Anglo-Saxon Burials and Later Features Excavated at Orsett, Essex, 1975

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TWO ANGLO-SAXON RING-DITCH INHUMATION BURIALS and various later medieval features were found during the excavation of a Neolithic causewayed enclosure in 1975 at Orsett, Essex. A bag containing various objects suggesting magical or amuletic associations indicates that one burial was a lady's grave of the late 7th or even 8th century. These are the first certain examples in Essex of Saxon ring-ditch burials, and overlying barrows are postulated.

The excavations undertaken at Orsett, South Essex (TQ 653806) were to investigate a cropmark site, with no surviving earthworks, discovered during aerial reconnaissance by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography (Pl. 1)[2] and independently by Mr J. Catton.[3] The principal cropmark feature was interpreted as a Neolithic causewayed enclosure, and this was confirmed by excavation. It was partially overlain by features of Early Iron-Age, Middle Iron-Age, Saxon and medieval date. The prehistoric evidence has been published[4] and this report confines itself to the Saxon and medieval evidence.[5]

The site was scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Acts (Essex Monument No. 153), but no archaeological investigations had taken place until in 1975 the Department of the Environment requested the Essex County Council Archaeology Section to carry out trial excavations to determine the state of preservation of the monument and, if possible, confirm the presumed nature and dating of the cropmarks. Grants of £1,250 were made available by the Department of the Environment and the British Museum. The latter also provided important post-excavation facilities.

THE SITE

The cropmark site at Orsett is located W. of the A 128 Brentwood road some 700 m S. of the junction of this road with the A 13 at the 'Orsett Cock' roundabout. Chadwell St Mary is 1500 m SW. (Fig. 1).

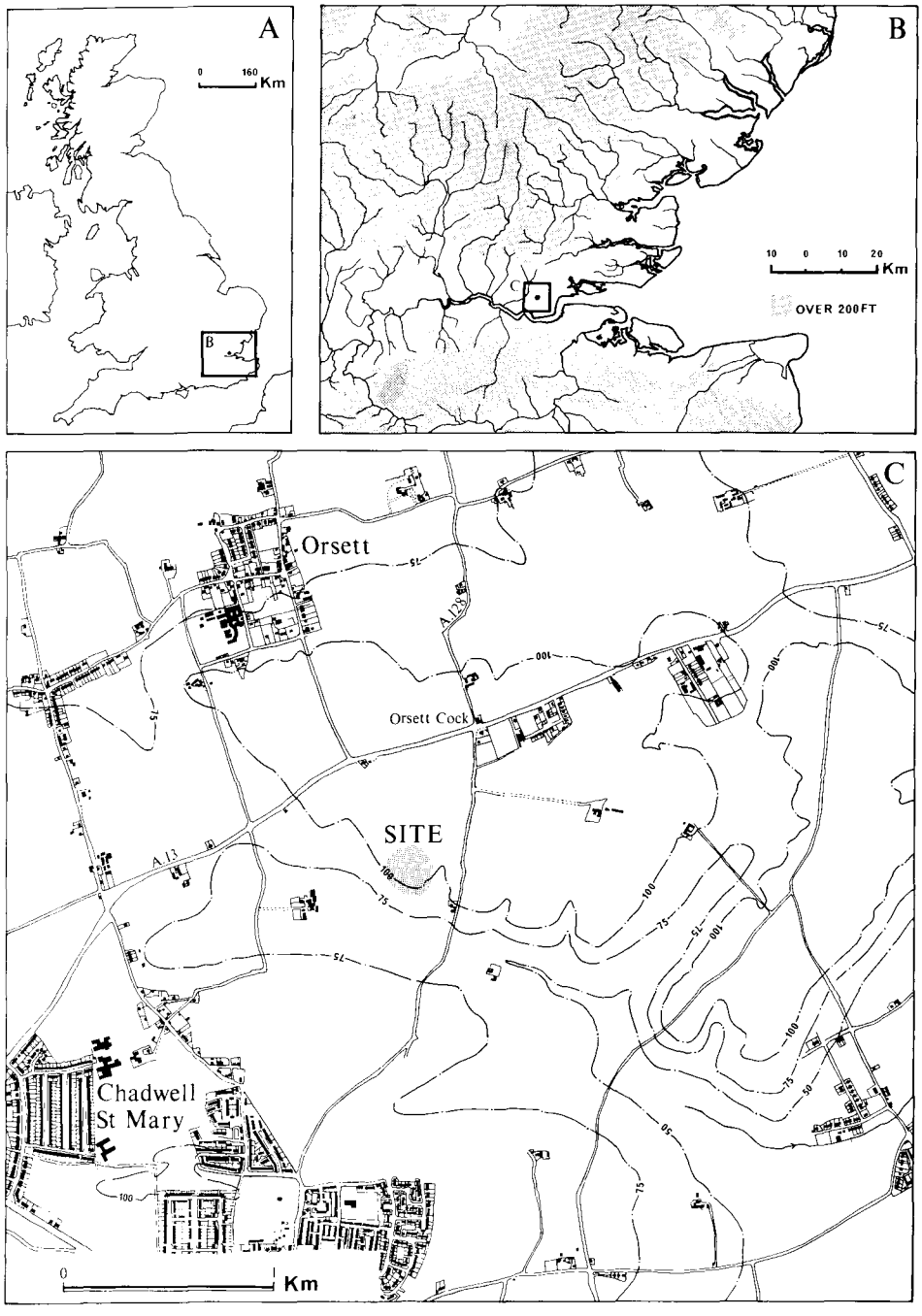

FIG. 1

ORSETT 1975
Location Map, Contours in Feet

The site lies on gently sloping ground at the southern edge of a remnant of the 100ft (30m) Thames terrace (Boyne Hill Terrace) overlooking the lower Thames Valley. Immediately to the S. the ground falls away into the valley of a small N. bank tributary of the R. Thames. The ground also slopes W. and E. into smaller dry valleys. The resulting topography gives the site a prominent position when viewed from the S.[6]

A description of the monument based upon interpretation of the aerial photographs has been published[7] and a plan of the cropmarks produced (Fig. 2). The principal archaeological features visible are the three irregularly concentric circuits of interrupted ditch comprising the Neolithic enclosure. The interrupted ditch system is in part intersected by a sub-rectangular enclosure of Middle Iron-Age date.[8] In addition there were other overlying linear, and four, possibly five, circular features, three with central pits. Professor J. K. St Joseph[9] observed that the circular ditches did not look like normal 'ring-ditches' of ploughed-out barrows, their diameters appearing somewhat small. However, prior to excavation a Neolithic, Bronze-Age or Iron-Age date was postulated for the majority of these additional features.

The excavations fit into a wide programme of investigations into the extensive areas of multi-period cropmarks now known along the N. bank of the R. Thames. Twelve years of rescue excavation carried out on the multi-period cropmarks at Mucking[10] have been of considerable importance to the advancement of Saxon studies. More recently Saxon occupation and burials were recorded during rescue excavations by Essex County Council Archaeology Section on the route of the new A 13 road.[11]

METHOD OF EXCAVATION AND RECORDING

In order to achieve the stated objects, but within the limitations of the farmers' cropping programme, two main areas were selected for excavation, designated B and C, and three smaller areas A, D and E excavated to answer specific questions (Fig. 2). Only Area C produced features of Saxon and medieval date. This was a 30m square, positioned on the edge of the terrace slope to examine a short length of the inner circuit of interrupted ditch, one corner of the sub-rectangular enclosure, two of the group of four ring-ditches, and a number of other features (Fig. 3; Pl. II, A).

After its last ploughing Area C was examined for surface finds before excavation. As the site had been ploughed for many years, it was decided to remove the ploughsoil by machine, the soil being carefully observed. Hand clearing to the base of layer 2 followed and all possible features were defined.

The major site features were numbered 1–9. Remaining features in Area C were numbered 100–305. Reference codes, e.g. CF8III(4), were used in the text as follows:

C = Excavation trench; F8 = Feature number; III = Segment within feature; 4 = Layer number.

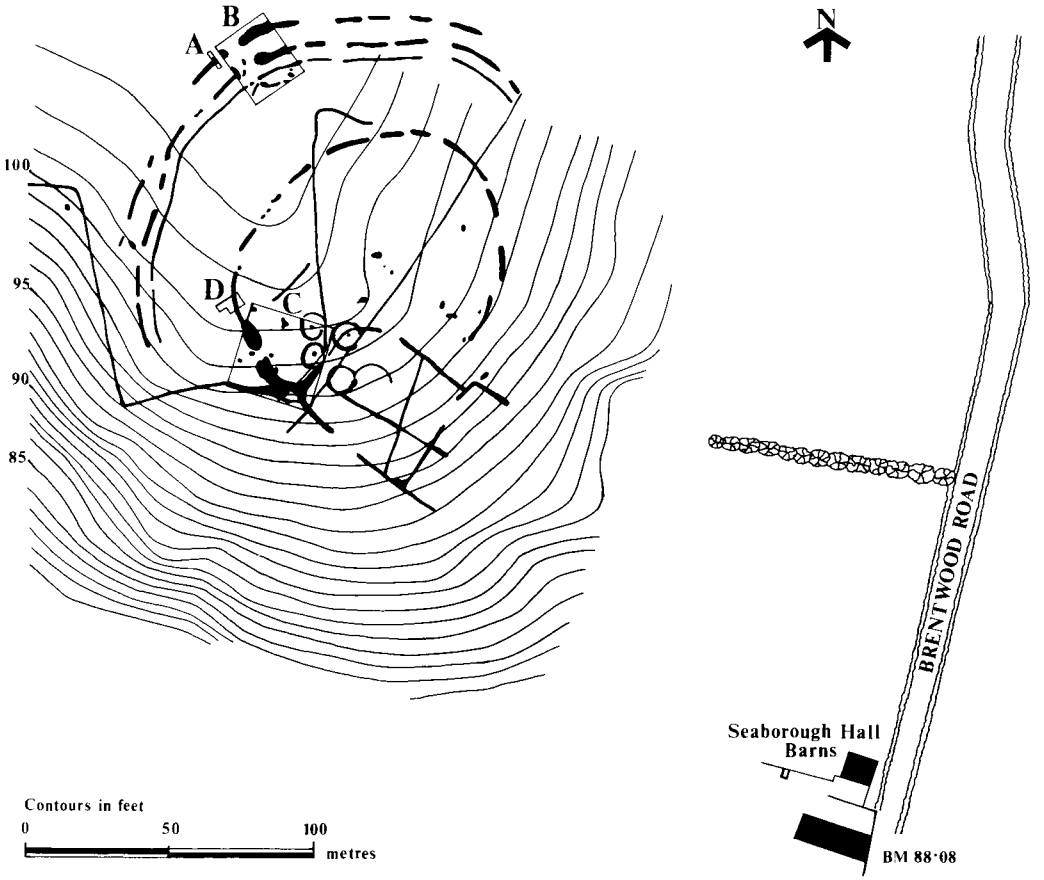

FIG. 2
ORSETT 1975
The Cropmark plan and position of the excavated trenches

Excavation under the direction of the authors was carried out during August and September 1975. As total excavation of the features revealed in Area C was not possible with the limited grant and time available, it was decided to excavate:

(a) all shallow features which would not survive the mechanical backfilling and a further stripping at a future date;
(b) features which could be satisfactorily excavated and hopefully dated without interfering with any multiple-feature stratigraphical relationship.

Detailed site records are deposited in the Essex Sites and Monuments Record (Ref. No. TQ 68/36), Archaeology Section, County Hall, Chelmsford.

THE EXCAVATIONS

THE SAXON BURIALS (Figs. 3, 4 and 5; Pl. II, A)

Area C was positioned to permit excavation of two of the small ring-ditches, CF6 and CF8. These each enclosed an area of *c.* 7 m diameter with a central burial

pit. The western edge of a third ring-ditch was also revealed, CF142, but not excavated.

The Ring-ditches

The circuits of CF6 and CF8 were divided into sections and each alternate segment was excavated (Fig. 3). The now eroded ditch profiles ranged in width from 1.00 to 2.00 m with a maximum surviving depth of *c.* 0.35 m below the ploughsoil (Fig. 4). The fills of each ring-ditch were similar, resulting from natural silting; they comprised:

Layer 3. Brown, sandy loam with few pebbles; the upper ditch fill tended to show in plan a band of finer silt towards the outer edge of the ditch becoming more pebbly towards the inner edge.
Layer 4. Brown, sandy loam with a high pebble content; the primary silt — this tended to form a central pebbly core to the ditch rising towards the inner edge.

CF8 had an entrance gap on its eastern side, as apparently does another of the unexcavated ring-ditches visible on the aerial photographs. The possible presence of an entrance on the eastern side of CF6 was obscured by the later ditches CF117 and CF5.

The finds from the ring-ditches were principally of prehistoric date but a single sherd of Saxon pottery was identified from each ditch.

The Graves

Single extended inhumation burials in E.–W. aligned grave pits, CF7 and CF9, occurred centrally in CF6 and CF8 respectively. Each grave pit was excavated in levels and drawn at 0.05 m intervals. The plans (Fig. 5) represent composites of these successive field plans. Each grave contained the silhouette of a body within a wooden coffin defined in the light sandy soil at the bottom of the pit. No skeletal material remained in either grave, but several objects were buried with each of the bodies. The outlines of textiles were preserved in the corrosion from the iron objects within CF9.

Post-holes

Most of the post-holes of uncertain date within Area C were probably Iron Age, but a Saxon date cannot be discounted for at least some of those within CF6 and CF8, although no plans of coherent structures appear. CF133 and CF270, adjacent to CF7 and CF9 respectively, may represent marker posts to the grave pits.

The Medieval Ditches (Figs. 3 and 6)

The Tithe map of *c.* 1840 shows that the large, *c.* 60 acre (24.3 hectare), field containing the Orsett cropmark complex was originally subdivided into a number of fields. The junction of these fields appears to have been within Area C, accounting for the ditches of medieval/post-medieval date, CF102, CF103, CF105, CF106, CF116, CF117 and CF128.

The only dating evidence from these ditches comprises a group of 13th-century pottery from CF106 and a post-medieval sherd from CF102. Stratigraphically CF117 and CF128 cut the silted-up Saxon ring-ditches. As they run parallel to each other, they may be seen as boundary replacements on the same N.–S. alignment, or as complimentary to each other to define a trackway. CF117 was cut by the undated CF116 which may have formed a north-eastern extension of CF106. The silted-up CF106 was cut by CF103, CF102 and possibly CF105. which ran broadly parallel to each other. CF103 was almost certainly a main E.–W. boundary extant until a few years ago and still marked to the E. of the excavations by a surviving tree line joining the Brentwood road (Fig. 2). CF102 and CF105 may again have defined a trackway running alongside this boundary. A N.–S. line of modern post-holes containing rotted post stumps (Fig. 3) indicates the maintenance of a boundary until recent times.

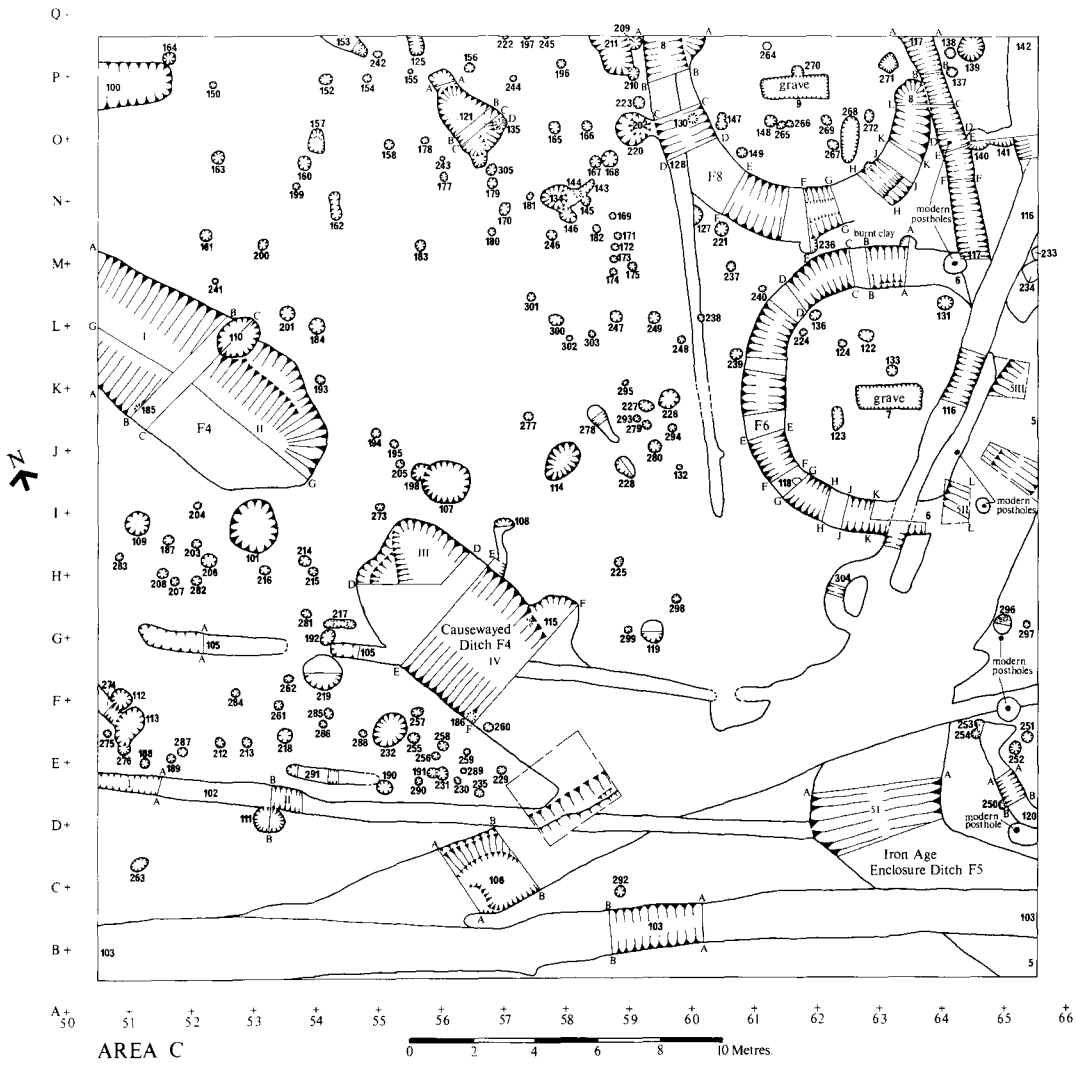

FIG. 3
ORSETT 1975
Plan of Area C

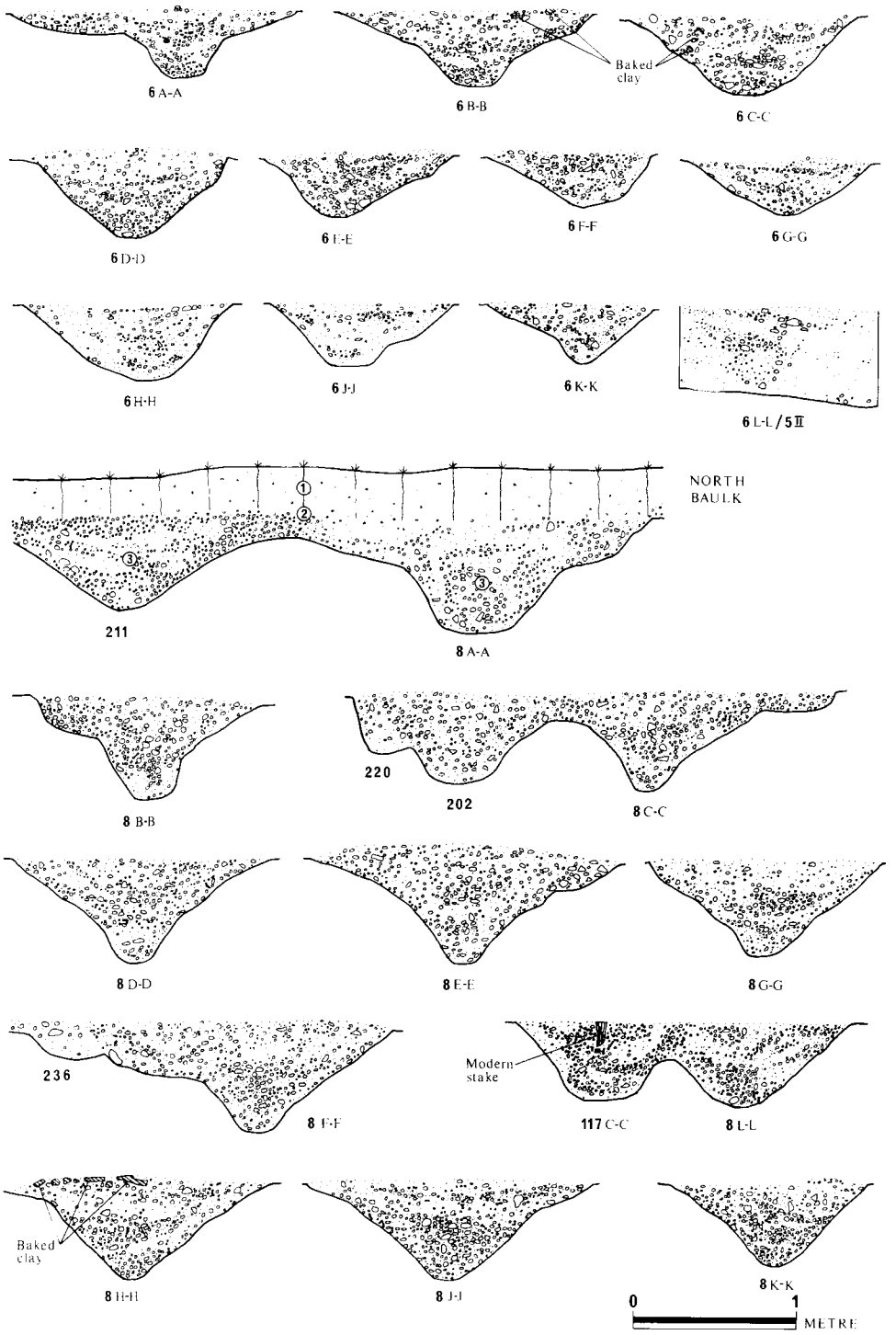

FIG. 4

ORSETT 1975
Sections of ring-ditches CF6 and CF8

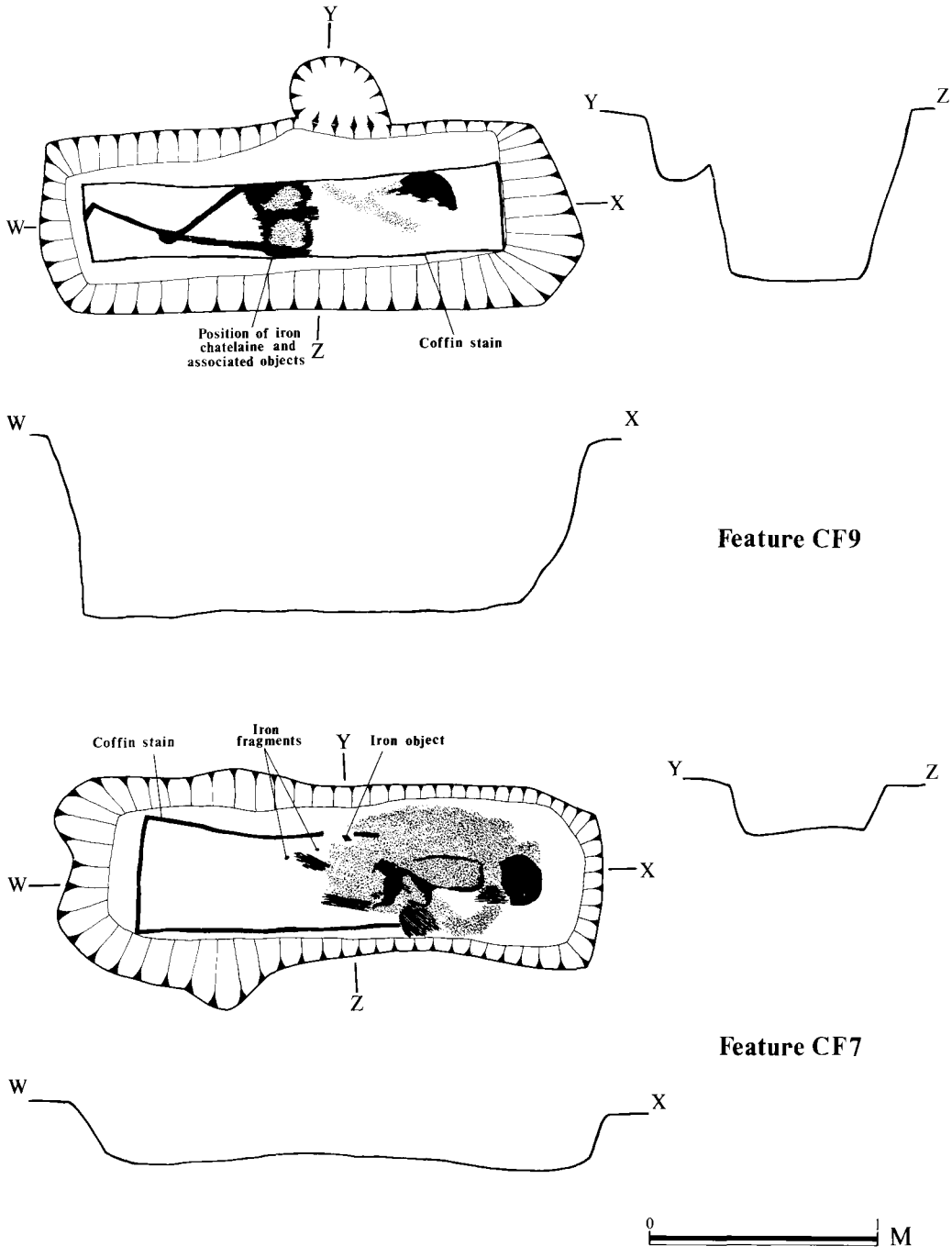

FIG. 5
ORSETT 1975
Plans and profiles of the two Saxon grave pits CF7 and CF9 with body stains

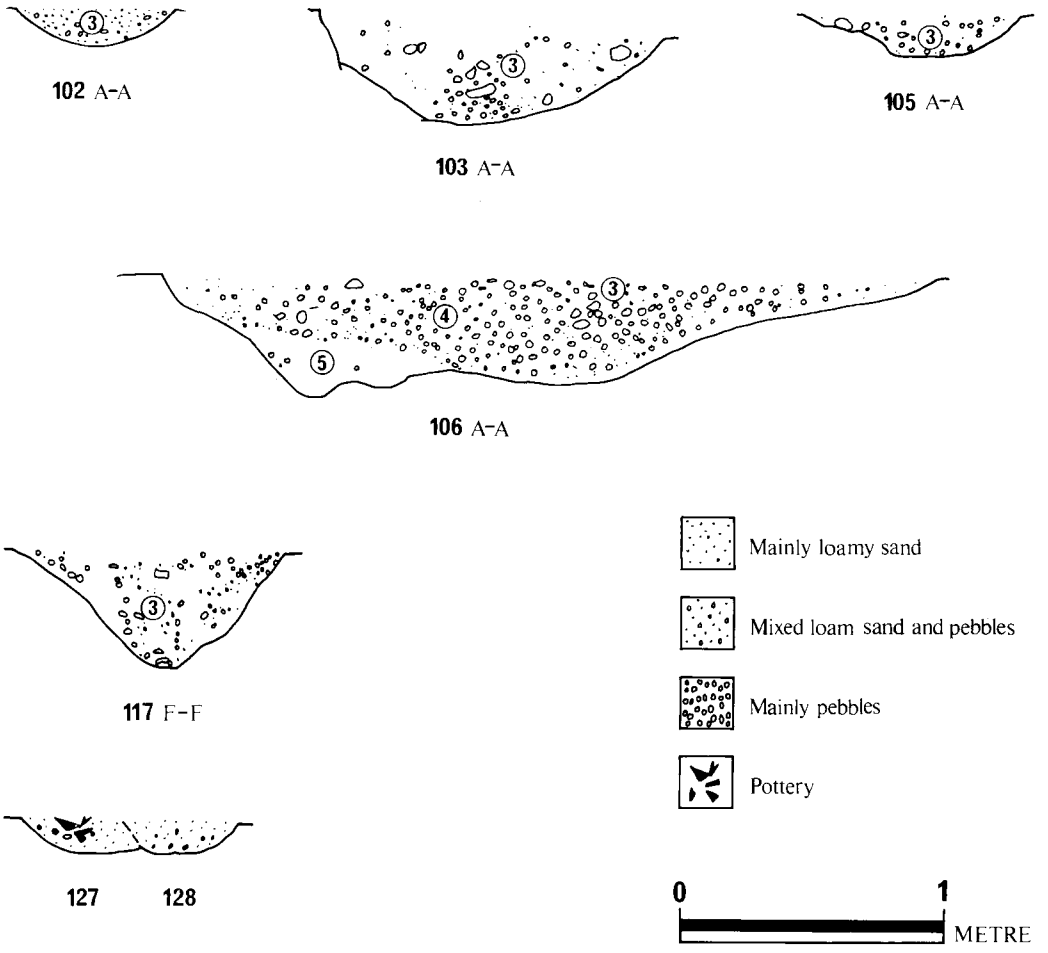

FIG. 6
ORSETT 1975
Sections of the medieval ditches

THE ARTEFACTS

The finds are deposited in the Thurrock Local History Museum, Grays (Acc. No. 1731). In addition to the finds reported below there were miscellaneous finds of post-medieval pottery and medieval or post-medieval tile, fired clay, glass, metal and clay pipe. Full details of these are contained in the Level III archive.

THE GRAVE GOODS. By LESLIE WEBSTER

Grave CF9

A complex of textile, iron, copper alloy and Kimmeridge shale or lignite objects was found apparently underlying the body stain in the left pelvic area, on the bottom of the coffin. This seems originally to have been a textile bag or wrapping containing the collection of

objects described below. The bag itself consisted of the fine checked textile (No. 2) described in Miss Crowfoot's report, which enveloped all the objects and seems to have been secured by a multiple plaited band (No. 3) wound tightly round one end of the complex; it seems unlikely that this was a draw-string. The contents of this bag or bundle are as follows (Pl. II, B):

1 Copper-alloy ring-shaped collar of sub-triangular cross-section; a slight trace of what may be solder or tinning occurs at one point on the under-side. Max. Diam.: 40 mm (Fig. 7, 1).
2 Copper-alloy flat curved strip, the upper surface incised with an irregular lozenge pattern, inlaid with traces of opaque red enamel (cuprite glass). The strip is broken at both ends. The back is undecorated and has a trace of solder in one place. Max. L.: 60 mm (Fig. 7, 2).
3 Drum-shaped bead of Kimmeridge shale or lignite with traces of an iron fitting remaining in the central perforation. Max. Diam. 28 mm. Height: 31 mm (Fig. 7, 3).
4 Two iron ring fragments. Max. Diam.: 81 mm (Fig. 7, 4).
5 Complex of iron linked elements from a chatelaine, consisting of five rods linked together by a loop at each end. A smaller iron ring fragment is now corroded to this complex but does not seem originally to have been so attached. Overall L. 86 mm. Average L. of link: 53 mm. Present Diam. of ring fragment: 30 mm (Fig. 7, 5).
6 Complex of iron objects with traces of textile 2 adhering, consisting of one complete element from a chatelaine and fragments of two others, fused into an uncertain relationship with three other rings, the largest of which is probably part of that described in 5, and a dismounted iron fitting from a seax or sword guard. Overall L.: 81.5 mm. Present Diam. of largest ring: 38 mm. Approximate L. of iron guard: 50 mm (Fig. 7, 6).
7 Iron linked element from a chatelaine with fragment of another linked to it. Overall L.: 71 mm. L. of intact element: 60 mm (Fig. 7, 7).
8 Two fragmentary iron elements from a chatelaine linked together. Max. L.: 49 mm (Fig. 7, 8).

Discussion

It seems best to discuss the various classes of items in this heterogeneous assemblage separately before going on to discuss the group as a whole.

The two *copper-alloy* pieces are of considerable interest. Both carry traces of solder on their undersides, indicating that they were attached to a metal object, and there can be little doubt that this object was a hanging-bowl. The possibility that they derive from two different hanging-bowls should not of course be overlooked, but such an occurrence would seem an extraordinary coincidence. The heavy ring is evidently the circular frame surrounding an enamelled disc from the interior or external base of such a bowl. Both in cross-section and size it matches closely many such frames, for example, those on the Winchester, Chesterton-on-Fossway and Lullingstone bowls.[12] The red-enamelled curved strip with its pattern of lozenges was clearly part of the decorative basal ring from a fairly elaborate bowl, such as occurs for instance on bowls from Barton (Cambs.), Dover, Faversham, Lullingstone (Kent) and Whitby (N. Yorks.).[13] The lozenge decoration on the Orsett example fits in well with the coarse and simple repertoire of ornament seen on these other mounts, and finds a specific decorative parallel in the red-enamelled lozenge decoration of an unassociated hanging-bowl escutcheon found at Eastry (Kent).[14]

There is little that can be said about the dating of the circular mount, although it is worth noting that the heavier frames which resemble the Orsett specimen seem to belong to the 7th century. Such a date would certainly apply to the basal ring, all of the counterparts to which are dated to the 7th century. The openwork escutcheon from Eastry with a similar treatment of the lozenge pattern must also take this general dating, which has recently been convincingly argued by Stevenson for all the openwork escutcheons.[15] How long after manufacture these fittings may have come to be disassembled and buried in an Anglo-Saxon grave will be discussed below.

The Kimmeridge shale or lignite bead is an equally unusual find. Its closest parallel is a lignite bead from grave 31, Shudy Camps (Cambs.), which like the Orsett specimen was suspended on a metal attachment, though in its case bronze, not iron as at Orsett.[16] This Shudy Camps specimen is rather smaller than our example in size, but like it lay by the left hip of the

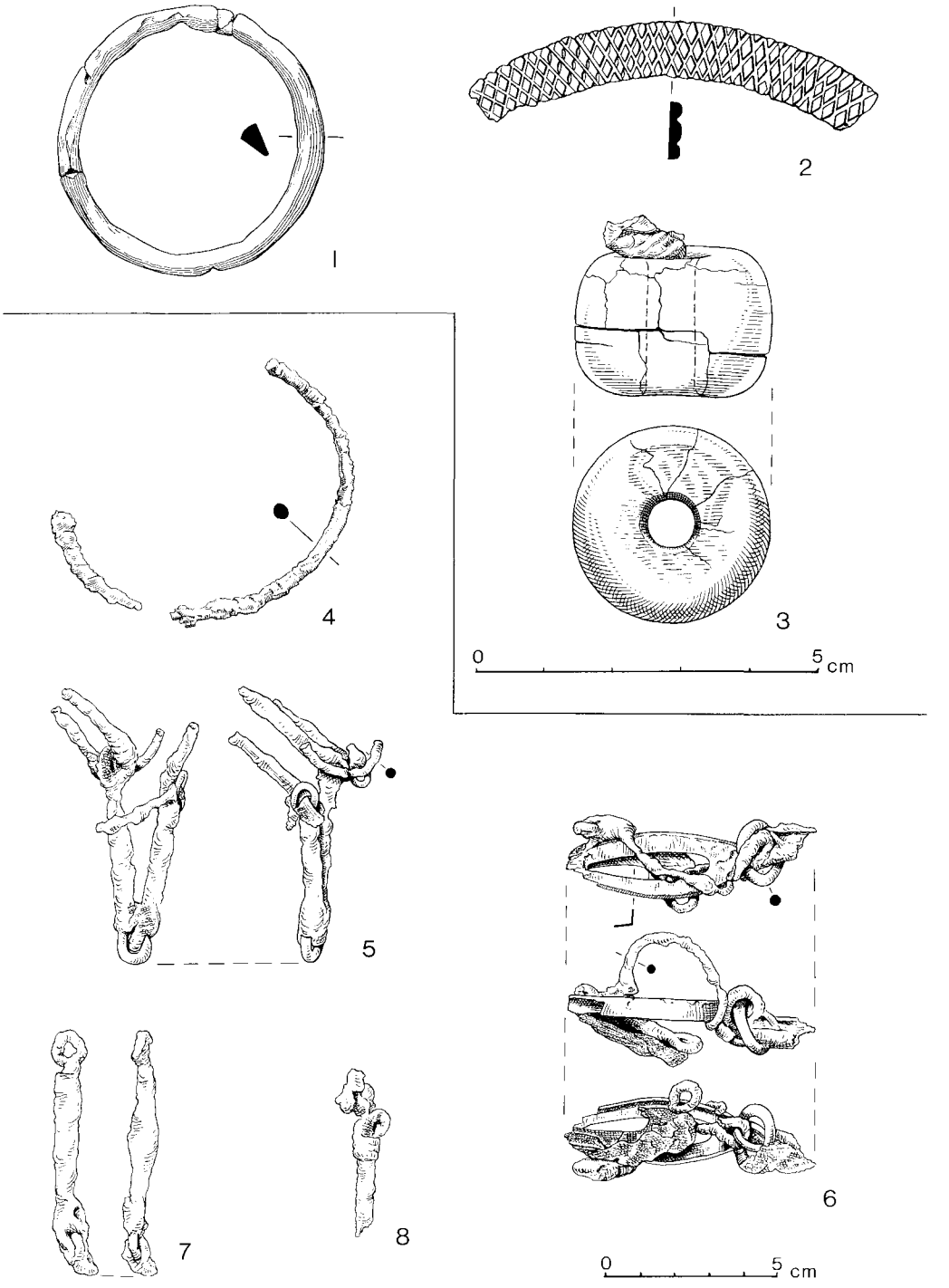

FIG. 7

ORSETT 1975

Grave goods from CF9. Objects of copper alloy, 1, collar or circular mount; 2, decorated strip; Scale 1:1. Shale or lignite bead, 3; Scale 1:1. Objects of iron, ring; 5–8, chatelaine and associated objects; Scale 1:2

deceased, associated with a chatelaine composed of iron links and an iron ring. It came from the grave of a lame woman, the result of a badly healed fracture of the left tibia, and may have had an amuletic or prophylactic function, like certain other types of large beads (sword beads for instance) current in the Anglo-Saxon period.[17] Large globular and drum-shaped magical beads were current from the 6th century onwards, but continue well into the 7th as some of the chalk or shell examples indicate;[18] Shudy Camps grave 31, with the lignite bead on the chatelaine, is certainly a 7th-century burial.[19]

The three or more *iron rings* of varying size are more of a puzzle, chiefly because the poor condition of the ironwork from the grave does not permit conclusions to be readily drawn about their relationship to the other iron components of this complex. It seems possible, however, that their presence in the complex may, like the pendant, be of amuletic rather than functional significance. The largest iron ring is of a diameter suitable for a purse-ring, but does not have the characteristic flat section of these iron rings, like, for instance, those in Cassington (Oxon.) 1, grave 11[20] or Bradstow School, Broadstairs (Kent), grave 55;[21] nor indeed is it substantial enough. The other rings have no obvious function and it is very likely that all of them served some magical purpose. Groups of iron and bronze rings with no apparent practical function are well attested in Anglo-Saxon contexts, for instance, in the early Anglo-Saxon levels at Shakenoak (Oxon.)[22] and in graves at Harrold (Beds.)[23] and Orpington (Kent).[24] They are thought to be amuletic and range in date from the late 5th to the 7th century.

The iron *guard-mount* is too small to be from a full-sized sword and probably comes from a large knife or seax. In its light, sheet-metal construction and shape it closely resembles the larger fittings of silver and bronze and, at Sutton Hoo, gold, seen on the composite guards of high-class 6th- and 7th-century swords, such as those from Coombe, Dover, grave C, Bifrons and Faversham (all Kent).[25] Such fittings served to protect the underside of the weapon's wooden guards and were rivetted through them to a flat upper plate, sandwich-wise, one below the pommel and one immediately above the blade; the Orsett mount has a lengthways slot in it to accommodate the top of the blade and is therefore from the lower guard. Iron fittings of this type are comparatively rare, but this is no doubt a reflexion of the fragility and instability of the thin iron sheet from which they were manufactured, rather than of any actual scarcity. The Orsett specimen's relatively small size (L. 50 mm as against an average of 70–80 mm for bronze and silver sword mounts of this type) shows that it came from a smaller weapon, probably a mounted seax of a type similar to those found in the graves at Oliver's Battery, Winchester (Hants.),[26] Northolt Manor (Middlesex) grave 3,[27] Ford (Wilts.)[28] and Shudy Camps grave 36.[29] These examples have shorter though related types of small guard mounts and all come from graves datable to the second half of the 7th century. It is impossible to know why the guard mount appears in the bag, other than as a curio or scrap. Model swords and other weapons however occur in some continental Germanic and Anglo-Saxon female graves,[30] and it is certainly possible that this fitting had some magical or protective significance. The presence of such an item, divorced from its original context like the hanging-bowl mounts in the same complex, again raises questions about the date and nature of the entire assemblage.

The *iron chatelaine links* are of a type well known in iron and other metals from Kentish graves of the 7th century,[31] for example those from Bradstow School, Broadstairs, grave 14, Bekesbourne, grave 29, and Kingston, grave 7. All of these graves are dated to the middle or later 7th century, but again the condition of the Orsett chatelaine prompts consideration of how long it might have continued in use before burial. It is noteworthy, for instance, that although several of the links were clearly articulated when the chain was buried, only one of the objects from the complex, the shale or lignite bead, seems likely (from the traces of an iron fitting going through it) to have been attached to the chain. There is no evidence to show whether one or more of the three iron rings might also have been attached or not. It is striking that none of the usual accoutrements of a fine chatelaine — a knife, tweezers, keys — appear in the assemblage; this and the fact that the chain was not worn by the dead person, but folded up inside a bag or bundle, reinforces the suspicion that the chatelaine was somehow

unfit for burial in the normal way, either because it was old, unfashionable or broken, or possibly even because of religious prohibitions of some kind.

All the articles from this grave appear to have come from inside a bag or bundle placed out of sight under the corpse; a number of them seem to be broken or scrap of some sort, while the iron rings, seax-fitting and the shale bead may have had magical or amuletic associations. The character of this odd miscellany shows that it is undoubtedly one of the magical collections first discussed by Brown[32] and at length by Meaney[33] who lists a number of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic instances. These collections, kept in bags or boxes, occur in women's graves, as in the classic instance from grave II, Cassington 1 (Oxon.) where a rich and varied collection of amuletic scrap of all sorts was found in a bag.[34] Such collections extend chronologically from the 6th century well into the 7th as at Camerton (Som.), grave 100 and Marina Drive, Dunstable (Beds.), grave E1–E2.[35] Meaney has argued that some of these hoards at least may have been used for witchcraft as much as to ward it, or bad luck, off. Whatever the precise significance of the Orsett assemblage, the fact that the bag or bundle was well wrapped up and placed out of sight beneath the corpse at least suggests that its inclusion may not have been meant to attract attention and may therefore have been viewed by religious authorities as superstitious at best.

The date of the whole assemblage would fit in well with this, for as we have seen the evidence of every item in the bag points to a deposition date late in the 7th century, or even the 8th if we take into account the inclusion of the broken and discarded hanging-bowl and seax fitments otherwise known from the late 7th-century contexts. The form of barrow burial (see below) would also be quite consistent with such a late date. To sum up, Orsett, grave CF9 must have contained a lady of some status, buried at the end of the 7th or beginning of the 8th century. At that late date, it would be unusual to see personal jewellery in a Christian grave, but those who were charged with her burial did not neglect some of the older customs when they clandestinely slipped in with her the little bundle with its evidently important and secret associations.

Grave CF7

1 Iron knife blade, the tang and tip of the blade broken away. L.: 78 mm (Fig. 8, 1).

2 Iron fragment of sub-rectangular section with traces of wood-grain running horizontally along it. Possibly part of the tang of 1. Max. L.: 25 mm (Fig. 8, 2).

3 Fragment of a U-shaped iron binding (Fig. 8, 3).

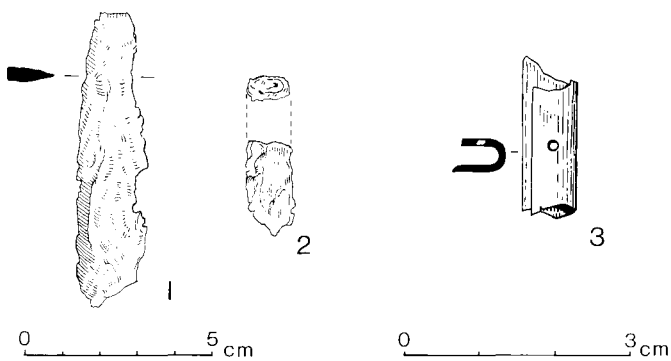

FIG. 8

ORSETT 1975
Grave goods from CF7. Objects of iron. 1, knife blade; 2, knife tang?; Scale 1:2. 3, U-shaped bindings; Scale 1:1

Discussion

All three fragments are too fragmentary to enable a typological dating to be suggested, though all are undoubtedly Anglo-Saxon. It is conceivable that the fragment of iron binding might derive from a knife, seax or sword sheath, though it could also derive from other kinds of bound leather or wooden objects, such as a purse. The scanty nature of the grave goods, the mode of barrow burial and its obvious relationship to grave CF9 strongly suggest a date late in the 7th century or early in the 8th.

POTTERY

Saxon

Three sherds of probable Saxon date were recovered from CF6, CF8 and CF5.

CF6 VI (3) Fig. 9.1: Simple rim of closed bowl, dark grey/black, vesicular fabric with smoothed exterior. This was included in the catalogue of Neolithic pottery (*Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 44 (1978), fig. 36:110, p. 276) but a Saxon date is more likely.
CF8 II (3) Fig. 9.2: Simple rim of (?) closed bowl with a light brown vesicular fabric and smoothed exterior. This was included in the catalogue of Neolithic pottery (*Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 44 (1978), fig. 36; 109, p. 276) but a Saxon date is more likely.
CF5 III (3) Not illustrated; a small body sherd with vegetable tempering probably of Saxon date.

Medieval. By M. R. EDDY

Medieval pottery came from the ploughsoil of Areas C and D, CF5 III (3), CF6 VI (2), CF8 (2), CF106 II (3), and CF210 (3) and a single sherd from BF10.

Area C (2) Fig. 9.3: Rim of cooking-pot in a red, flint- and originally shell-tempered, now vesiculated fabric. Thumb decoration on top of rim, *c.* 1200–1300.
CF6 VI (2) Fig. 9.4: Rim of cooking-pot in grey shell-tempered fabric with red fire-blackened and vesiculated surfaces, *c.* 1100–1200.

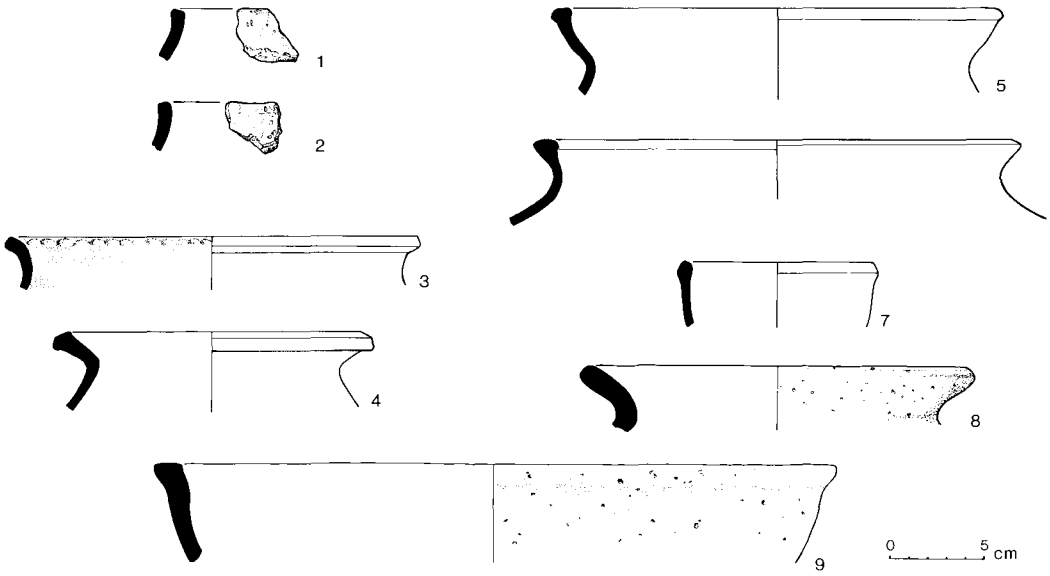

FIG. 9
ORSETT 1975
Saxon Pottery, 1–2; medieval pottery, 3–9; Scale 1:4

CF106 II (3) Fig. 9.5: Rim of cooking-pot in red, originally shell-tempered fabric now vesiculated, *c.* 1200–1300. Ten body sherds in a similar vesicular fabric probably from the same pot.[36]
Fig. 9.6: Rim of cooking-pot in hard-buff fabric, *c.* 1200–1300.
Fig. 9.7: Rim of a jug in a hard pink fabric with a cream slip externally, *c.* 1350–1450.
CF219 (3) Fig. 9.8: Everted rim in a soft black and buff fabric, vesicular, probably the result of burnt-out shell. A medieval rim form, but a late Saxon fabric type, cf. St Neots types.
BF10 I (3) Fig. 9.9: Rim. This was included in the catalogue of Neolithic pottery (*Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 44 (1978), fig. 30: 14, p. 265) but a medieval date is more likely.

TEXTILES. By ELISABETH CROWFOOT

On a group of iron objects from burial CF9, areas of three different textiles can be identified. In the catalogue, the abbreviated term, 'replaced', indicates that no actual fibres are preserved, these having been replaced by metal oxides from the objects with which they have been in contact; the letters Z and S indicate the direction of spinning twist in the threads.

1 Area roughly 70 × 80 mm all over one surface of the main iron lump, fine replaced fabric lying in folds, surface deteriorated except in a few small areas. Spinning Z in one system, S in the other, weave four-shed twill, 2/2 broken diamond (Fig. 10.1) count 16(Z)/12(S) threads per cm.
2 On other surface of lump, fine replaced fabric in many tight folds, over area *c.* 100 × 70 mm, surface deteriorated. Spinning Z and S threads in both systems, weave tabby, count 18–19/17–18 threads per cm; where clear alternate 6Z, 6S threads can be seen in warp and weft, i.e. a check pattern (Fig. 10.2).
3 Above 2, over an area *c.* 50 × 35 mm, very coarse replaced threads, of harsh-looking fibres, slightly Z-spun, some Z, Zply, some Z, Sply, lying twisted alternately right and left. There is no sign of a weft passing through, so this is unlikely to be tablet-weave; possibly coarse 3-plaits, or perhaps, as in places four lie together, flat 9-strand plait (Fig. 10.3) used for tying.

On separate fragments:

(a) Broken straight, iron piece, fine replaced folds weave 2, Z and S threads visible both systems; a raised line of the fabric may be a selvedge, but more probably simply the edge of a fold.
(b) On another broken fragment, similar folds of weave 2, tightly wound round the metal; 6Z, 6S threads clear in one system.
(c) On iron ring pieces, tiny replaced scraps of weaves 1 and 2.

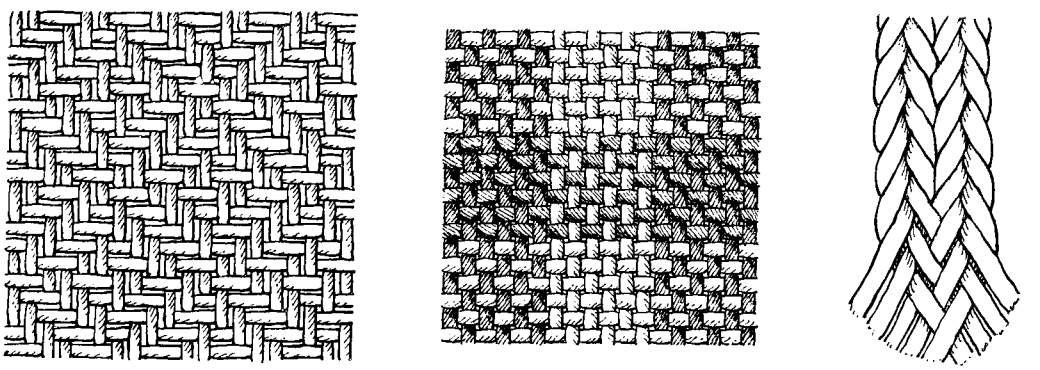

FIG. 10

ORSETT 1975
Grave CF9; Textile, replaced. No. 1, diagram of probable weave, broken diamond twill. No. 2, check tabby weave. Colours unknown, indicated by change of spinning direction. Possible construction of No. 3, multiple plait on nine threads

Although no actual textile threads are preserved on the iron fragments it is likely from their spinning, their general appearance and from comparative material, that all these were of wool. In spite of the deterioration of much of the surface two weaves can be identified, both of good quality.

The broken diamond twill, no. 1, was a popular weave for fine Anglo-Saxon fabrics. There are numerous variations, involving different centres and diamonds of varying sizes; from the small areas where the threads are clear in the Orsett example the weave pattern was most probably as shown in Fig. 10, 1. The use of Z-spinning for the warp and S-spinning for the weft, and the higher warp count — a characteristic of the finer fabrics woven on the warp-weighted loom — which gives an elongated lozenge shape to the diamonds, are typical of the better pre-7th-century Anglo-Saxon examples.

The weave first appears in England in the Roman period, but Dr J. P. Wild[37] suggests that fabrics of this type may have been of North British manufacture rather than imported; the considerable number of fragments found at Vindolanda could have been locally supplied. Woollen broken diamond twills of varying qualities have been found from many Anglo-Saxon burials including Spong Hill (Norfolk),[38] Sutton Hoo,[39] Coombe (Kent),[40] Fordcroft, Orpington (Kent),[41] The Paddocks, Swaffham (Suffolk),[42] Bergh Apton (Norfolk),[43] Fonaby (Lincs.),[44] and unpublished examples from Mucking (Essex), Dover, Finglesham (Kent), Sewerby (E. Yorks.), Welbeck Hill, Irby (Lincs.) and others. The Orsett weave, while considerably coarser than the best examples, from Sutton Hoo and Broomfield Barrow, must still have been a fine cloth, suitable for a tunic or a light cloak.

From the tight folds and creases in which it has been preserved, the tabby weave no. 2 must have been a very soft fabric. As suggested by Mrs Webster, the arrangement of this fabric around the collection of objects probably indicates a bag or wrapping. In the few places where they can be seen clearly, the threads in both warp and weft are in groups of alternate 6Z-spun and 6S-spun, i.e. a checked pattern, and it seems probable that the different spinning indicates different colours. It is perhaps interesting that two of only five tabby weaves with these checks or stripes so far found from English sites are woollens from the nearby site of Mucking (two other examples have been excavated from Finglesham, Kent, and one from Worthy Park, Hants). In one of these (Grave 448) no pigment or dye was identifiable, but in the other (Grave 975) the wool of the S threads was more heavily naturally pigmented than that of the Z threads. Checked and striped fabrics in which the patterns are indicated by change of spinning direction have a long history — twills from the Late Roman Iron Age in Denmark,[45] and tabbies and twills from German sites, the earliest Hallstatt weaves from the Salzberg[46] and the later examples from four sites contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon ones, Niederstotzingen,[47] Sirnau,[48] Donzdorf,[49] and Altenerding.[50] While these were originally thought to be simply texture patterns, later examination has suggested that here, as at Mucking, the difference in spinning was probably accompanied by a difference in colour, no longer identifiable.[51] The coarse twisted threads lying across the checked weave are broken and fragile. Their appearance at first suggests a tablet-weave — a technique popular in Anglo-Saxon weaving for braids and borders — with the tablets threaded to produce twists slanting alternately right and left; but though in one place there seems to be a thread lying at right-angles underneath the twists this does not pass through them, and there is no sign of broken or returning weft ends at the edges. It is possible that these threads are a plait, either a simple 3-plait, wound round and round or, from two places where four 'twists' lie close together perhaps a flat multiple plait of nine threads (Fig. 10.3). Their position suggests a narrow band used to tie the metal objects together, passing several times around their ends.

ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE

The survival of environmental evidence from the site was generally poor. Dr H. Keeley (D.o.E. Ancient Monuments Labs.) visited during the course of excavation, but could only report that there were no suitable deposits on the site for sampling for pollen analysis and that

the soil was too acid for mollusca to be present. Reports on the small quantity of bone and charcoal are contained in the Level III archive.

DISCUSSION

A late 7th- or even early 8th-century date for the two excavated ring-ditch burials at Orsett has been suggested by Mrs Webster in her discussion of the grave goods from CF7 and CF9. The unexcavated ring-ditches are believed to be of similar date. In Essex, Orsett is the first site where excavation has confirmed ring-ditches enclosing Anglo-Saxon burials. The setting, form of construction and relationship of the Orsett burials to other Saxon cemeteries in Essex and beyond the county can be considered.

After an extended period of settlement at Orsett during the Early and Middle Iron-Age occupation appears to have ceased and the Middle Iron-Age enclosure ditch, CF5, had entirely silted up by the time that it was cut by ring-ditch CF6. No evidence for a Saxon settlement was recovered within the immediate vicinity of the burials. The site was probably chosen because of a commanding view over the Thames Valley to the south.

It is considered likely that a mound was constructed over each burial (see below), and these would probably have remained as extant landscape features for several centuries. The burials are located close to the junction of a number of later field boundaries and the mounds may well have served as boundary markers for these. The penannular ditches surrounding the Orsett graves conform to Hogarth's[52] class IIb, while the possible marker posts equate with his IIa. However, it has been pointed out that barrows and ring-ditches cannot be clearly equated, especially since some Saxon penannular gullies surrounding burials in Kent show signs of palisading.[53] A further variation is a small external bank with a tiny mound over the grave comparable to a Bronze-Age disc barrow, as postulated for a barrow at Ford, Wilts.[54] Possible alternative reconstructions for the Orsett burials are presented in Figure 11, comprising:

I Flat open area within ring-ditch.
II Flat open area within ring-ditch, external bank.
III Internal bank, flat open area within the bank.
IV Internal low mound (with or without a berm).
V Internal raised mound (with or without a berm).
VI Mausolea, constructed with posts and/or wattling within the ring-ditch.
VII Mausolea, constructed with a supporting structure (posts, wattle or turf) on the inside of the ring-ditch.

The simple forms I and II are discounted on the grounds that the gully silts were predominantly derived from the interior, indicating an internal mound as in III to VII. The 'entrance' through ring-ditch CF8 implies an area to which access was required as in III and IV. These options would also be most appropriate if the postulated grave marker posts existed. However, excavation of the ring-ditch would have produced a sufficient volume of soil for a mound several feet in height. The

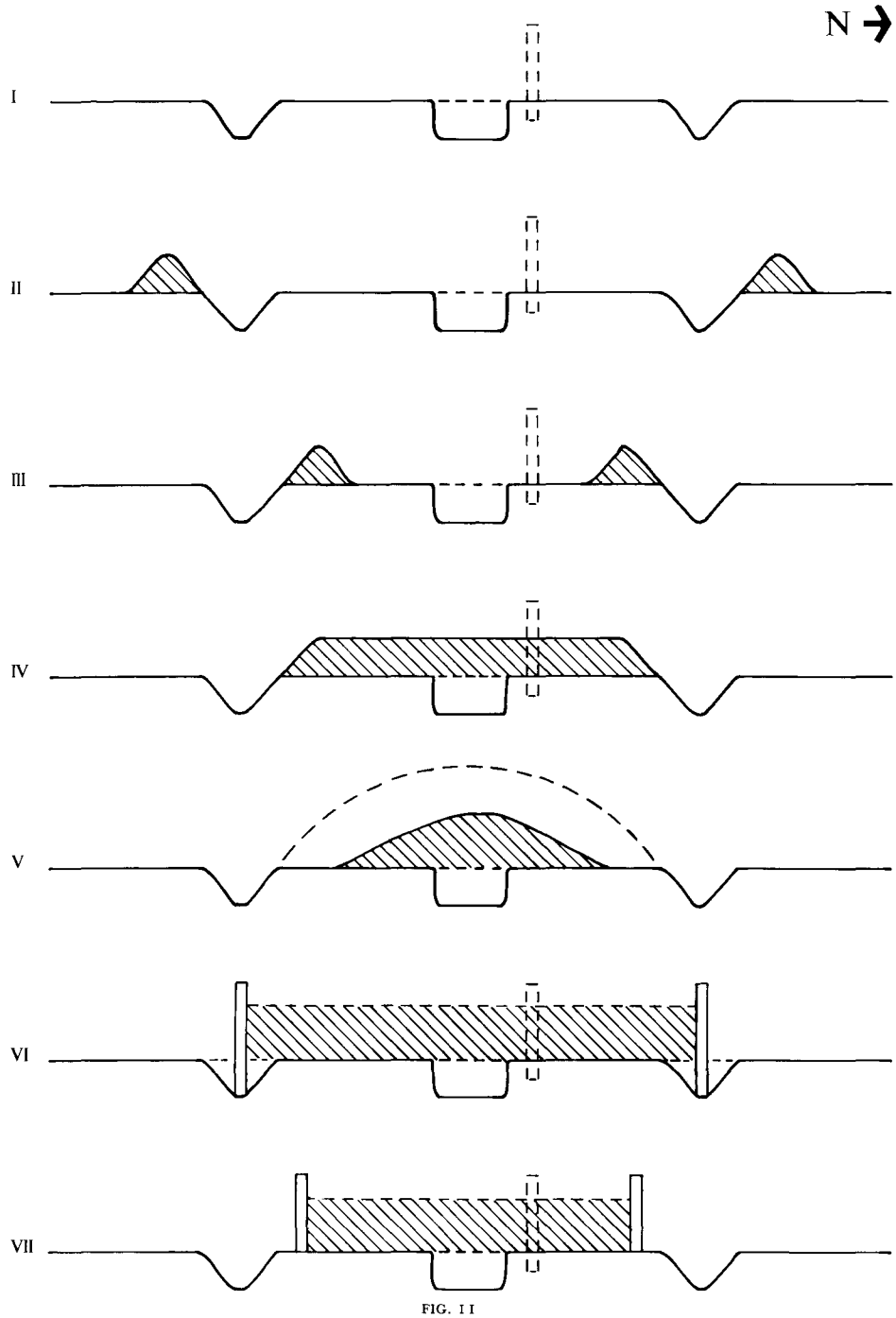

FIG. 11

ORSETT 1975

Sketch sections showing possible reconstructions of the original burial structures

absence of structural evidence suggests that V, a simple dump mound, would be most likely. There were no post-pipes visible within the fill of the ring-ditch to substantiate VI. The absence of post-holes on the inner edge of the ring militates against VII but evidence for a simple stake-and-wattle construction, or even turf 'walling', could have been obliterated by subsequent ploughing.

Place-name evidence provides additional support for options V or VII and suggests that the name of the nearby Seaborough Hall (now demolished, see Fig. 2) may derive from seven barrows, Old English *seofen*, seven. Reaney[55] considered that this explanation required a good deal of imaginative reconstruction, but it becomes much more plausible if a group of barrows was located upon the nearby terrace scarp.

ANGLO-SAXON BURIAL SITES IN ESSEX (Fig. 12)

A gazetteer of certain and probable Essex Saxon cemeteries and a comprehensive review of the evidence for barrows and ring-ditches of all periods in Essex have both been published recently.[56] Further discoveries include a small cemetery at Ardale School, North Stifford[57] and a cemetery at present being excavated by the authors at Springfield, near Chelmsford. In all, only 37 certain or probable Saxon cemeteries have been excavated, many inadequately. Mucking is exceptional, with over 800 cremations and inhumations from two cemeteries.[58] Notably although some of these graves contained rich grave-goods, and burial continued into the 7th century, none had an enclosing ditch. In fact, until the excavation at Orsett evidence for Anglo-Saxon barrow burial in Essex[59] consisted of possible sites such as Great Clacton,[60] Wendens Ambo,[61] and Kelvedon/Feering.[62] Aerial photographs of the last[63] revealed two ring-ditches, but they cannot be directly related to the burials and one of the crop-marks, a double concentric ring, is considered unlikely to be Saxon. Ring-ditches may not have been discovered in earlier excavations,[64] an example perhaps being the rich but badly damaged 7th-century grave at Broomfield which has many similarities to the Taplow Barrow (Bucks.). Here D. H. Read found no indication of a structure, but he confined his attentions to the immediate burial area.[65] Unlocated mounds at Maldon and Great Totham have been claimed as Saxon or Danish battle graves.[66] At Ardale School, three circular gullies were found within the cemetery area, two comparable in size to those at Orsett, but none contained clearly related internal features. The excavator, Mr A. J. Wilkinson, was forced to conclude that had the gullies ever surrounded burials, these had been within either the topsoil or an overlying mound, and had been destroyed by ploughing.

There is no evidence either from the excavations or from the aerial photographs to show that the ditched burials at Orsett formed part of a larger cemetery containing unenclosed graves. Bronze-Age and Roman barrows are known to have served as foci for Saxon barrows, as at Ford in Wiltshire,[67] but this is considered unlikely at Orsett given the similarity of ring-ditch plan and the probability that all the prehistoric features had been levelled during the Roman period. In the absence

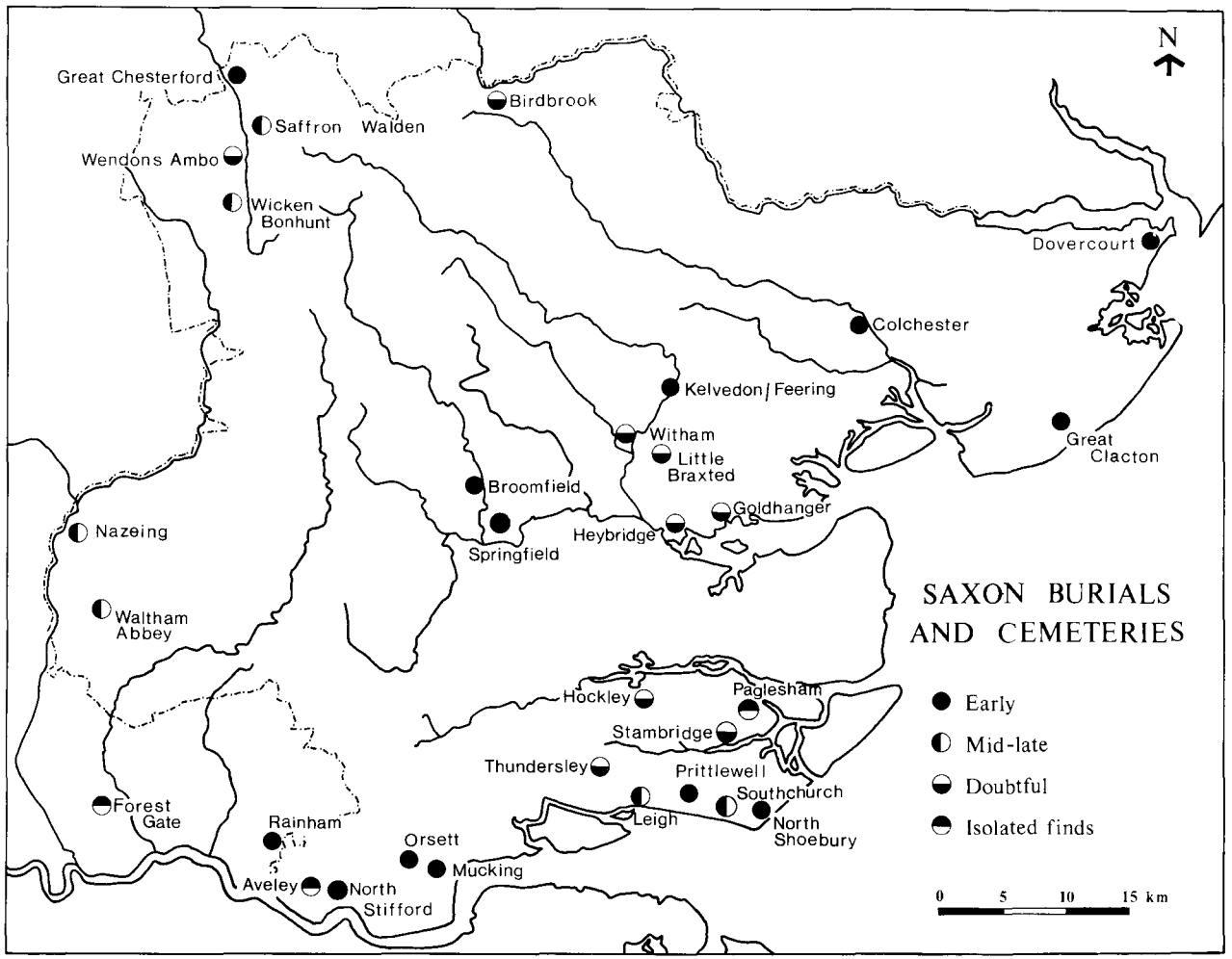

FIG. 12

ORSETT 1975
Distribution map of Anglo-Saxon burial sites in Essex
(after Jones, op. cit. in note 56, with recent additions)

of evidence to the contrary the Orsett burials are to be seen as a tight group of four, possibly five burials, enclosed by ditches and covered by fairly substantial mounds. The late 7th-/early 8th-century date proposed for the burials conforms to Meaney's view that although secondary burials in earlier barrows occurred early in the Saxon period, and there is evidence of 6th-century barrow building in Kent, construction of barrows did not become widespread until the 7th century.[68] Moreover, primary barrow burial appears to have been reserved for persons of status. Shephard[69] considers that the burial mound probably satisfied social demands as well as purely functional needs. Ancestral associations and hereditary claims to scarce resources are seen to be reinforced by the construction of burial mounds. Occasionally two or three of these rich barrows occur close together.[70] The quality of the grave goods from CF9 suggests that the larger, still unexcavated Orsett burials could contain equally well furnished graves and that the group may tentatively be seen as one of the small, rich barrow cemeteries which are otherwise concentrated in Kent, Surrey and Sussex.[71] The evidence for Saxon ring-ditches, including those from the Continent, has been considered by Hills[72] and more recently by Shephard.[73] There has been a marked increase in the number recorded in recent years, largely as a result of large-scale area excavation of cemetery sites, and in some instances as a consequence of area excavation of sites of other periods.

In an East Anglian context the Orsett group is one of only a few confirmed barrow groups. Numbers of barrows have produced early Saxon remains, but the weight of the evidence suggests that the majority of these are secondary intrusions.[72] Although some of the round barrows on the Sandlings of Suffolk are undoubtedly of Anglo-Saxon construction, notably Sutton Hoo, the only Norfolk examples probably of this date are the four mounds on Cotes Common, Sporle with Palgrave.[75] The large cemeteries at Spong Hill, North Elmham[76] and Morning-thorpe[77] each contained a number of small ring-ditches. At Spong Hill they form part of an area of inhumation burial on the edge of what is predominantly a cremation cemetery. The graves are chambered and are believed to have contained persons of some local importance. They are comparable in size to the Orsett rings, but are dated to the 6th century.[78]

In Kent, similar small barrows, ring-ditches or penannular gullies, *c.* 6 to 7 m in diameter, are recorded within cemeteries at Barham Down, Finglesham, Chartham Down, Polhill[79] and St Peters, Broadstairs.[80] As in East Anglia the numbers present are small and tend to be located at the edge of the cemeteries. In general they are late 7th century in date and though containing few grave-goods have usually been regarded as belonging to individuals of some status. Elsewhere in the country occasional barrow-burials, mostly isolated and late in date, are found, such as that at Harting Beacon Hill Fort, W. Sussex, recorded as 30 cm high in the 1930s, which had a ditch of 8 m diameter and an E.–W. orientated grave. Unfortunately, the grave had been robbed, but the bones of an adult male thrown back into the grave gave a date of *c.* a.d. 800.[81] The quality and type of grave-goods from primary Saxon burials within barrows, whether they occur as isolated mounds or as small groups, indicates that this form of burial was predominantly reserved for individuals of some status. There is little doubt, therefore, of the social rank ascribed to the Orsett burial group.

Jones[82] considered that the possibility of Saxon burials being discovered in Essex in the future through a deliberate research policy seemed slight, and this has been supported by the recent unexpected discoveries at Ardale School and Springfield. Accordingly, every opportunity should be taken to follow up the discovery of isolated graves or finds. There is also a need to conserve known burial groups as a future research source. At Orsett the presence of an undisturbed Saxon grave group, in addition to the Neolithic causewayed enclosure, adds further emphasis to the need to protect this site. Any future research programme should include a search for the settlement which, on the basis of the evidence from Mucking, Ardale School and Springfield is unlikely to be far from the burials. Finally, Orsett serves as a reminder that not all cropmark ring-ditches, of which there are hundreds recorded in the Essex Sites and Monuments Record, need necessarily be considered to be of Bronze-Age date.

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