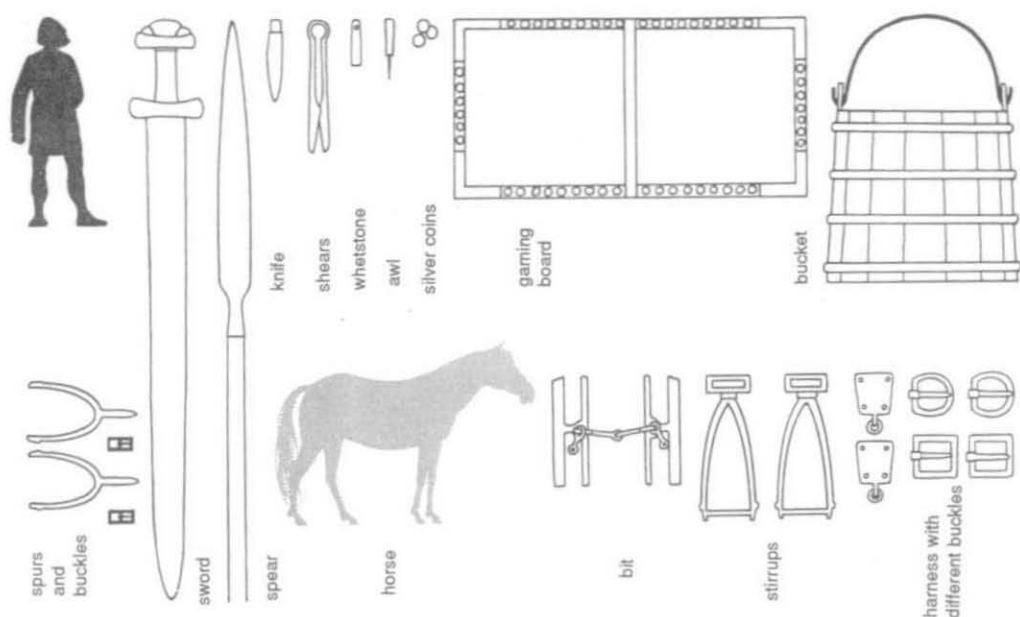


Fig. 2. Schematic depiction of the equipment from the Brandstrup grave. (Drawn by Flemming Bau; from Roesdahl op. cit. note 17.)

This evidence is of burials of knightly warriors (*rittergraver*) which appear in the Scandinavian archaeological record from about the year 900. In Denmark it is believed that they do not occur much beyond the middle of the 10th century, and this date can be associated with the conversion of the Danes which took place after 965 AD. They lasted longer in Norway and Sweden, where the conversion process was more protracted. Some very important deductions have been made from this grave evidence about the cult of Odin in Denmark and the development of a warrior class closely tied to the powerful dynasty based at Jelling in Jutland.¹⁷

The distribution of these graves is primarily in west and south Jutland, and they would appear to relate to the Jelling dynasty which had its seat of power in south Jutland.¹⁸ They are distinguished by the quantity of grave goods, their quality and the evidence they provide of well-equipped warrior horsemen. The collections of grave goods from the burials at Ketting and Brandstrup are shown in Figs. 1–2, and the predominance of the equestrian equipment is clear: it is the stirrups and spurs in particular which are distinctive and which mark these graves out as different from earlier Viking warrior graves, of which there are very few in Denmark. However, it is notable that there is no body armour in any of the Danish graves (helmet or byrnie), although both are known from a single grave in Norway, at Gjermundbu. Apart from military equipment there are domestic items, the purpose of some of which is clear, such as the board games, whereas others have a less obvious significance, such as the shears (especially relevant to the Cherwell find).

¹⁷ E. Roesdahl, 'Fra Vikingegrav til Valhal', *Beretning Fra Andet Tverfaglige Vikingsymposium* (1983), 39–40.

¹⁸ K. Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark* (1980), 129.

This rich burial equipment marks these men out as members of a warrior over-class who can probably be identified with the 'thegns' mentioned on the contemporary rune-stones.¹⁹ Because of the standardised nature of their equipment, some of which is so similar in manufacture that it would appear to have been produced in the same workshop, Roesdahl propounds the theory that it was probably produced in royal centres for close military followers of the kings, such as Gorm the Old or Harald Bluetooth.²⁰ There is no doubting the efficiency of the war machine of these kings, who were responsible for the construction of the round fortresses of Trelleborg, Nonnebakken, Fyrkat and Aggersborg. Whatever the purpose of these structures, they would have to have been manned by warriors who were closely bound to their lord, the king. These overlords would also have to provide their following with weapons and gifts, although it is rather surprising if they permitted such expensive products to be removed from circulation through burial with the dead thegn. In Anglo-Saxon England the royal *hereot* (war gear) had to be returned to the king on the death of his thegn.²¹ Perhaps the absence of helmet and byrnie from Danish graves indicates that some control was exercised over the return of some items to the royal treasury on the death of a warrior in the king's following.

The warrior graves certainly provide material evidence for strong pagan custom of a militaristic kind, and it is tempting to link this with the literary evidence for the existence of the cult of Odin in the last phases of pagan belief in the north.²² But did this all end with the conversion of Harald Bluetooth, so dramatically demonstrated by the scenario at Jelling, with the empty burial chamber in the pagan mound and the Christian grave in front of the altar of the earliest Christian church alongside? In addition, the nearby rune-stone, carefully placed, proudly boasts that it was raised by Harald who 'converted the Danes' and conquered Norway. The most immediate effects of this conversion would be felt in the king's entourage, where it would be forbidden to continue with the old rites and where the worship of Odin would be strictly curtailed. It would not be surprising then if warrior equestrian graves went out of use very shortly after the introduction of Christianity.

But is it possible to be so certain about the dating of those which have been found? Much of the evidence rests on stylistic grounds of form and decoration of the objects. On this question of dating rests the whole case of the likelihood, or possibility, of the Oxford material representing a pagan grave, for if the warrior graves had definitely ceased by 970 AD, and the raids on Æthelred's England started in the 980s, then a pagan burial in England by members of the Danish equestrian class of the second Viking Age would be unlikely.

There is, apparently, one warrior grave which has been interpreted as dating from the early 11th century. This is a burial from Velds (Viborg, Jutland) which includes a pair of stirrups with ornamented plates, the design of which was classified by Brøndsted as 'south of England work of the period round about the year 1000'.²³ Although some of Brøndsted's dates have been revised, this dating has recently been repeated by Leslie Webster, who suggests that the stirrups had been made either for a Scandinavian follower of Cnut in early 11th-century England (more likely for a follower of Swein Forkbeard, who died in 1013), or for a home-

¹⁹ Roesdahl op. cit. note 17, 44.

²⁰ Ibid. 43; but see a recent assessment of the Ketting grave objects where it is argued that they were fabricated locally (H. Lyngstrøm, 'Ketting, en Vikingetidsgavplads med ryttergrave', *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1993), 143-79).

²¹ N. Brooks, 'Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', in D. Hill (ed.), *Æthelred the Unready* (B.A.R. Brit. Ser. 59, 1978), 81-103.

²² Roesdahl op. cit. note 17, 47.

²³ J. Brøndsted, 'Danish Inhumation Graves of the Viking Age: a Survey', *Acta Archaeologica*, vii (1936), 81-229, at 104.

coming Viking by a native craftsman adopting an English style of ornament.²⁴ The question of the influences on design between Scandinavia and England in this period is a complicated one, and linked to the question of the adoption of stirrups, spurs and equestrian equipment.²⁵ But it would appear that the art-historical evidence from the Velds grave leaves the possibility open that equestrian burials may still have been taking place during the period of the renewed raids on Æthelred's England. Certainly there are Norwegian and Swedish graves of the same type which date from the period of raiding. Braaten's analysis of the Norwegian *ryttergraver* assigns those graves with stirrups of his 'C2' type (the most closely comparable with the Velds example) to the later 10th century.²⁶

THE LOCAL CONTEXT: DANES IN EARLY 11TH-CENTURY OXFORD

If the archaeological evidence from Scandinavia leaves the possibility open that warriors might have been buried with pagan ritual at Oxford, it is not easy to find the historical evidence to confirm a Viking presence there during the early decades of renewed Scandinavian attack. Most of the renewed raiding which started in the 980s was concentrated in the south-west and was probably perpetrated by Hiberno-Norse from Ireland and western Scotland. There were raids in the Thames estuary in the early 980s, but no evidence that they penetrated very far.²⁷ Only in 991 do we have evidence that an army 'remained at large in the British Isles' after the battle of Maldon,²⁸ followed in 994 by the famous attack on London by 94 ships, after which the Viking host 'seized horses and rode as widely as they wished'.²⁹ The demands of the army led by Olaf Triggvason give the impression that permanent bases were being established, and even after Olaf left for Norway 'many of its members seem to have remained in England',³⁰ to help the English protect the land against other Vikings. Some of these members could still have been using pagan burial practices in a period when Olaf himself had only just undergone full conversion.

It is in this period that one can imagine strategic places like Oxford, on the main river artery in southern England, being used as a base by a Viking force which controlled the important crossing places nearby. Certainly, by 1002 there were Danes dwelling in the town who were caught in the massacre of St Brice's Day.³¹ They may have been there for some years, and although these particular Danes sought refuge in St. Frideswide's church, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that some members of the Scandinavian community still practised old customs and could have been buried with pagan ritual on an island in the river which they used, and near the crossing place which they controlled. It is even possible that the man buried at Magdalen Bridge was a member of one of the Danish armies which burned Oxford in 1009 and took it in 1013.

In the light of these possibilities the immediate local topography of the find is suggestive. Just beyond Magdalen Bridge lay the suburban parish and village of St. Clement's, known as

²⁴ J. Backhouse, D.H. Turner and L. Webster (eds.), *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art* (Cat. of British Museum Exhibition, 1984), no. 98.

²⁵ See Seaby and Woodfield op. cit. note 6; Graham-Campbell op. cit. note 16.

²⁶ H. Braaten, *Ryttergraver*, in *Varia* (Universitets Oldsaksamling, Oslo), xix (1989), 21-2, 42-3.

²⁷ H.R. Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (1977), 82.

²⁸ S. Keynes, 'The Historical Context', in D. Scragg (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon* (1991), 81-113, at 91.

²⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. D. Whitelock (1961), 83.

³⁰ Keynes op. cit. note 28, 93.

³¹ Blair op. cit. note 1, 167-8.

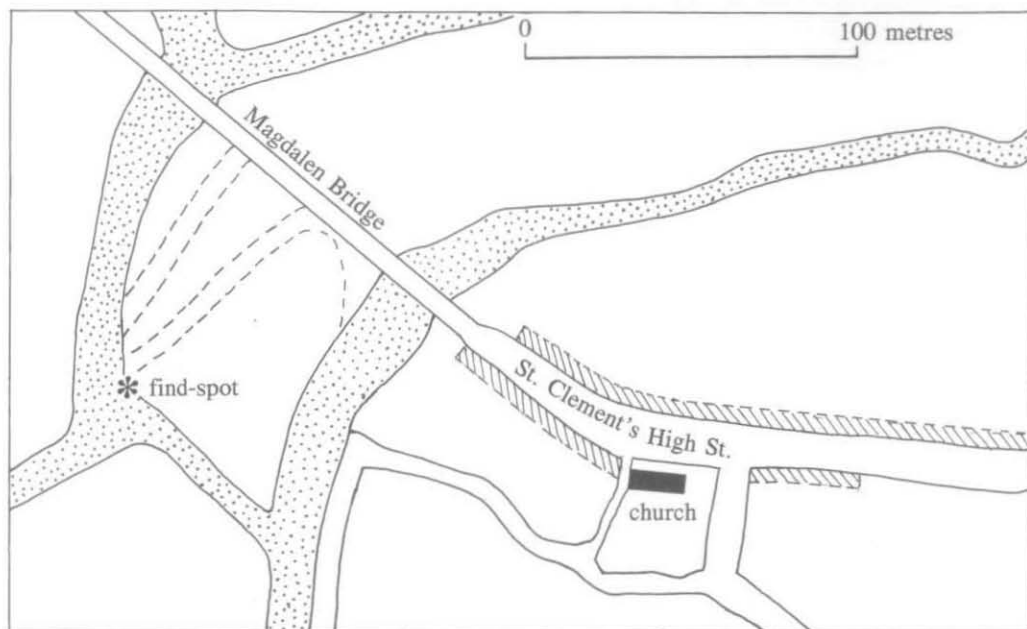


Fig. 3. Sketch-map showing the find-spot of the burial in relation to the 16th-century topography of the St. Clement's area. (Data from maps reproduced in *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1981), 94–8 and H.E. Salter (ed.), *Cartulary of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist*, i (1914), map I, transcribed on to O.S. 25-inch base.) The now-lost channels across the island which appear on Agas's map (1578) are shown schematically in broken line.

the 'bridge-settlement' (*brycg-gesett*).³² The suburb seems to have grown up on land belonging to St. Frideswide's minster, on the main approach to the town by road from the London direction. The parish church of St. Clement is first recorded in the 1120s. As has been shown elsewhere, churches with this dedication are likely to have had a Scandinavian context. St. Clement Danes in London was founded immediately to the west of the main city gate, and at Norwich, Cambridge, Rochester and Worcester, as at Oxford, a church of St. Clement stood at one end of a major bridge. Some connection with suburban garrison sites during the period of Cnut's rule seems likely.³³

It is therefore a remarkable fact that the furnished late-Viking burial, if such it was, lay only 150 m. west of the Oxford church of St. Clement (Fig. 3). This juxtaposition seems to reinforce the idea of a Danish garrison settlement at the bridging-point, and one which had a Christian focus only shortly after the deposition of the pagan-style burial: it is worth asking how far furnished equestrian burial (which could after all be a mark more of status than of religion) was in practice considered incompatible with at least nominal Christianity. The find

³² Blair *op. cit.* note 1, 161, 170; M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire* (1953), i, 20. The name is first recorded in 1285, but it was presumably an Old English formation.

³³ B. Crawford, 'The Cult of St. Clement of the Danes in England and Scotland', in *Medieval England 1992: Pre-Printed Papers vol. 6: Religion and Belief* (Society for Medieval Archaeology Conference, York, 1992), 1–3.

raises fascinating questions about what may count as the last episode of significant pagan influence on southern England.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

A recent study by A. Pedersen, 'Weapons and Riding Gear in Burials: Evidence of Military and Social Rank in 10th-century Denmark', in A.N. Jørgensen and B. Clausen (eds.), *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society* (1997) was published after this article was written. While the author says that 'the custom of depositing riding gear in burials appears to belong mainly to the period c. AD 925-975' (p. 128), her chronology illustration (Fig. 5) shows weapon types and riding gear to be found in burials in the last decades of the 10th century. The few examples of 'late' riding equipment (Fig. 7) are from the north and east periphery where there appears to have been a persistence of older burial customs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Arthur MacGregor for discussing the objects with us, and to Else Roesdahl for permission to reproduce Fig. 2.