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Volume LXXIX

for 1990



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Barrington Anglo-Saxon cemetery, 1989

TL37464959

Tim Malim

Summary

A three-week programme of survey and excavation to determine the extent and condition of a 6th-century AD burial ground threatened by ploughing, was undertaken by Cambridgeshire County Council in September 1989. The burials covered an area of at least half an hectare sitting on top of a small rise. Traces of a bank appear to delimit the cemetery. 27 skeletons were excavated of which 10 were severely damaged, and only three were virtually undamaged. Weapons, jewellery, and other personal possessions including a large number of amber beads, were deposited with the burials.

Introduction

The site lies on a knoll of chalk-marl set in the river valley of the Cam. It forms a pronounced feature as it rises 4 metres out of the surrounding plain and has been known for centuries as Edix Hill Hole. It lies midway between the river and the sudden rise of the Barrington–Orwell hills. Although in Barrington parish it lies closer to Orwell village, 500 metres from the parish boundary (Figure 1).

Originally discovered by drainage work in the 1840s this cemetery has enjoyed haphazard antiquarian interest ever since (Babington 1860; Wilkinson 1868; Fox 1923: 250–59), but should not be confused with the better-known cemetery of Hooper's Field, known as Barrington B, excavated by Foster in 1880 (Foster 1883).

It appears that at least 11 skeletons were excavated between 1840 and 1860, and it was recorded that they lay below 18 inches (46 cm) of soil on a slightly rising slope. The artifacts found with them correspond to ones found

more recently at Edix Hill, and several references are made to the outstanding size of the skeletons (Babington 1860), whilst Wilkinson (1868) refers to them as being 'of persons in the prime of life'. A further 30 skeletons were excavated by Wilkinson who gave them to Cambridge University, but since then reorganization of the collections has resulted in all the bones being thrown out without having been properly studied.

The attention of the Archaeology section of Cambridgeshire County Council was drawn to the area in 1987/8 by a local metal-detector user who had discovered an iron shield boss and other 6th-century artifacts. On small-scale excavations three skeletons were uncovered: a male with spearhead and shield boss, and a male and female double burial with shield boss and jewellery. These skeletons lay in shallow graves cut into the chalk natural and had barely 24 cm (9 inches) of soil covering them, half the depth of soil reported from the last century. The skulls and some of the other bones had been removed by the plough.

These excavations were followed by a day's fieldwalking, and it was decided that a fuller programme of assessment was needed to try to establish the extent of the burial ground and to see whether the burials were in serious danger of being ploughed away.

Survey and excavation, 1989

In September 1989 a team of archaeologists and metal-detector users undertook a survey of the knoll and surrounding land to see if sufficient evidence was available from surface data to map the area of the cemetery. This was followed up by 600 metres of trial trenching and excavation over a two week period.

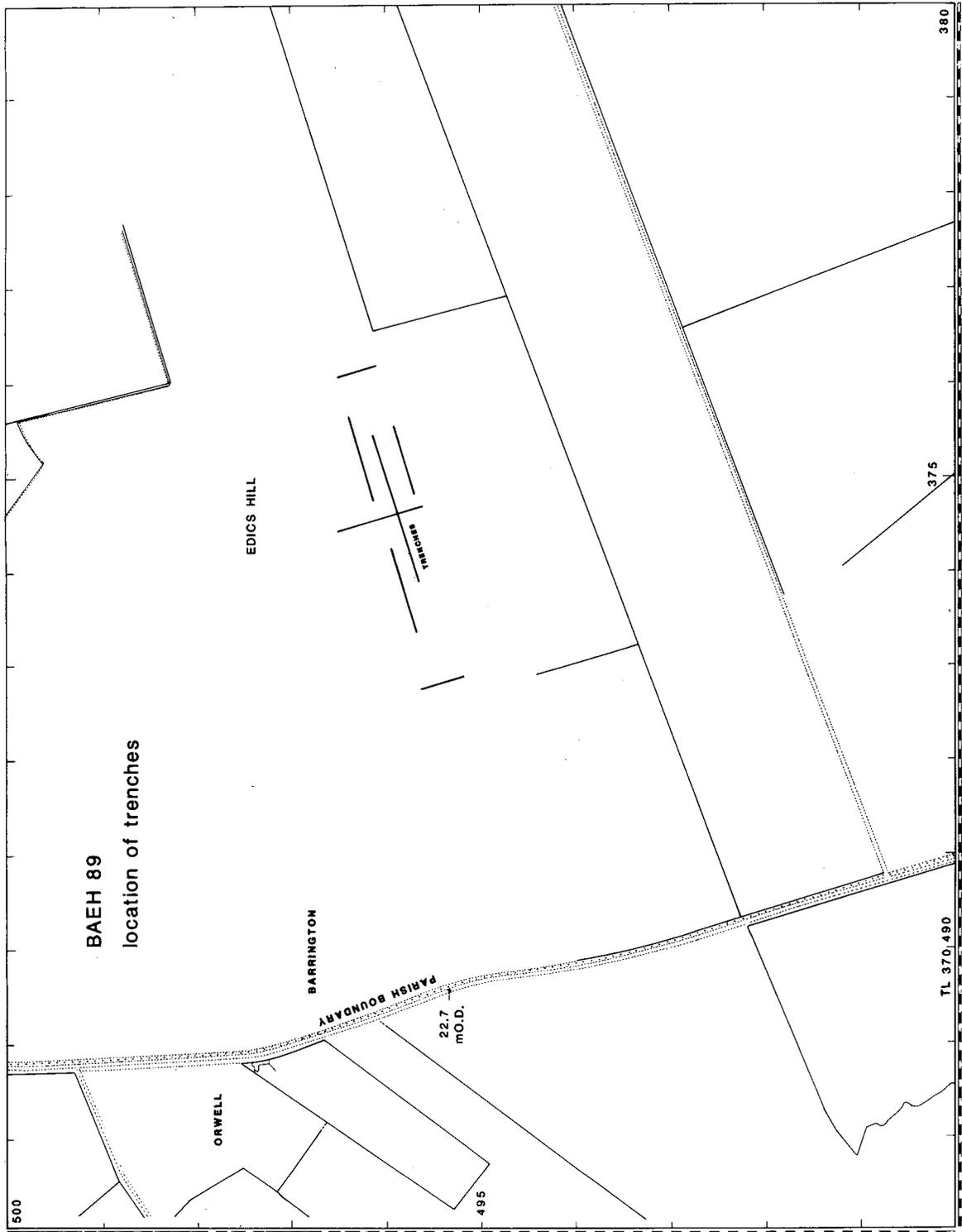


Figure 1. Location of trenches.

The survey

Conditions for survey work varied as half the area under study had been ploughed and harrowed, whilst a 50 metre wide band running right through the site had been left in stubble. Both types of ground were dry and the weather conditions remained dry and reasonably bright throughout the survey period.

As the burials in 1987/8 had been found with the use of a metal detector it was proposed to thoroughly prospect the area with these machines and experienced operators. We enlisted the support of the Soke Metal detecting Club and several local enthusiasts who covered an area 300 x 100 metres in two main ways: (A) A strip 50 x 90 metres was surveyed with metal detectors on 1 metre transects and all signals were marked and plotted onto a 1:500 scale plan (B) The remaining area was covered by blanket-surveying with metal detector users randomly walking the area, then crossing it at right angles in lines 5 metres apart. With this approach only very loud signals were marked, whilst other notable signals were dug by the finders to a few inches depth in the plough soil. If the signal went deeper the object was marked for later excavation.

Concurrent with this metal detecting a programme of field walking was undertaken on 10 metre transects, covering an area 150 x 400 metres.

Survey results

The 0.45 hectare of plotted metal detecting produced 680 signals which showed no obvious patterns to help us decide where there might be burials. Of the signals 11 were non-ferrous, all of which were modern items except the square head of an ornate 6th-century brooch. The iron signals were not excavated but a trial trench put through this area revealed no burials or other ancient features at all.

Different field conditions did not unduly affect the work, although the survey went faster and produced a slightly higher percentage of signals from the ploughed area than from that with stubble.

The area covered by blanket metal-detecting produced surprisingly few deep signals, and conditions on the ploughed and harrowed area were definitely preferable to the stubble band. Some of the machines that were used can detect to a depth of 30–35 cm, and yet the most interesting finds were a Tudor half coin and a

medieval jetton. Burials were not detected by this method.

It was noted that there were a great number of signals in the area examined but that the proportion of non-ferrous to ferrous signals was remarkably low. This led to the conclusion that the site had been well combed in the past and much of the non-ferrous material collected and removed by previous detector users.

Fieldwalking produced a concentration of pre-medieval finds on and around the top of the chalk knoll. This had been noticed also by the fieldwalking in 1988 which had covered the area presently under stubble. Medieval and post-medieval finds were not prolific but formed a fairly even background away from the knoll. If the fieldwalking had been part of a regional study the finds probably would not have been thought significant enough to warrant further work in the field, but for us they corroborated available evidence and pinpointed the ridge and slopes of the chalk knoll as being the main area of pre-medieval activity.

Excavation

Eight trial trenches 1.5 metres wide were dug with a mechanical digger. The ploughsoil was removed until the chalk subsoil was encountered. This was only 24–30 cm below the surface on the top of the knoll, and trenches on the ridge immediately exposed graves cut into the chalk. Bones were apparent also at the base of the ploughsoil and great care was needed in using the digger.

The trenches were laid out in 100 metre lengths across the top of the knoll with the central one (Trench 1) running approximately north–south and others down the slopes on either side perpendicular to it. On the plain further trenches (Trenches 2, 8) were positioned running parallel to Trench 1 on the knoll, and in the burial area this central trench was widened to 5 metres. Another two trenches were cut running out at right angles from the main area of interest so that the spread of burials down the slope could be seen (Trenches 4, 6). A final trench (Trench 7) was cut running down the slope to the east to investigate the best evidence for a slight bank (Figure 2).

Extensive trenching into the ploughed area of the field was not possible, but the long central trench did run 50 metres into this part of the field and revealed a number of

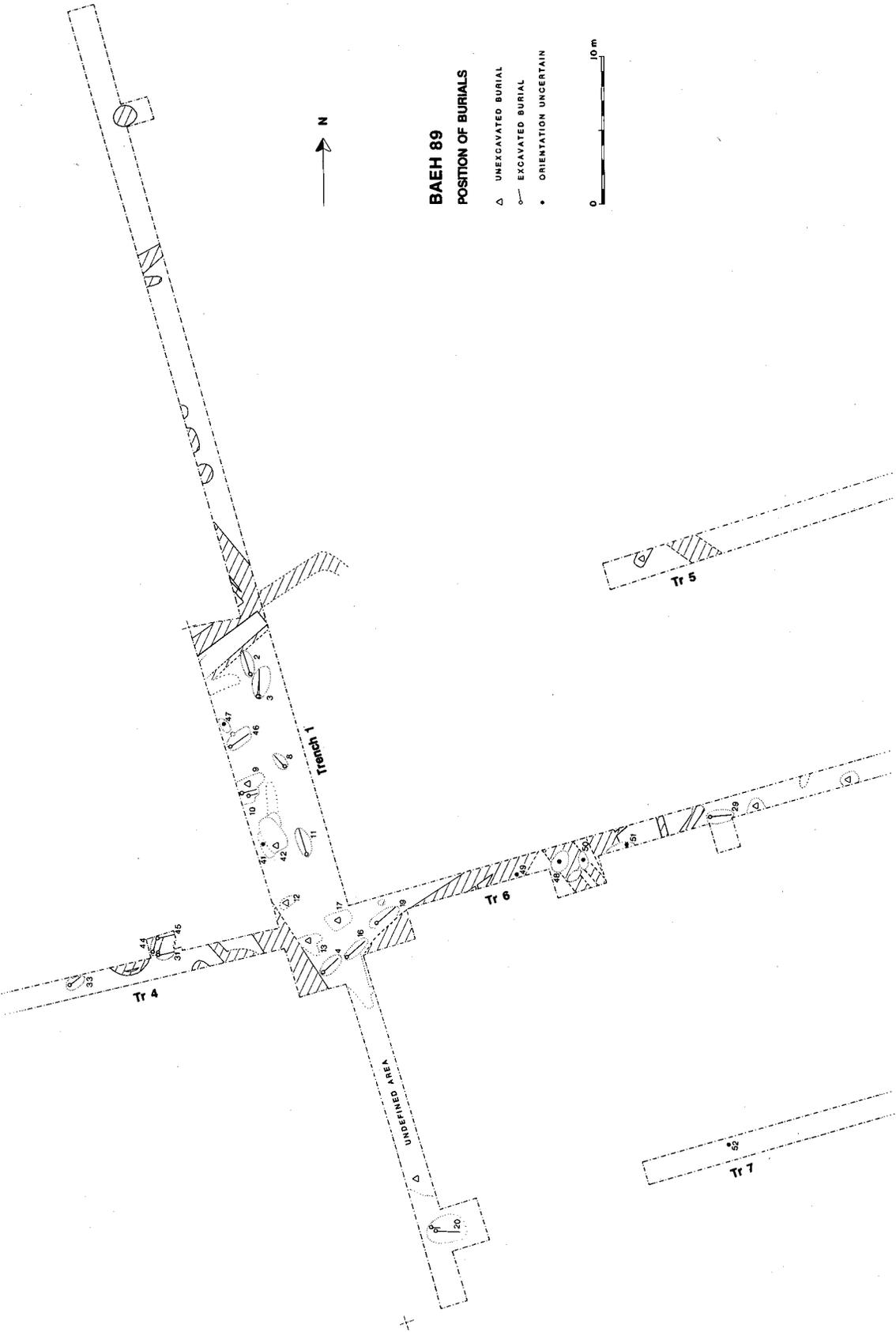


Figure 3.
Position of burials.

features other than graves. Ditches and pits dug into the chalk were found suggesting occupation activity. A background scatter of Iron Age and some Romano-British pottery was evident in these features and the ploughsoil. However as the burials did not seem to continue into this area, indeed they may be separated from it by a small ditch, there was time to excavate only one pit here. This contained an upside-down cattle skull lying in the middle and directly on the floor of the pit, presumably a deliberately placed deposit.

The pottery

Pottery found during fieldwalking and in the excavation has been provisionally examined by Morag Woudhuysen and some general points can be made about it. Saxon pottery predominates with a remarkable variety in quality and number of vessels present. It seems to represent a domestic assemblage of straight-sided, 'bag'-shaped pots. Datable sherds are few but belong to the 5th and 6th centuries AD. There are some 1st- and 2nd-century Romano-British wares, and an assemblage of abraded Late Iron Age pottery.

The burials

The burials seemed to group around the southern end of the brow of the knoll, and extended some 50 metres east and west down the slopes (Figure 3). Possibly they extend further south too, but this was in a field that belonged to another owner and was not part of the area excavated this year. However part of a cruciform brooch was found 150 metres away from the excavated burials when this field was walked. To the north the evidence of the one trench running into the ploughed area suggests this was used for activities other than burial.

Orientation of the skeletons varied considerably between due north and due east (Figures 3–9). Similarly there appeared to be no conformity to burial position, although there have been none found prone. The majority were supine and extended, apparently similar to the positions of those reported by Wilkinson (1868). Multiple burials were common amongst the sample so far excavated. No coffin nails have been found but many burials had shallow scoops cut into the chalk as graves. Those skeletons that did not have the benefit of this type of burial have been largely destroyed by ploughing, and even those given graves have been damaged to a greater or lesser degree. Many of the skeletons appear to have been

buried with the heads slightly raised on a 'pillow' of chalk, and this has resulted in a particularly high percentage of plough damage to skulls. The bones are in good condition and are easy to lift, and from a layman's view the skeletons appear to have come from healthy individuals, mostly fully mature adults, ranging in height between 175 and 180 cm for the males, and between 162 and 175 cm for the females. (Sexing of the skeletons has been done purely by their association with certain artifacts. All comments on the skeletal material are those of the excavators, and a specialist study of the bones needs to be carried out forthwith.)

There were definite disparities between the richness of artifacts found with one skeleton and another. The burials that had not been dug into the chalk had few if any objects associated with them, and this lack of finds may be consistent with the apparent lack of effort put into the burial procedure, thus indicating a poor status of the individual concerned. But the devastation caused by the plough gives a more prosaic reason to the lack of associated artifacts. Many of the skeletons had iron knives with them, and several of the males had spearheads and shield bosses. One of these burials (19) (see Figures 3, 5) was interesting because it had two spearheads positioned around the skull pointing down the body so that the hafts, if any had been there, would have been lying outside of the grave. A shield boss positioned by the left knee was only 10 cm wide, hardly big enough for a man's hand, and this was with a skeleton around 180 cm tall. The arrangement and size of these artifacts seem unconventional. Richard Darrah briefly examined the bosses and noted possible wood and leather replacement on some (pers. comm.).

The female burials often had rich adornments of brooches and beads, notably burials 4, 20.2, 29, 44.1, and 44.2 (see Figures 3, 6–8, 12). Only one bone comb was found, and only two burials had pots with them.

Burial 4 was of an adult female seemingly cramped into a relatively deep cut but narrow grave. She had two small-long brooches, and a strip of slip knot rings and amber beads running down from her neck (see Figures 6, 14). Sleeve clasps with pelleted decoration were found at the wrists, but also a pair was found between the legs. This is the first time clasps in this position have been noticed in England (Catherine Hills, pers. comm.) although it is known from Scandinavian burials. A pair of tweezers with an amber bead

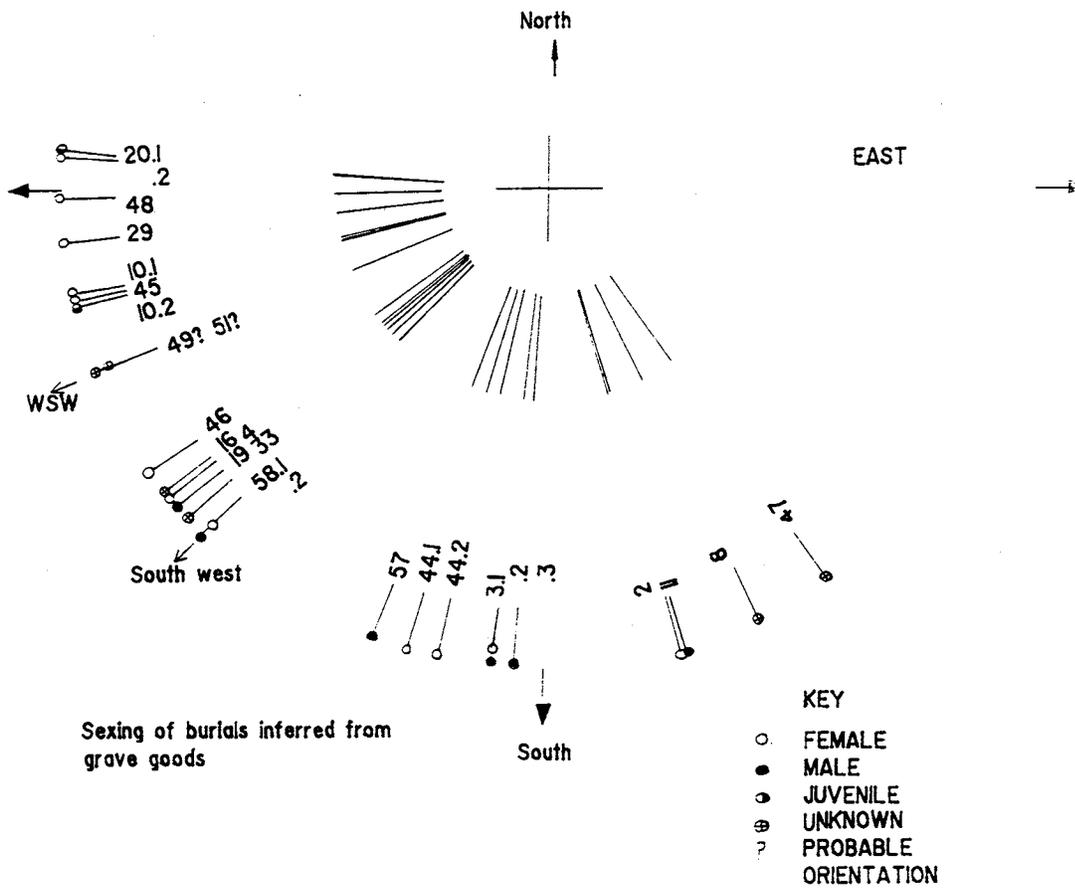
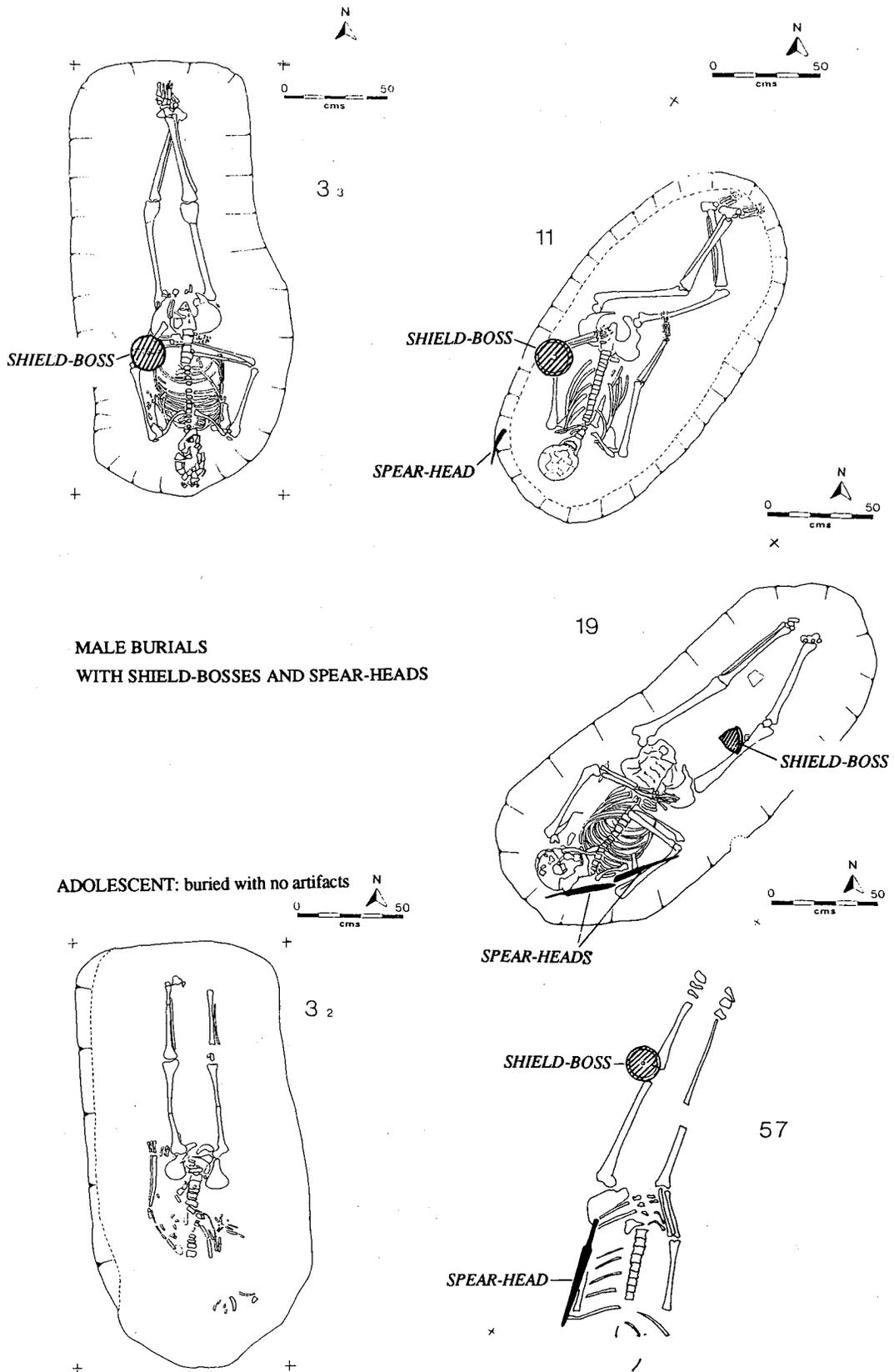


Figure 4.
Inhumation orientation, Barrington Edix Hill 1989



**MALE BURIALS
WITH SHIELD-BOSSES AND SPEAR-HEADS**

ADOLESCENT: buried with no artifacts

Figure 5.
Male burials with shield bosses and spearheads, 3.2, 3.3, 11, 19, 57.

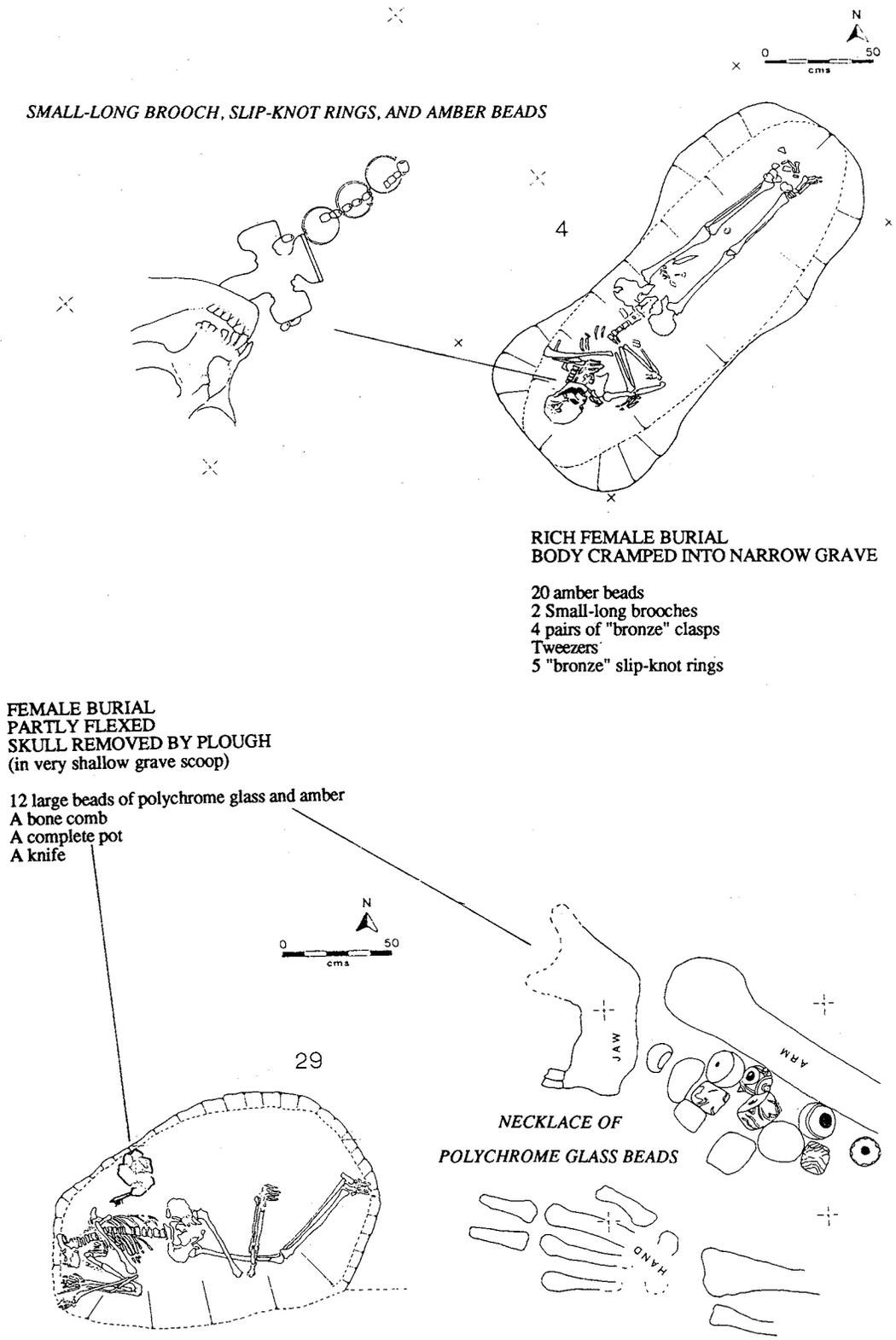


Figure 6.
Female burials, 4, 29.

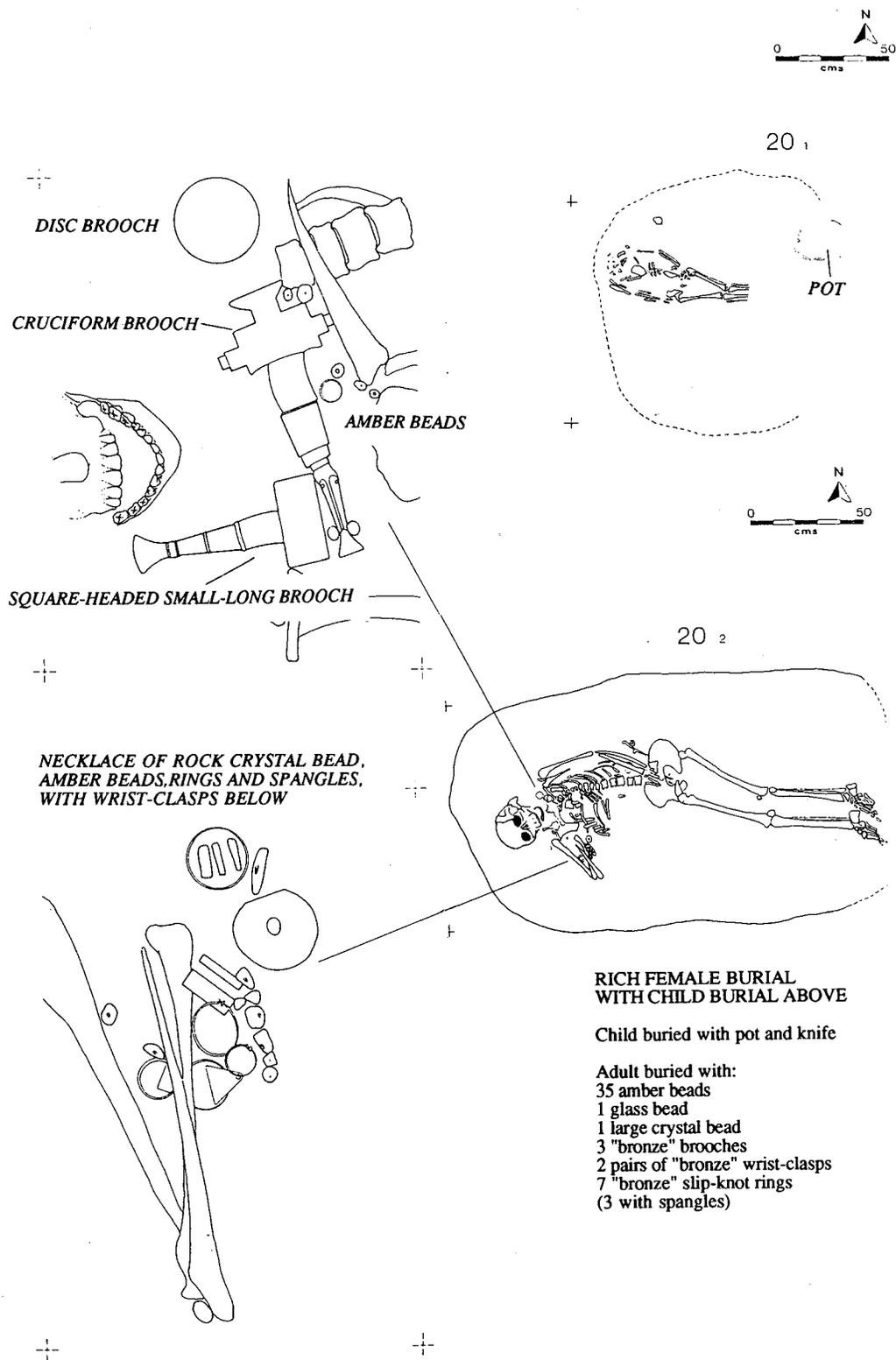


Figure 7.
 Female burial with child burial above, 20.

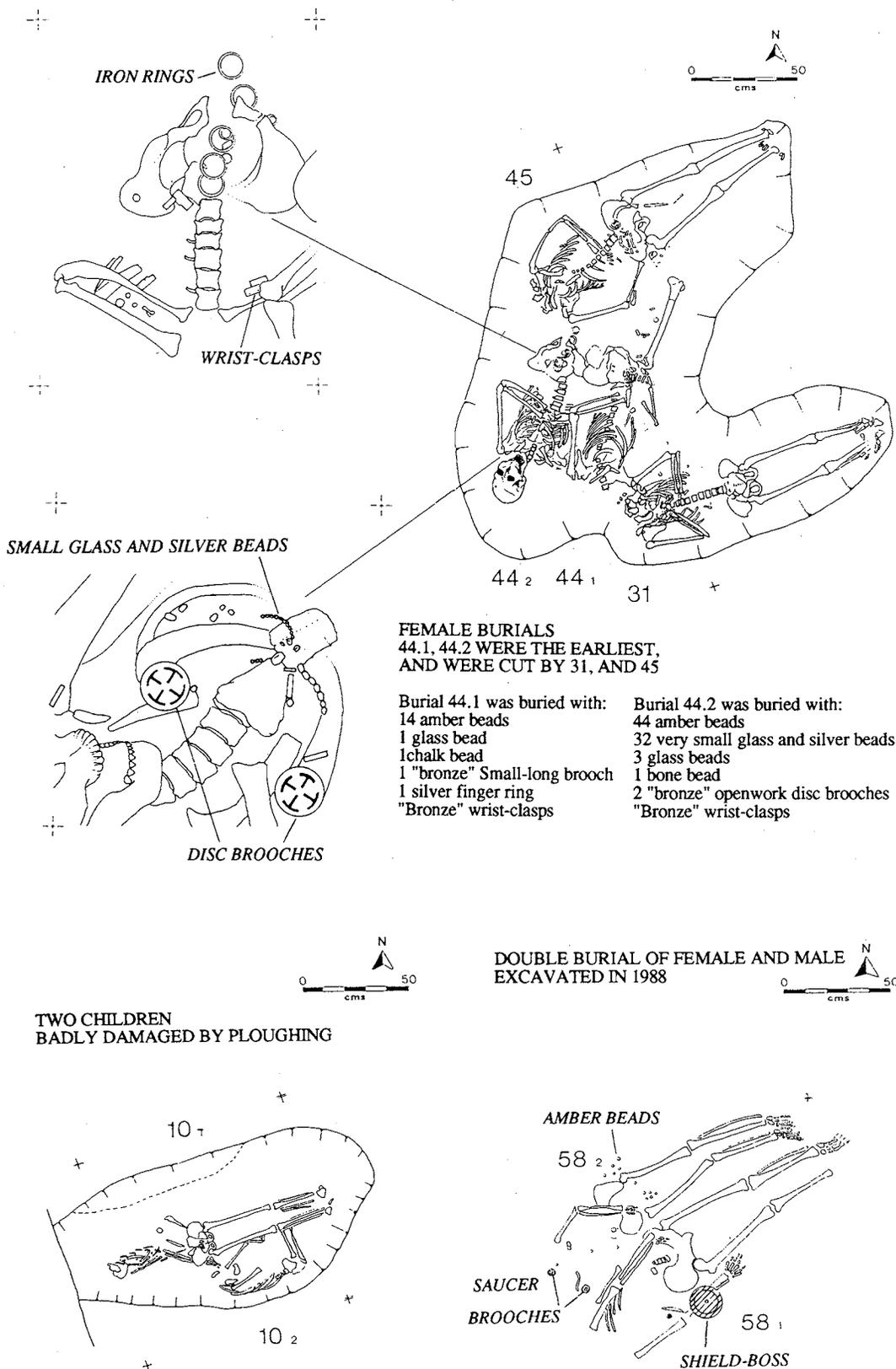


Figure 8.
 Various burials: two female burials, 44.1, 44.2, with 31, 45; two children, 10.1, 10.2;
 double burial of male and female, 58.1, 58.2.

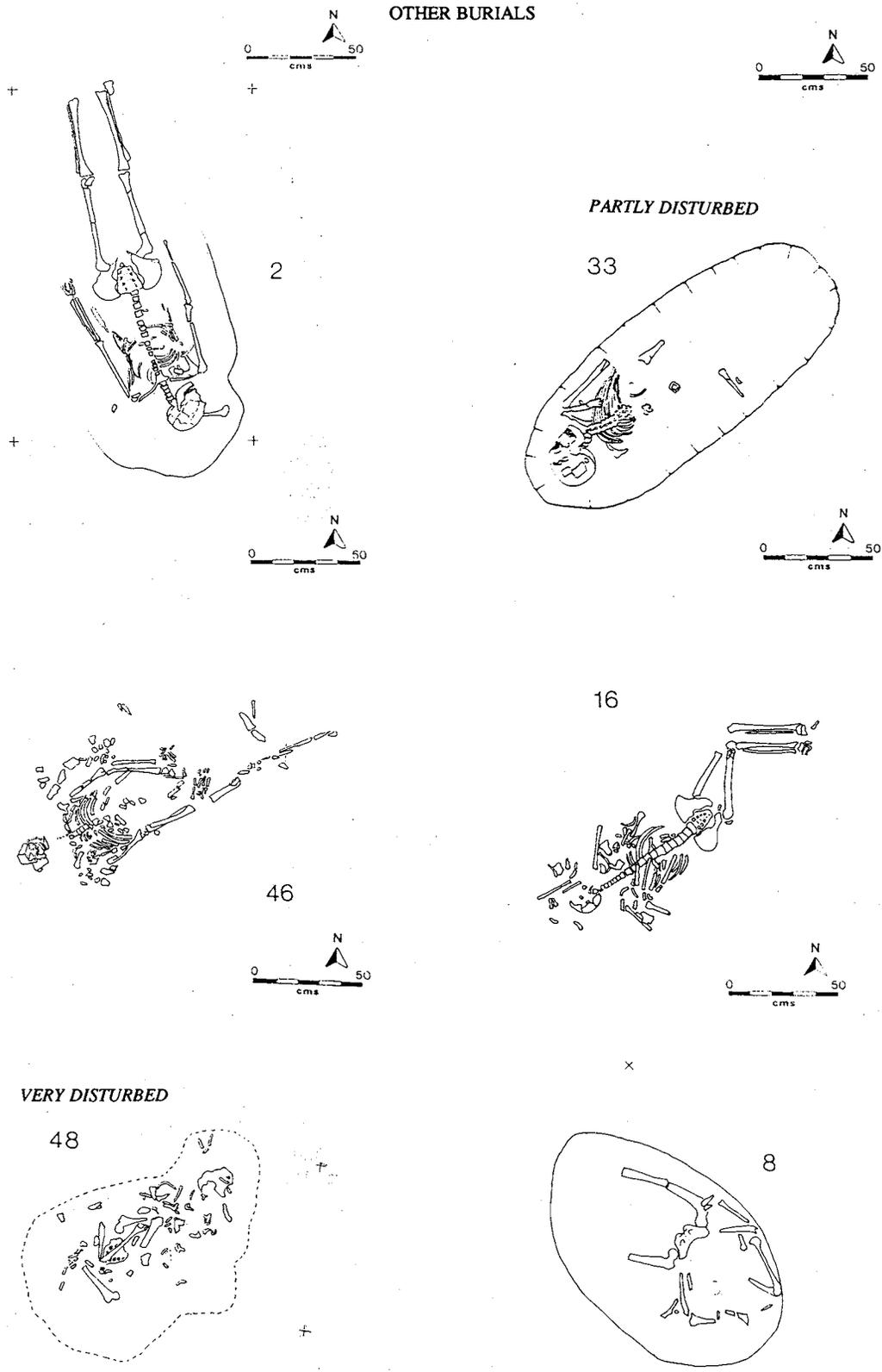


Figure 9.
Other burials: 2, 8, 16, 33, 46, 48.

pinched between them was found close to the pelvis area, where there was also a collection of unidentified ironwork.

Burial 20.2 was that of an adult female buried beneath a child (20.1) accompanied by an almost complete pot (see Figures 3, 7, 14). The two skeletons were separated by a layer of soil. The adult had 3 brooches around her neck, a square-headed small-long, simple disc, and cruciform. A necklace of amber beads, slip knot rings and spangles, and a large rock crystal bead appears to have slumped beneath her right arm (see Figure 7). Decorated sleeve clasps were present, as well as a hooked iron rod (catchlifter) and rings found beside her left hip.

Burial 29 was an adult female lying on her side and with one leg flexed. She had no copper alloy objects, but had a necklace of large polychrome glass and amber beads. In addition a pot and bone comb had been buried with her. The glass beads were presumably continental imports (see Figures 3, 6, 12).

Burials 44.1/.2 were the earliest inhumations of a group of four. Burial 31 cut through and removed the right arm of 44.1, and burial 45 removed the legs of both skeletons in burial 44 (see Figures 3, 8). The only skull that has remained intact is that of 44.2. The earlier burials of this group were also the richest, with two decorated disc brooches on the shoulders of 44.2, and a small-long brooch associated with 44.1 (see Figure 13). Over 60 amber beads were found, as well as small glass ones, and a group of 32 tiny segmented "silver in glass" beads. A chalk bead was also present, and some coils of copper alloy sheet may also be beads. Wrist clasps with pelleted decoration, and other objects of copper alloy occurred, and around the pelvis area of 44.2 there lay a number of iron and copper alloy rings (see Figure 8, 13).

The group of four females described above was the most complex multiple burial, but in addition to the woman with child above (20), there were two other multiple burials. Two children (10.1/.2) were put together without a grave cut into the chalk (see Figure 8). The lower skeleton was flexed beneath the extended upper skeleton, but apparently not cut by it, suggesting these burials were contemporary. For similar reasons a burial containing 3 skeletons lying one on top of the other (3.1/.2/.3) would all seem to be contemporary, or at least the lack of disturbance of the earliest burial would indicate an awareness of the burial being there. The bottom skeleton (3.3) was in very good condition and lay extended facing north with its feet crossed. It

was male and was laid in a grave. The second skeleton in this stack was an adolescent and separated from the first by stones. The shallow scoop of the grave partly protected it, but it had been damaged by ploughing, whilst the third skeleton (3.1) was almost entirely destroyed through plough action (see Figure 5).

Burial 33 was interesting because although it was in a scoop grave it was only partially present. Just the ribs, upper vertebrae, humerus, and skull remain, and yet no sign of plough damage into the sides of the grave are apparent (see Figure 9). No artifacts were present, so possibly this may be a burial found previously by metal detector users.

Burial 11 on the other hand was one of the most conventional excavated this season. It lay facing north with legs slightly bent, in a shallow grave. Over the left elbow rested a shield boss, and at the head end of the grave a spearhead was found orientated so that the haft would have run beneath the shield (see Figure 5). The spearhead had been bent by the plough, but otherwise this burial was in very good condition.

Burials excavated in 1987 and 1988 should also be included in this report, which brings the total number of skeletons excavated to 30. The exact locations of these are not known as the size of Edix Hill field, devoid as it is of mapped landmarks, makes plotting the position of a single burial impossible short of a full programme of survey. The first burial excavated in 1987 was that of a male lying extended and facing north (57) (see Figure 5). It was accompanied by a shield boss and spearhead. The burial excavated in 1988 was a double burial (58.1/.2) with a male and female lying extended and facing north-east (see Figure 8). A shield boss was found with the male, and 14 glass and amber beads with the female. In addition two gilt saucer brooches with anthropomorphic design were found on her shoulders, and a silver and iron buckle at her waist (see Figure 11). Extremely unusual intricately designed appliqué decorations were found by metal-detecting and may have been associated with this burial. These are interpreted as shield ornaments (see Figure 11).

Conclusion

The cemetery at Edix Hill, Barrington, seems to cover an area no greater than half a hectare, but was situated in a locally prominent position which was also used for earlier occupation. The skeletons buried in chalk-cut graves have survived in remarkably

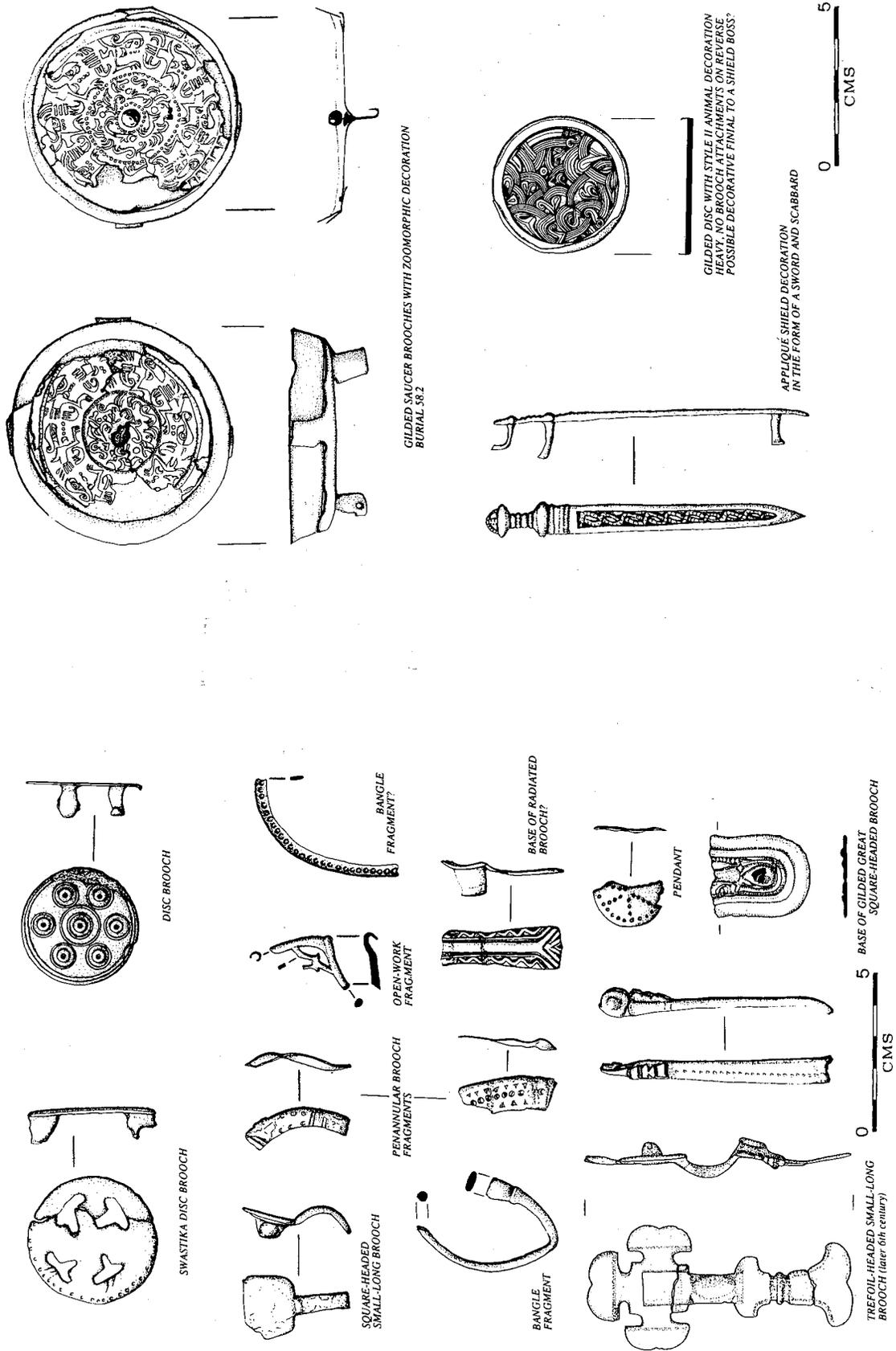


Figure 11. Saucer brooches from 1988 burial (58.1, 58.2) and unusual shield decorations possibly associated with it.

Figure 10. Metal-detecting finds.

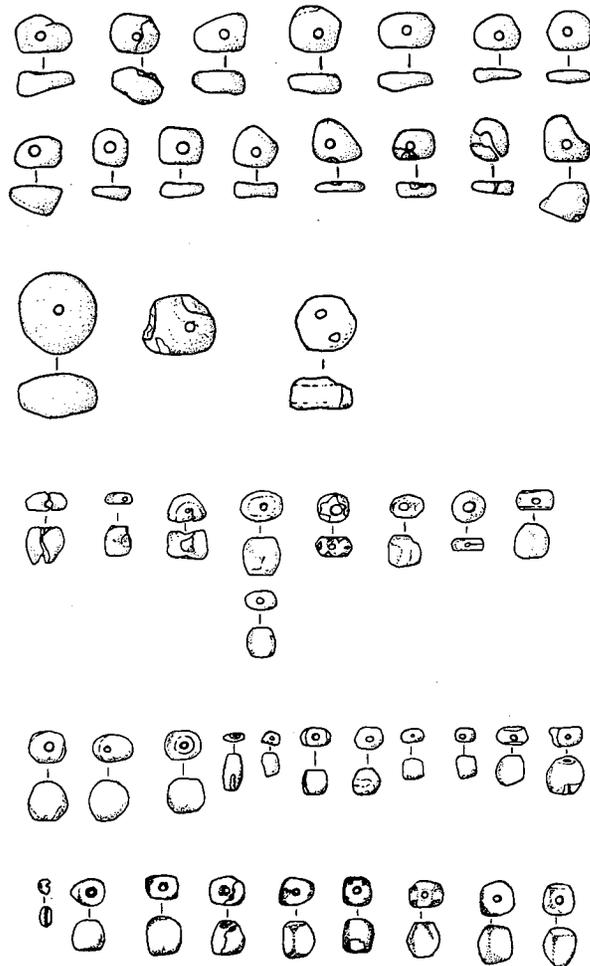
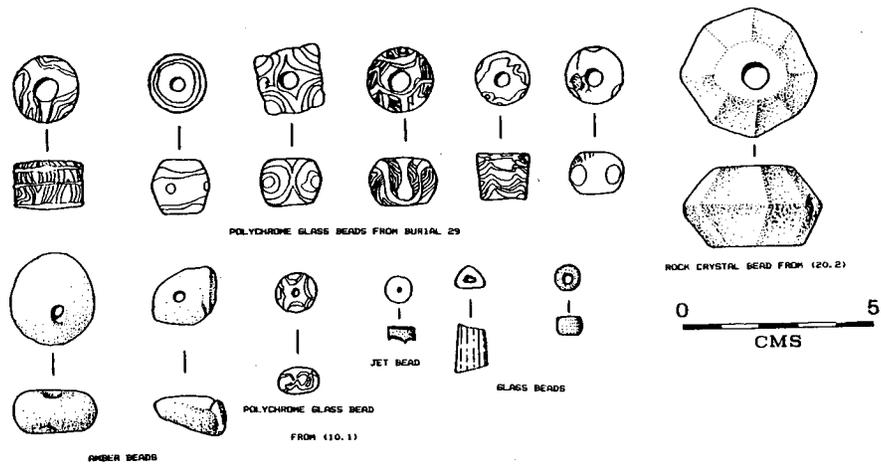


Figure 12.
Beads from various contexts.

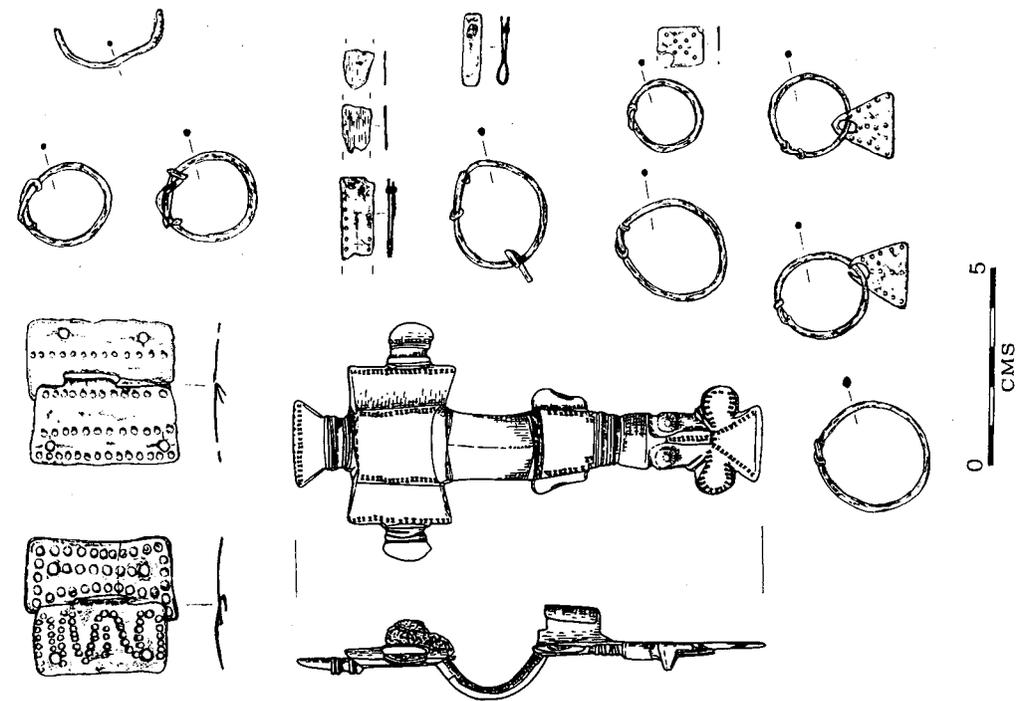


Figure 14.
Wrist clasps and slip-rings: burial 4.
Cruciform brooch, strap ends, and slip-rings
(some with spangles): burial 20.2.

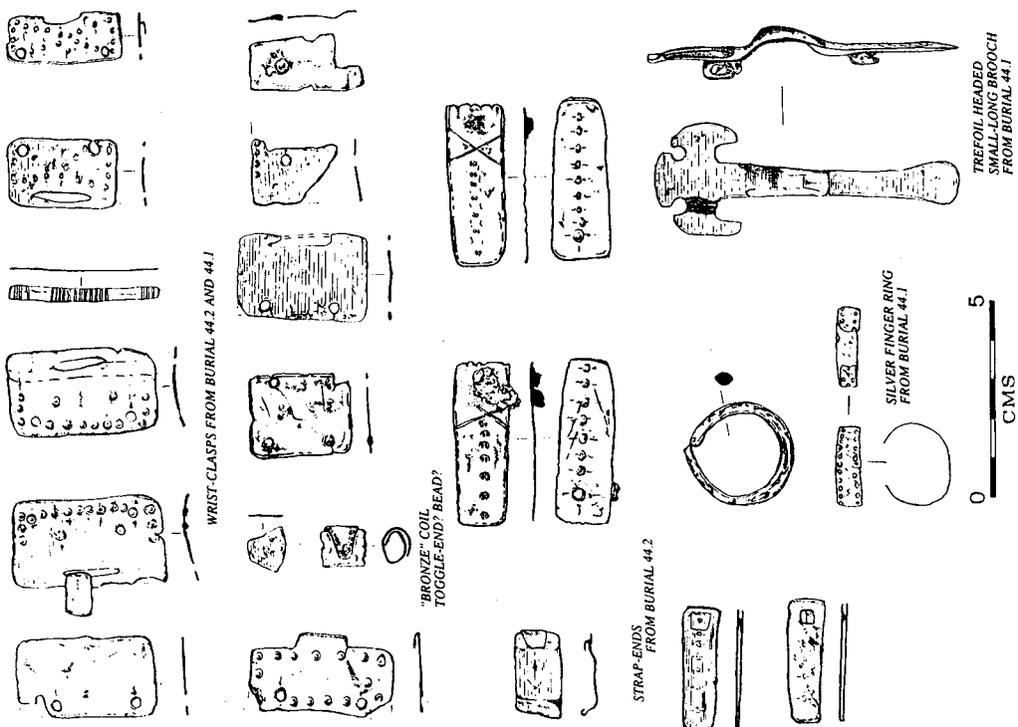


Figure 13.
Wrist clasps, and other jewellery: burials 44.1, 44.2.

burial	condition	position	orient- ation	posture	age	sex	comb	pot	amber	glass	brooch	wrist	ring	ring	tweezer	buckle	knife	shield	spear
									bead	bead		clasp	Cu	Fe				boss	head
2.0	+	supine	S-N	extended	A	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
3.1	-	supine	S-N	extended	A	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
3.2	+/-	supine	S-N	extended	A		1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3.3	+	supine	S-N	extended	A	M	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-
4.0	+	supine	SW-NE	extended	A	F	-	-	29	-	2	4	5	-	1	1	1	-	-
8.0	-	supine	SW-NE	extended	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10.1	-	supine	W-E	extended	J	?	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10.2	-	side L	W-E	crouched	J	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11.0	+	supine	SW-NE	semiflex	A	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
16.0	+/-	supine	SW-NE	semiflex	A	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
19.0	+/-	supine	SW-NE	extended	A	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
20.1	-	supine	W-E	extended	J	?	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
20.2	+	supine	W-E	extended	A	F	-	-	35	1	3	2	7	-	-	1	1	-	-
29.0	+/-	side R	W-E	flexed	A	F	1	1	6	6	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
31.0	+/-	supine	W-E	extended	A	F	-	-	8	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
33.0	-	supine	SW-NE	extended	A	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
41.0	-	supine	S-N	flex?	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
44.1	+/-	supine	SSW-NNE	extended	A	F	-	-	14	1	1	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
44.2	+/-	supine	SSB-NNE	extended	A	F	-	-	45	37	2	4	2	5	-	1	-	-	-
45.0	+/-	supine	SW-NE	extended	A	F	-	-	12	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	-	-
46.0	-	supine	W-E	extended	A	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
47.0	-	supine	SW-NE	extended	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
48.0	-	?	?	?	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
49.0	-	?	?	?	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
50.0	-	?	?	?	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
51.0	-	?	W-E	?	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
52.0	-	?	?	?	?	?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
57.0	+/-	supine	S-N	extended	A	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
58.1	+/-	supine	SW-NE	extended	A	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-
58.2	+/-	supine	SW-NE	extended	A	F	-	-	2	12	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 1: Burial chart: skeleton information and associated artifacts
 Key: Condition: +=good, +/-=fair, -=poor; Age: A=adult, J=juvenile

good condition, but those more shallowly buried merely in the soil have been very severely plough damaged. Although the preservation of bone is excellent all burials are vulnerable to agricultural activity if the present regime is continued. Ploughing, harrowing, and compaction from heavy machinery will soon destroy all that remains. The cemetery lies in a very exposed position on its chalky knoll in the middle of this large field, and 25 cm of soil protection has been lost since the last century. Most of this has probably occurred in the past 15–20 years. Even the metal artifacts retrieved from the plough soil are broken and severely damaged bearing witness to the pounding received from recent ploughing.

Artifacts recovered from the graves are rich and varied, and tied into the wealth of information on age, sex, nutritional condition, disease, and genetic variation available from the bones we should be in a position to make detailed insights into the society from which this cemetery derived. The area of Barrington seems to have been a frontier zone between the Angles to the east and the Merclan area of the Midlands, and as such it gives us the opportunity to examine the relationship that existed between the East Angles and Mercia. Although several major Anglo-Saxon cemeteries have been exhaustively investigated in East Anglia, the preservation of bone in most of them has been poor, and Barrington provides us with a superb opportunity to fill this gap.

A summary of excavations on the same site in 1990 appears on p.94 of this proceedings. Further work will take place in 1991.

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Our thanks also go to those who undertook the metal detecting: Chris Montague, Dick Stripe, and members of the Soke Metaldetecting Club.

It must be emphasized that this is an interim statement of on-going work. Aspects of this report may be subject to amendment for the final publication.

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The Proceedings

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