

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVI

JANUARY 1975 TO DECEMBER 1976

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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several times over in the making of the bank of the Devil's Dyke bank. Accordingly it is clear that the digging of the ditch proceeded in an orderly fashion, strip by strip longitudinally.

Fourthly, Stage 1 of the investigation showed that the ditch-diggers were enabled by some mechanism to deliver their quarried material in great tips to the head of the growing bank. (Several of us at the same time agreed that there might be some analogy with the making of Victorian railway-cuttings.)

Fifthly, Stage 2 most elegantly proved that fixed earth-hauling ramps were indeed used by the engineers of the Devil's Dyke.

From the calculating, engineering, viewpoint the sudden return of 'missing' tons of topsoil into the ditch, thereafter, may solve a simple equation, although worm-activity had reduced that redeposited material to mincemeat long before it was viewed by a soil-scientist. The dating of the human burial made precisely between the chalky and loamy zones of the ditch-filling will put the last engineering event, if not the first, into chronological perspective.

Work on the final report will be completed shortly, when all the contributory specialist reports will be available.

II. Bran Ditch – the burials reconsidered

DAVID HILL

DURING the pre-war excavations in the Cambridgeshire Dykes a series of burials of the Anglo-Saxon period were found at Bran Ditch, Fowlmere. About sixty individuals were represented, mainly mature males, a few were juveniles from 12 years upwards, two were considered as probably female and there was the skeletal remains of a miscarriage or newborn child. Most showed signs of a violent death, mainly by decapitation, by poleaxing and by what was considered to be by having the throat cut, the latter suggested by the unnatural angle of the head. There were many skulls lying away from the corpses to which they belonged and many bodies had been buried in an advanced state of corruption. The group was dated by the very few finds to the Saxon period and the paucity of those finds made them appear as Christian Saxon. When Fox found the first two skeletons he suggested they were of sheep stealers (Fox and Palmer, 1924–5, 31). But the 50 skeletons found in 1927 led the excavators to believe that they had discovered the site of a massacre, the defenders of the Ditch being killed in cold blood and the corpses not buried for a considerable time (Lethbridge and Palmer, 1927–8, 78–96). Further finds in 1931 showed that there were multiple burials in the same grave and that some of the graves were not on any ritual alignment (Palmer, Leaf and Lethbridge, 1930–31, 54–6). The site is generally accepted as marking a battlefield or a massacre (Meaney, 1964, 61). An attempt

has been made to assign the incident to a particular point in time, a Danish incursion of 1010 (Gray, 1928–30, 77–87).

There are, however, very serious objections to this 'massacre' or 'battlefield' theory. Christian burials, and these would appear to be of that period, should be by law in a churchyard. Secondly, a battlefield should not include women or new-born children. Thirdly, a battle or a massacre is a single event and these burials would apparently represent, from the intercutting of the graves, a series of events; in this context it could also be argued that a battlefield or massacre burial would be a common grave not a series of individual graves.

There are types of burial ground which contain burials of the Christian period, the individuals having come to violent ends, and the area remaining in use for a length of time. For certain crimes in the tenth and eleventh century the criminal was forbidden Christian burial: for example in Athelstan's Second Code cap. 26 'and if anyone swears a false oath and it becomes manifest he has done so, he shall never again have the right to swear an oath, and he shall not be buried in any consecrated burial ground when he dies . . .' (Attenborough, 1963, 141). The laws make it clear that death was commonly by beheading, hanging or poleaxing and could be applied to malefactors aged from 12 upwards (ibid. 126–7). A graveyard for persons not allowed Christian burial would also include others, suicides, etc., and – in this case conclusive evidence for the site – new-born children who had not been baptised before they died. The site would then be performing the same purpose as the pre-historic Irish *Killeens* which remained in use until modern times as the burial ground for unbaptised children (Evans, 1966, 33).

The site at Bran Ditch is therefore, probably, a *cwealmstow*, an Anglo-Saxon execution site. Two features that one would expect from a *cwealmstow* are missing, the mound (presumably the site of the gallows, or perhaps the place the *witan* stood or sat) and a number of skeletons showing signs that they had been buried with their hands tied. Here the mound was replaced by the use of the dyke; this is exactly paralleled by the gallows on Wansdyke mentioned in the Stanton St Bernard, Wiltshire, bounds of AD 960 (Sawyer Charter No. 685). The corpses had been stripped before interment, so the hands would first have to be untied (Lethbridge and Palmer, 1927–8, 82).

The advanced state of decomposition is interestingly, though depressingly, illustrated by the poem 'The Fates of Men' which refers to the tenth century and proves that the corpse might hang for a considerable time before burial:

'One shall swing on the broad gallows, hang in death, until the body, the frame is bloodily destroyed. There the raven pecks his eyes; the dark-coated one rends the corpse, nor can he keep the hateful flying foe from that malice with his hands; his life is gone, and, powerless to feel, past hope of life, he endures

his fate, pale on the tree, surrounded by a deadly mist. His name is accursed.'
(Gordon, 1926, 318)

From the laws and the few coin finds associated with these sites one would expect the *cwealmstow* to belong to the period circa 900 to circa 1080. This would add one more puzzle to the confused stratigraphy and chronology of Bran Ditch.

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