

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



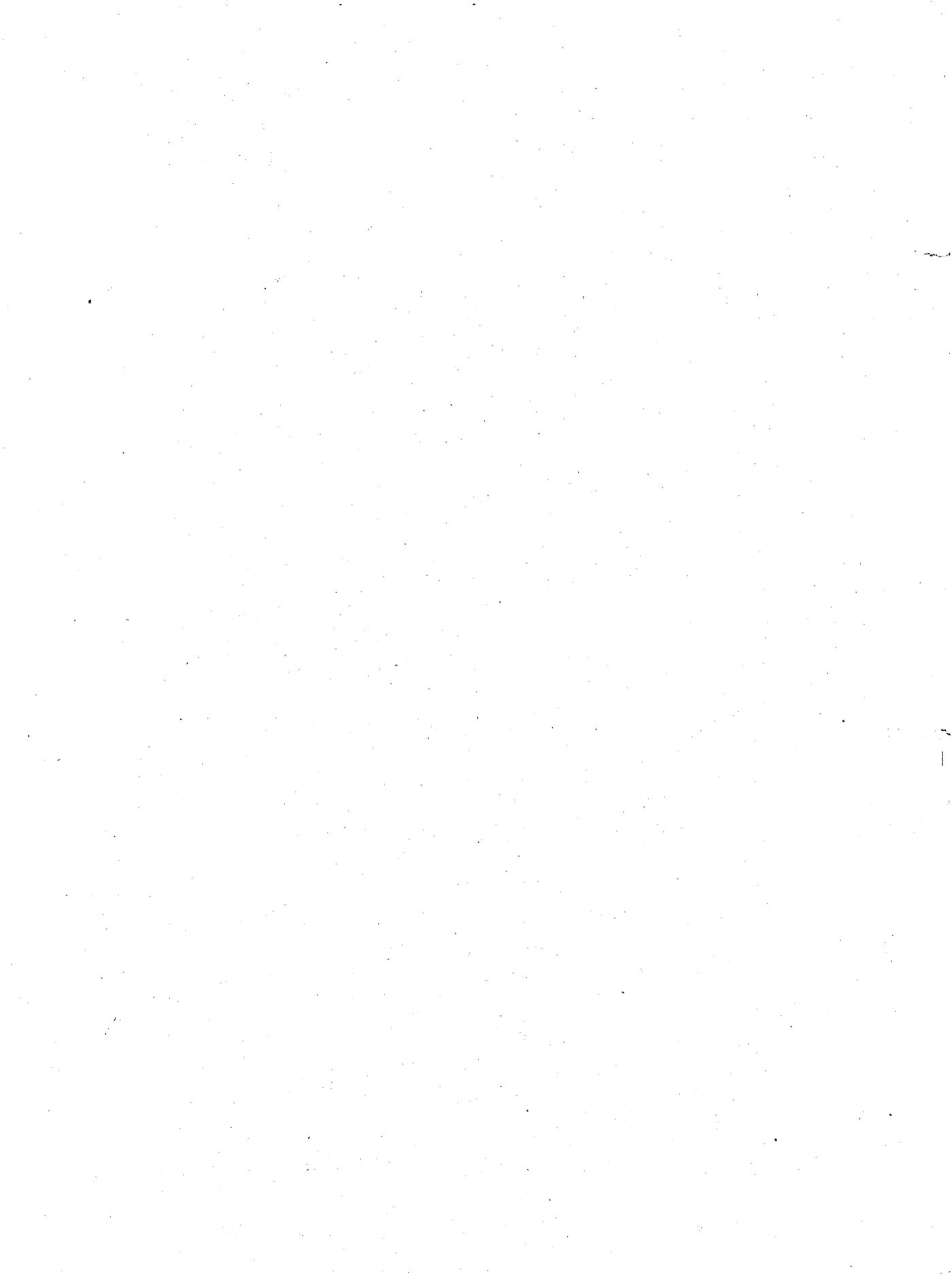
VOLUME LIV

JANUARY 1960 TO DECEMBER 1960

CAMBRIDGE  
DEIGHTON BELL

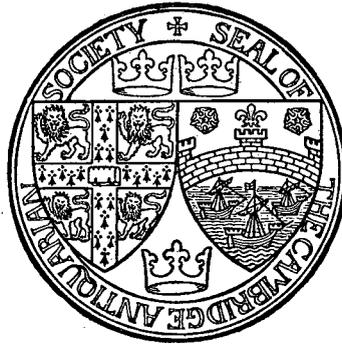
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## AN EARLY TWELFTH-CENTURY BUILDING AT EYNESBURY, HUNTINGDONSHIRE

C. F. TEBBUTT, F.S.A.

DURING 1960 a range of old buildings at Eynesbury (St Neots), known as the 'skin yard' and once used as a parchment factory, was pulled down by the St Neots U.D.C. to make way for housing development. One right-angled wing of these buildings faced north on to Montague Square and the other west towards the River Ouse. Between this factory and the Ouse is an area known as the Coneygear which was almost entirely dug over for gravel in the nineteenth century or earlier. In the course of this digging finds from the Early Bronze Age to the Saxon period were found,<sup>1</sup> and a small Roman fortified enclosure almost entirely destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

I thought it worth while, therefore, before the area of demolished factory was again built over, to trench the ground under its floors in the hope that this had escaped gravel digging. Permission readily given by the St Neots U.D.C., and a grant gratefully received from the Ministry of Works, enabled this to be done in the time available.

A single trench was first dug down the centre of the westward-facing wing covering the greater part of its length. Contrary to hopes most of the ground had been disturbed down to or below gravel level before the erection of the demolished building (perhaps about 1820) or its predecessor (perhaps about 1720) of which we found many traces. The only find of note here (in an unstratified context) was the rim of a heavily ornamented St Neots ware pottery bowl with bold thumbprint decoration on applied strips (Fig. 3, no. 4).

The length of the factory wing facing Montague Square was then trenched in similar manner. Here again there had been much deep disturbance by foundations connected with the two building-periods mentioned above. Near the east end, however, these foundations were less numerous and it was here, 2 ft. 6 in. below the skin yard floor-level, that we found enough undisturbed remains of an early building to determine its size and some details of its construction.

Preparation for this building had been made by clearing, down to the top of the natural gravel, a squared area equal to the outside size of the building, in this case about 14 ft. by 9 ft. 6 in. Inside this another squared area 11 ft. by 6 ft. was then dug out a further 9-12 in., leaving on its four sides a step of gravel as foundation for the clay walls.

The remains of these clay walls were nowhere more than 6 in. high, and whereas

<sup>1</sup> *Ant. J.* vol. x, no. 4 (October 1930); Gorham, *History of St Neots* (1820).

<sup>2</sup> *Camb. and Hunts. Arch. Soc. Trans.* vol. v, part v, p. 266.

those on the south and west sides were about 1 ft. 6 in. thick that on the north was 2 ft. thick. The east wall was very fragmentary, having suffered from later disturbance, and it is not impossible that it was a partition rather than an outside wall (Fig. 1).

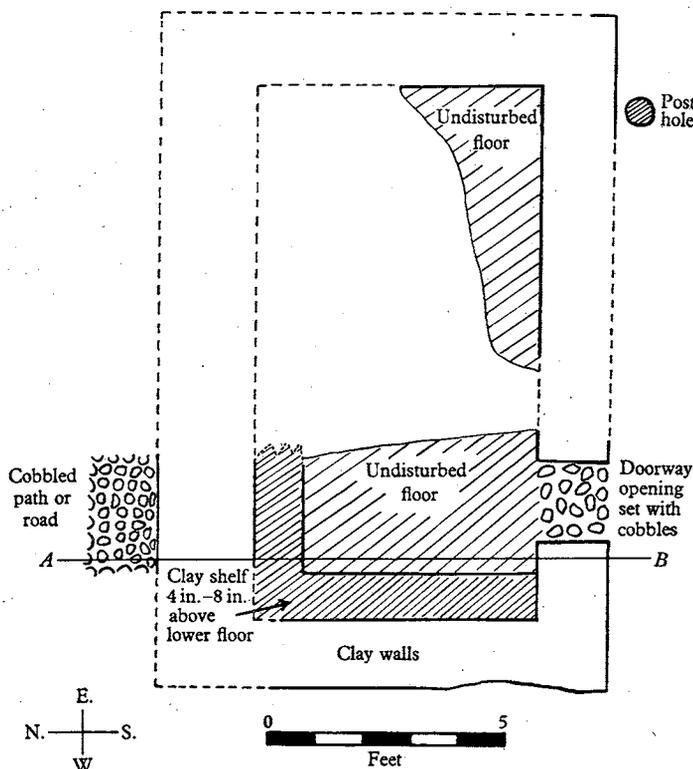


Fig. 1. Plan of the building.

A narrow doorway opening, 1 ft. 7 in. wide, had been left in the south wall and towards the west end of it. In this opening cobble-stones had been set. This threshold was probably about 1 ft. below ground-level and from it a further step down of 9 in. to 1 ft. led to the original floor of the building.

At the east end, where part of the wall remained to a height of 6 in. in places, the higher sections were deeply stained with carbonized wood on the top, perhaps indicating a sleeper beam embedded in the clay wall. The floor had been formed by a thin layer of clay laid over the gravel and tended to sag in the centre of the building. A feature of this floor was a low shelf of solid clay 4-5 in. thick and 12 in. wide running along the edge of the west and at least part of the north walls. On the floor, or a few inches above it, were found bones of pig and sheep and several pottery sherds of St Neots ware dated by J. Hurst, F.S.A., as early twelfth century (Fig. 2).

Above this original floor dirt and dust had accumulated producing a fine stoneless loam 4-9 in. in depth, and at this height a second clay floor had been laid covering the clay shelf mentioned above. This floor was better and more level than the first

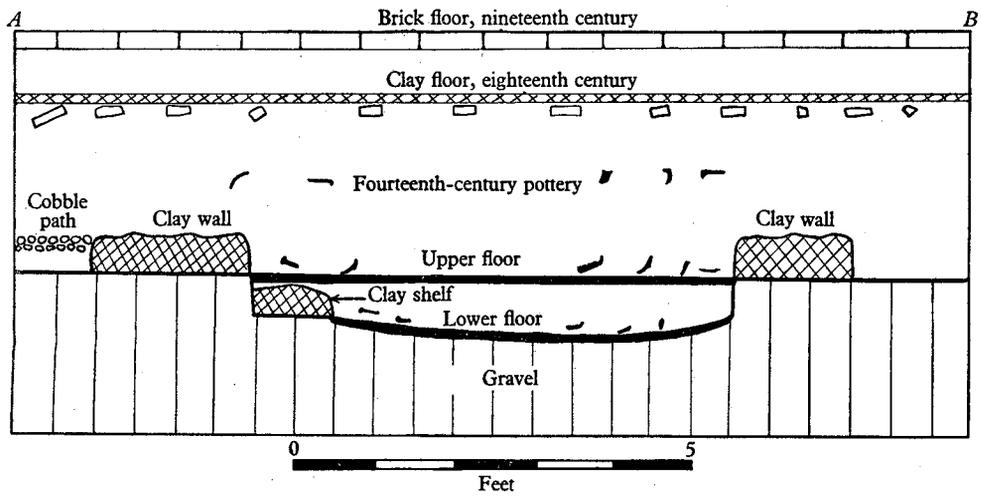


Fig. 2. Section across building.

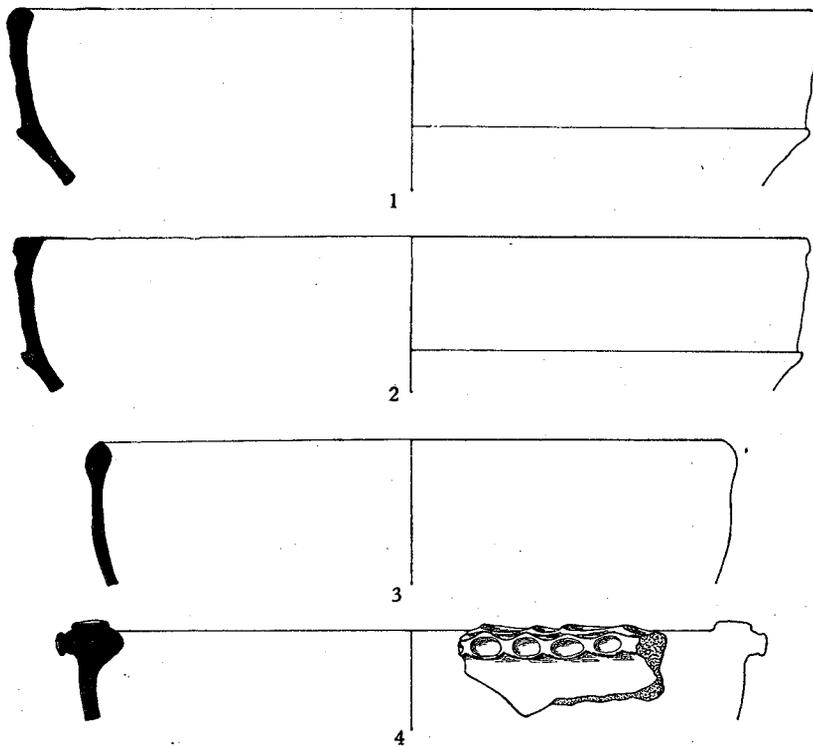


Fig. 3 (quarter natural size).

and parts of it were burnt red and stained with wood ash. On it and in the 4–6 in. of accumulated dirt above it, were more animal bones as well as pottery sherds indistinguishable in date from those of the lower floor (Fig. 3). From this floor came six large rim sherds from three similar and equal-sized cordoned St Neots ware bowls about 20 in. in diameter and of an unpublished type (Fig. 3, nos. 1, 2). An interesting find here was a round ornamental turned bone box-lid,  $1\frac{3}{8}$  in. in diameter. The inner side of the lid had been undercut round the rim to form a thread groove which was broken in two opposite places to receive projections on a cylindrical box-rim that could be twisted into the groove to make the lid fast (Fig. 4).

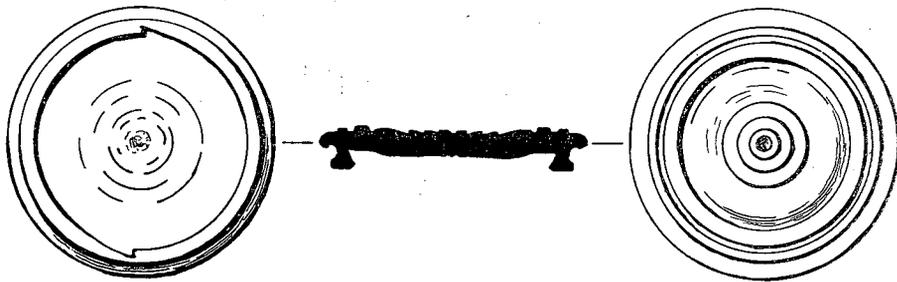


Fig. 4. Bone box-lid (natural size).

At the east end of the building, about 4 in. above the upper floor, were the plainly seen black stain marks of several lengths of squared timber approximately 4 in. wide. Two of these formed an angle and looked as if they had been fastened together rather than had fortuitously fallen in that position. The angle was  $54^\circ$ , exactly that now used for a thatched roof, and it seems probable that the timbers had formed one base angle of a gable end that had fallen when the building became derelict. Only the outside corners at each end of the south wall were available for examination for postholes, and none was found. There was, however, a 6 in. diameter hole along the outside of the south wall 2 ft. from the east corner. Outside the north wall, which faces Montague Square, was a cobble pavement or road running along it at a height of 1 ft. 6 in. above the lower floor-level. It would seem to have been contemporary with the building. Unfortunately its width could not be determined.

Above the upper floor was about 12 in. of soil, all of which, except about 4 in. actually above the floor, was a filling of mixed loam and gravel. In the filling was medieval pottery—some of St Neots ware but also several sherds of hard grey ware similar to that found at Sandon Mount, Herts, and dated by G. C. Dunning, F.S.A., as fourteenth-century.<sup>1</sup>

Buildings used by the humble folk of the early twelfth century are almost entirely unknown in this country and therefore any details of their appearance and construction are of great interest. The small interior size of the building (11 by 6 ft.) makes it difficult to believe that it was a dwelling-house, rather than some sort of

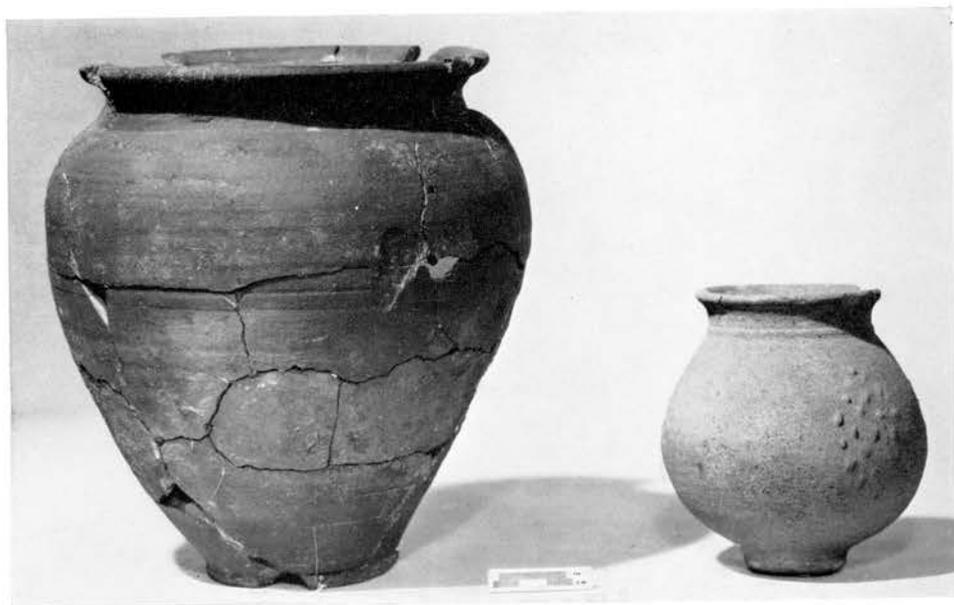
<sup>1</sup> 'Sandon Mount, Hertfordshire', *St Albans and Herts Arch. Soc. Trans.* (1934), fig. 6, nos. 2–4.

store or workshop. I would incline to favour the latter, as there had been a fire and food eaten there, and it was built virtually on the present village building-line facing Montague Square, an ancient open space still called locally the Green. A most interesting feature of its construction is the sinking of the floor into the natural gravel, well below ground-level. This seems to link it with the much more primitive pit huts excavated by me a short distance away at St Neots in 1929,<sup>1</sup> and now thought to be eighth or ninth century. They in their turn can be compared with pit huts of the pagan Saxon period. Indeed it is probable that the fact that part of the building was well below ground-level has ensured its preservation. It would seem that after it became derelict, or at least by the fourteenth century, filling was put in to bring the site up to ground-level. If further building was then carried out on the site all trace of it has disappeared.

The use of clay laid on the top of gravel as a floor surface is common in this district and I have found many examples of it in buildings of St Neots Priory. Indeed the eighteenth-century building on the same site had such a floor. In Eynesbury there still remain two or three thatched cottages with clay walls in which timbers are set at intervals to give stability. In their case, however, the clay walls have as foundation a timber sleeper beam resting on a low foundation wall of bricks and large stones, and the gable ends are supported by corner posts. They would appear to be in the direct line of descent from the twelfth-century building described above, but it would seem likely that soon after that century such buildings were built at ground-level.

Besides those I have already mentioned I should like to thank J. Hurst, F.S.A., for dating the pottery and for other help and advice; also Miss M. D. Cra'ster, M.A., of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, for her drawings of finds, all of which will be deposited in that museum.

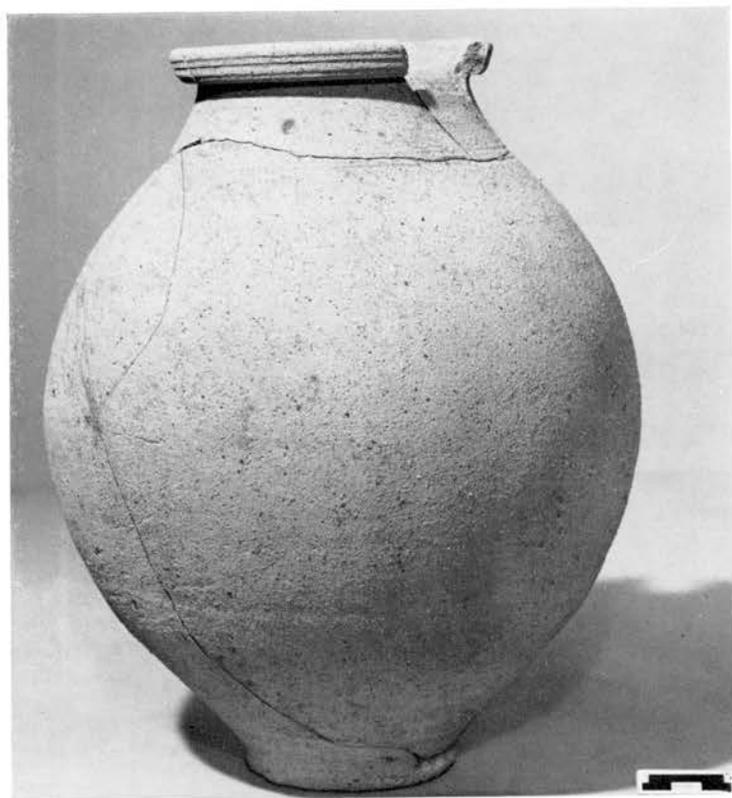
<sup>1</sup> Lethbridge and Tebbutt, 'Huts of the Anglo-Saxon Period', *C.A.S.* vol. xxxiii (1933).



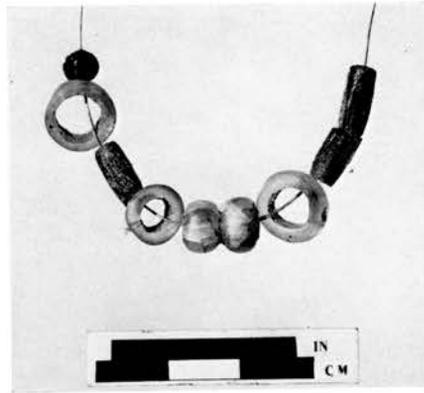
(a)

(b)

Grave group 1.



Grave group 3.

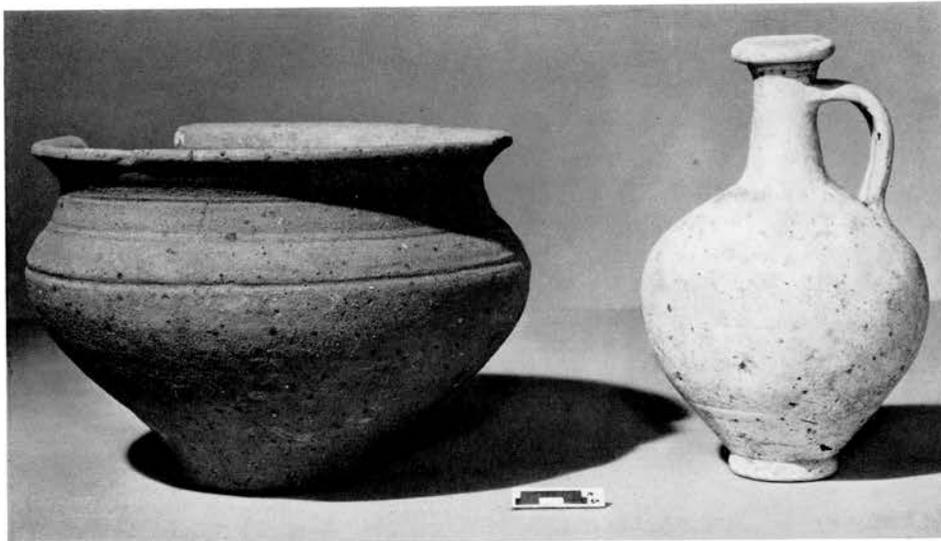


(a)



(b)

(c)



(d)

(e)

Grave group 2.

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