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Mid-Saxon burials at Barnwell Road, Cambridge

Andrew A. S. Newton

with Nina Crummy and Carina Phillips

In September and November 2005, Archaeological Solutions carried out an excavation and a watching brief at land to the rear of 1–23 Barnwell Road, Cambridge, following an evaluation carried out at the site earlier in the year. The excavation identified two graves, which between them contained three burials, as well as a pit and a linear feature. Three further burials were identified during the watching brief phase of the project. A copper-alloy buckle similar to others found elsewhere in sixth-, seventh- and eighth-century contexts – and of a type considered typical of the period when English people were converting to Christianity – found with one of the burials has dated one individual to the Anglo-Saxon period. By association, the other burials on the site have been tentatively dated to the same period. The site contributes to the body of information regarding Middle Saxon activity in the Cambridge area.

In September 2005, Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) conducted an excavation at land to the rear of 1–23 Barnwell Road, Cambridge (NGR TL 4790 5928), covering an area of around 200 square metres approximately three kilometres east of Cambridge city centre (Fig. 1). This was followed in November 2005 by a watching brief carried out to observe ground works for proposed development of the site. An evaluation had already been carried out by Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (Kenney 2005), which revealed the eastern end of a grave, within which the lower legs and feet of a human skeleton were visible. The evaluation concluded that the burial was probably of Iron Age or Roman date.

The burial was, however, unlikely to have formed part of a cemetery as Roman cemeteries tended to be situated close to roads and there are no known Roman roads close to the site. During the later Romano-British period, the Romans also practised isolated burial, often associated with field systems, and usually without grave goods; the skeleton found at Barnwell Road could have been such a burial. Roman period activity has been identified at former allotments 500 metres east of the Barnwell Road site, where structures and finds indicating both domestic and industrial activity

have been recorded (Casa-Hatton 2001). Roman inhumations were discovered in the 1870s at Coldham's Common, to the south-west of the site, during coprolite digging (Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (HER) 05067a). There was a second- to fourth-century villa to the south-east and a later Romano-British settlement around two kilometres to the east (Heawood 1997).

However, there was also Saxon activity in the area and this affects the interpretation of the Barnwell Road site. A single Saxon burial has been found alongside those of Roman date at Coldham's Common (HER 05067b) and burials with grave goods have also been found within High Ditch (part of Fleam Dyke), to the north of Barnwell Road, during road works (Taylor 1998, p. 31). The pattern of Saxon cemetery distribution in Cambridgeshire indicates that settlement was concentrated on the Cam valley, but the relationship between settlement and cemetery is complicated as many villages may have used the same cemetery, which could therefore have been at some distance from their habitation sites (Taylor 1978, p. 20). On the western side of Cambridge, at King's Garden Hostel, an Early to Middle Saxon cemetery was excavated by the CAU in 2000 (Dodwell 2001). The cemetery contained 21 burials within 20 graves (Dodwell, Lucy & Tipper 2004) and, although only five of these burials were furnished, the general picture points to this being a cemetery dating from the seventh century (Dodwell 2001, p. 29). A Middle to Late Saxon execution cemetery was excavated at the corner of Chesterton Lane in 2001 (Mortimer & Regan 2001). In the area immediately surrounding the Barnwell Road site, two parallel ditches excavated at the former allotment site to the east may represent a droveway, part of a small enclosure or field boundaries, and have been dated to the Anglo-Saxon period by pottery contained within their fill (Casa-Hatton 2001).

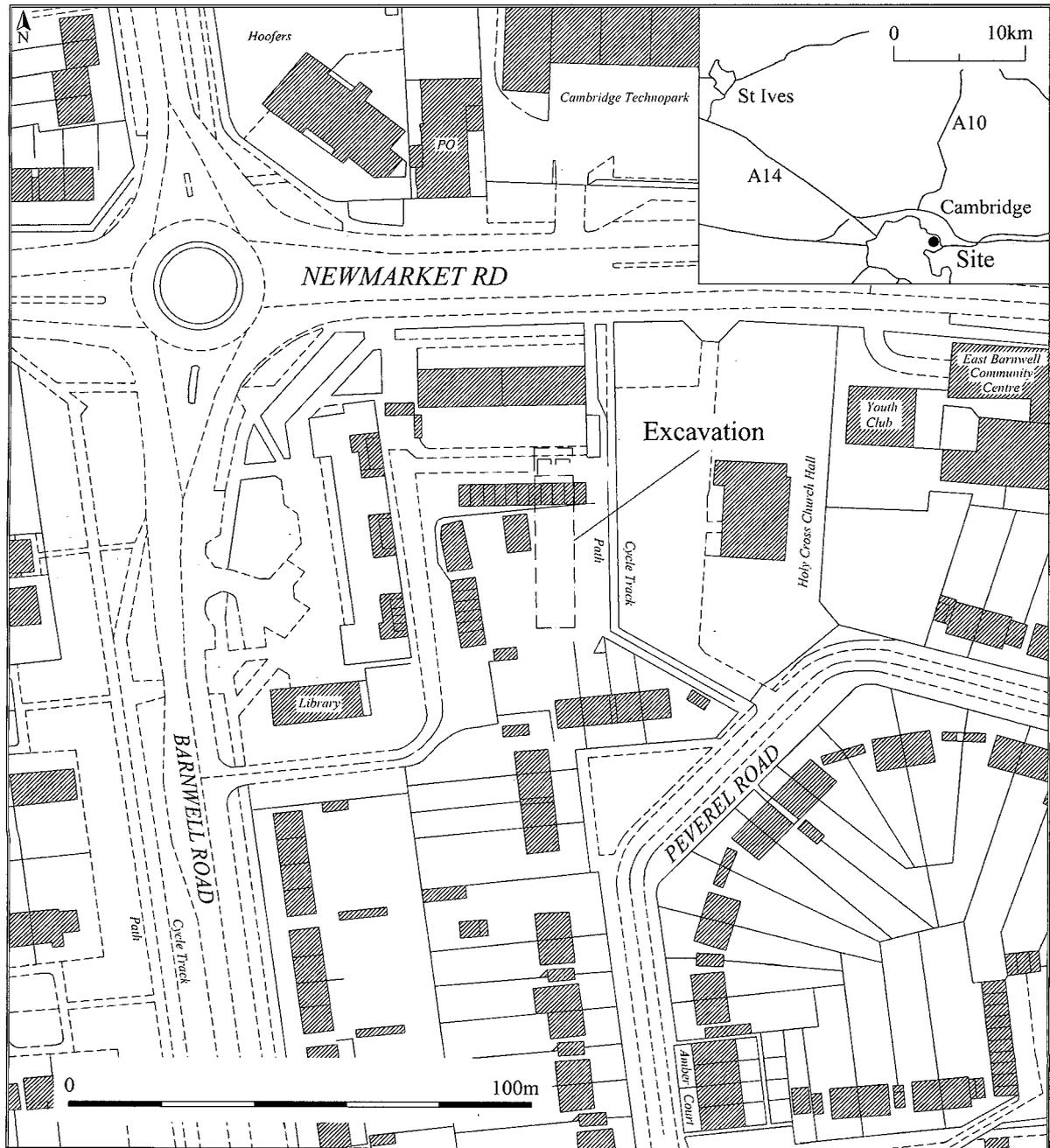


Figure 1. Site location.

The excavation

An area measuring 35 metres x 8 metres was excavated, expanding the area investigated during the preceding evaluation (Kenney 2005). In addition, a watching brief observed ground works associated with the development of the site.

The excavation revealed four archaeological features: two graves, an elongated pit and a ditch. The watching brief identified the legs and feet of two further inhumations, located at the western side of the area under observation, and a further truncated burial in the north-western corner of this area (Fig. 2).

Information given here about the skeletons has been extracted from the human bone report contained in the site grey report, which is available through the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record. It has not been possible to establish a relative chronology between the features because they all cut the natural deposits and shared no stratigraphic relationships.

Grave F2006 (Figs 3 & 4) was the most southerly of the identified features. It was comparatively wide for a grave, around 0.90 metres, and contained two bodies. The first of these, SK2007, was an adult, possibly in middle adulthood and around 5 feet 6 inches to 5 feet 8 inches tall. The skeleton was poorly preserved



Plate 1. Pit F2051, Lynton Way, Sawston. This may have been a monumental feature, its shaft holding a large post with symbolic significance.



Plate 2. 'Ploughing over the site of the Roman villa, The Quave Trees in the background' by George Maynard of Whittlesford, courtesy of the Cambridgeshire County Record Office.

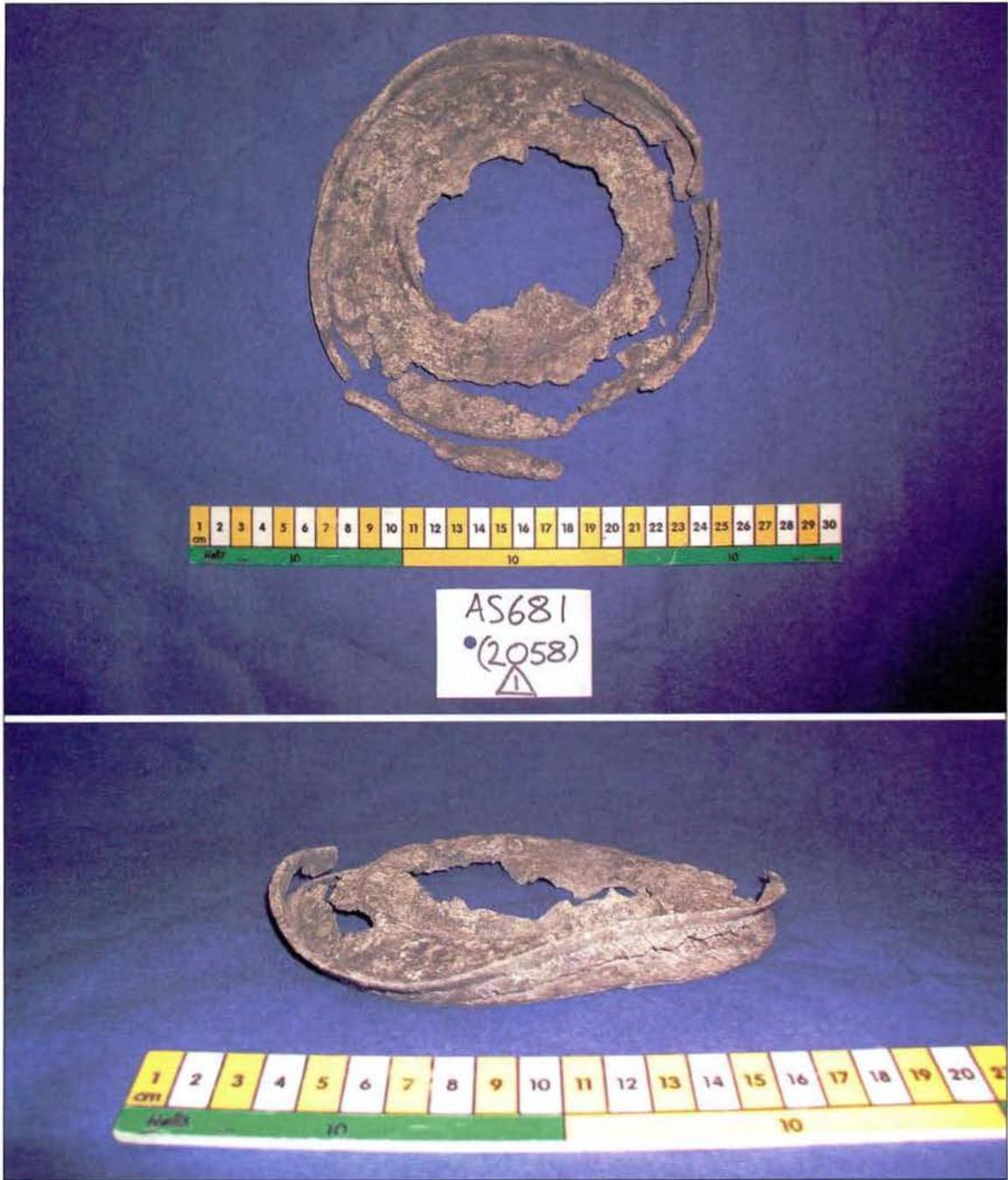


Plate 3. The remains of a lead-alloy (pewter) plate or lid with a shallow decorated rim found in the fill of ditch F2056 at the former Oblic Engineering site, Church Street, Litlington.



Plate 4. Cambridge 1815. St John's College from the garden. The University and the colleges would not permit a towpath along The Backs. The string of barges or lighters is being poled (Cambs Collection E. SJ. 14 28213. R Ackermann History of the University of Cambridge, 1815. London: Printed for R Ackermann)



Plate 5. Garden front of St Chad's, 48 Grange Road, erected on land leased by the Revd Robert Burn from St Catharine's College in 1877. Now a hall of residence of St Catharine's.



Plate 6. Garden front of Balliol Croft, 6 Madingley Road, erected on land leased by Professor Alfred Marshall from St John's College in 1885. Now the Lodge of the President of Lucy Cavendish College.



Plate 7. 5 West Road, erected on land leased by Captain Charles Clay, Printer of Cambridge University Press, from Gonville and Caius College in 1872. Recently housed the Institute of Criminology, and is shortly to be demolished by the University.



Plate 8. The garden front of Straithaird, Lady Margaret Road, erected on land leased by Sir Donald MacAlister from St John's College in 1897. Now part of Lucy Cavendish College.



Plate 9. 60 Grange Road, erected on land leased by William Sindall, builder, from St John's College in 1906. Despite the double front door, it was used as a single house. Now a Trinity College hostel.



Plate 10. The kink in Grange Road, seen from the south.

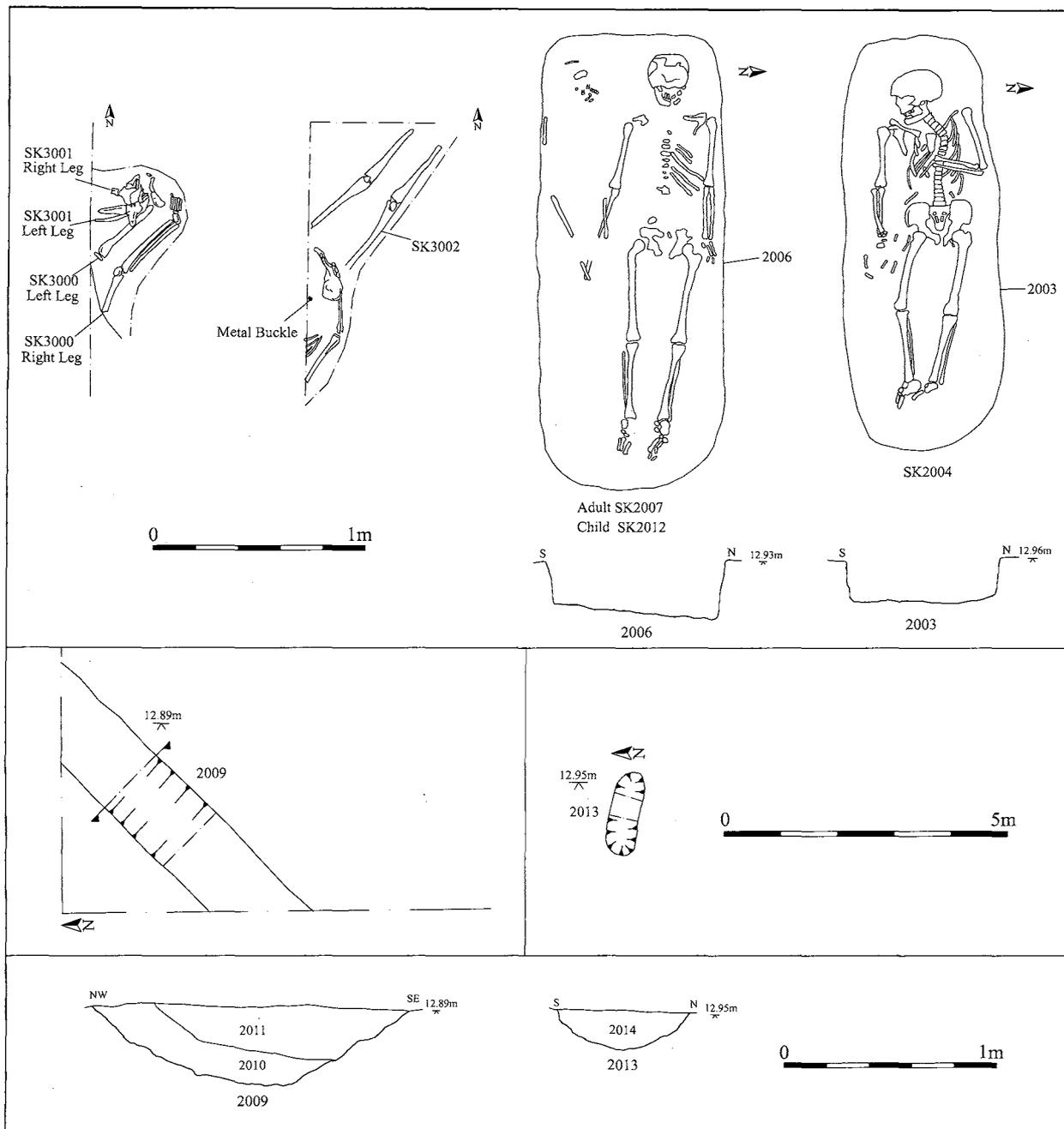


Figure 3. Plans and sections.

rather than two rivets, occur in Anglo-Saxon graves, for example from two eighth-century male graves at Southampton, and from both male and female graves in the sixth- to seventh-century cemetery at Edix Hill, Barrington, near Cambridge (Hinton 1996, pp. 6–7, fig. 2, 20/9; Malim & Hines 1998, fig. 3.44, 27/1, fig. 3.51, 54/4, fig. 3.64, 109B/9). The buckle is of Marzinzik's type II.24a, described as typical of the sixth to eighth centuries (2003, pp. 51–2, plates 130–7, 302, map 28).

About 1.5 metres to the north of grave F2003 was a small sub-oval pit, F2013 (Fig. 3). This was shorter and slightly narrower than either of the graves but

was similarly aligned. The pit's similarity in position and alignment to F2003 and F2006 suggest that it might have been a simple grave cut, which contained the skeleton of a child whose immature bones have not survived. The concave profile of the pit is, however, unlike the profiles of the graves, suggesting that it was dug in a hurry, that little care was taken over its construction, or that it is not a grave at all. Kenney (2005) suggested that the pit might have been dug earlier than the graves, as it was sealed by the subsoil through which they were cut. However, the relationship between the graves and the subsoil was

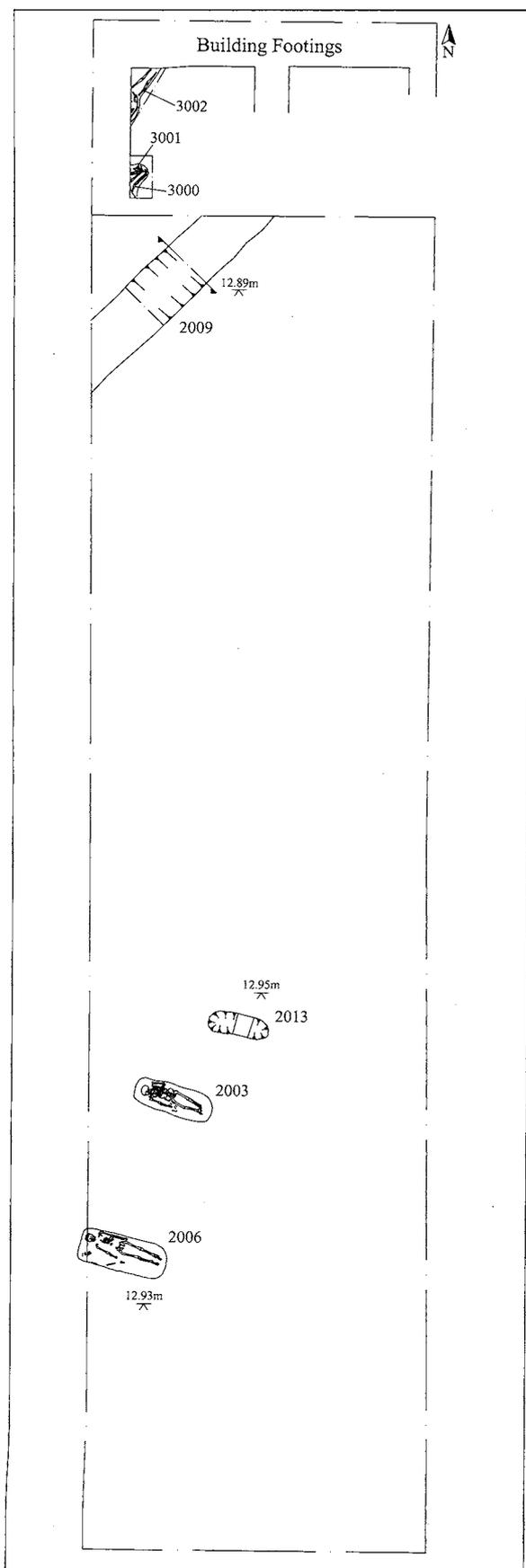


Figure 2. Site plan.

and incomplete, hindering identification of its sex. There was no evidence of skeletal pathologies, but the poor preservation of the bone may have destroyed pathological evidence or hindered observation.

Lying on the right-hand side of this skeleton was a second burial within the same grave; this was SK2012, a child aged around six to seven years old. The grave was on an east to west orientation and, although the child's skeleton was too poorly preserved to be entirely certain, it is thought that both skeletons lay in a supine extended position.

No finds were identified with either of these burials but the orange-brown sandy silt fill of the grave contained a Neolithic or Bronze Age flint scraper (identified by Tom McDonald) and two sherds of prehistoric (probably Late Iron Age) pottery (identified by Peter Thompson), all thought to be residual.

Grave F2003 (Figs 3 & 5) was north-east of Grave F2006. The eastern end of the grave had been revealed during the preceding evaluation (Kenney 2005). As with F2006, no grave goods were identified, although three residual sherds of prehistoric (probably Late Iron Age) pottery (identified by Peter Thompson) and two metal items (including one which may have been part of a dress accessory) were present. Skeleton SK2004 was much more complete than those in the other grave and was identified as a probable female in young to middle adulthood. She stood about 5 feet 2 inches to 5 feet 4 inches tall and had poor dentition, with five caries and an abscess present on the surviving teeth. Four teeth had also been lost before death. Unusually, the canines and second premolars were congenitally absent from the maxilla.

Samples of the fills of Graves F2006 and F2003 contained low density scatters of burnt refuse of unknown origin (analysis was by Val Fryer).

Skeletons SK3000 and SK3001 (Figs 3 & 6) appear to have been buried at the same time and in the same grave as one another. SK3000 was aligned south-west to north-east, whereas SK3001 was aligned east to west. SK3001 seems to have been buried with its feet crossed and it appears to have been placed into the grave after SK3000 as its left foot partially lay on the left leg of SK3000. Only the lower legs and feet of these two burials survived the ground works at the site; it was not possible to determine their sex and assessment of age was difficult. However, both skeletons appear to have been more than 14 years old, probably adults, at the time of death.

The final burial, SK3002 (Figs 3 & 7), was more complete than the others identified during the watching brief, and most of the right side of the torso and both legs were recovered. The bones were adult-sized and no pathologies were observable. As can be seen in Fig. 2, SK3002 was, like SK3000, aligned south-west/north-east. This was the only burial at the site associated with any finds: there was a copper alloy buckle just above the pelvis (Fig. 8). The oval loop is plain and was attached to a narrow leather strap by a folded buckle-plate secured by two copper-alloy rivets; part of the back of this plate is missing. Buckles of much the same form and size, sometimes fixed by three



Figure 4. Grave F2006, skeletons SK2007 and SK2012.



Figure 6. Skeletons SK3000 and SK3001.



Figure 5. Grave F2003, skeleton SK2004.



Figure 7. Skeleton SK3002.

observed during the excavation to be ambiguous, owing to the similar compositions of the subsoil and grave fills, and so it is still possible that the pit was contemporary with the graves.

The final feature identified was a ditch (F2009), about 1.4 metres wide, that ran south-west to north-east across the north-western corner of the site (Fig. 3). The excavation identified five metres of its length and it appeared to continue outside the excavated area. Of the feature's two fills only the lower contained any finds: a small fragment of ceramic building material (identified by Andrew Peachey) and three fragments of animal bone from a cattle/horse sized animal (identified by Carina Phillips). It is not possible to say whether or not this ditch was contemporary with the inhumations, although its alignment parallel to the apparent alignments of SK3002 and SK3000 might indicate that this was so. It might represent a boundary but, given the short length of the section revealed within the excavated area, this also cannot be confirmed.

The date of the burials

It is possible that the remains from Barnwell Road date from the Iron Age or Romano-British period, as suggested by Kenney (2005) based on the presence of settlement evidence of these periods in the vicinity of the site. A later (Christian) date within this period may be more likely than an earlier one.

However, the presence of the sixth- to eighth-century copper-alloy buckle with SK3002 throws the possible Romano-British date into doubt. This suggests that SK3002 dates from the Middle Anglo-Saxon or later period. As there is no evidence to the contrary, it is suggested that the burials and other features were approximately contemporary with one another, and so an Anglo-Saxon date (consistent with the buckle associated with SK3002) is tentatively proposed for them.

The lack of intercutting between the graves (or other features) suggests that the individuals who dug them were aware of the existence and locations of others in the area, possibly reinforcing the suggestion that they were all contemporary with each other. Apparent ease of recognition of graves (either to avoid disturbing a previous burial or to locate a grave in which to place another family member) is a regularly observed feature of Anglo-Saxon burial (Taylor 2001, p. 144).

Certain characteristics of the Barnwell Road burials can be used tentatively to refine the sixth- to eighth-century date range given by the buckle. It was normal in the sixth century for women to be buried in a Germanic style of costume, but this practice declined from the early seventh century (Geake 2002). There was no evidence to suggest that SK2004 (probably female) had been buried in such costume (although evidence may not have survived), and this burial is thus consistent with a post sixth-century date. Indeed, the absence of grave

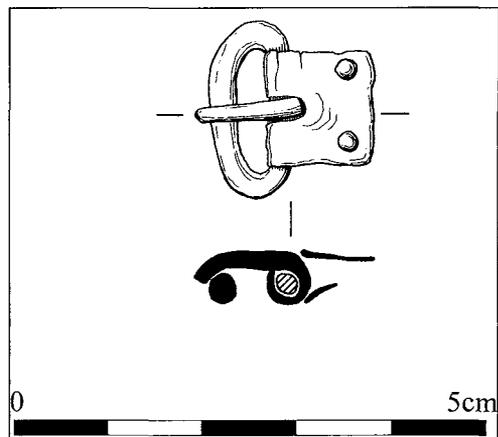


Figure 8. Copper-alloy buckle.

goods from the burials is consistent with an eighth-century or later date (cf. Hadley 2001, pp. 92–3).

A seventh- to eighth-century date for the buckle would make it broadly contemporary with, or slightly later than, the cemetery excavated at King's Garden Hostel in Cambridge. Use of this cemetery is considered to have been restricted to the seventh century because of the variable orientations of the graves, the variations in the body position of the burials and the premise that after the seventh century flexed burials and burials on their side became rarer and grave orientation became more uniform (Dodwell, Lucy & Tipper 2004). However, it seems that burial practice in the seventh century was characterised by its oddness and uncertainties rather than by its own distinctive character (Geake 2002). In comparison to the King's Garden Hostel burials, those at Barnwell Road display a slightly more uniform orientation, with four aligned east to west and two aligned south-west to north-east. Those burials at Barnwell Road that were complete enough for body position to be identified were supine and extended. Although the evidence is limited, this comparison might indicate that the Barnwell Road burials are later than the seventh century and thus fall towards the end of the date range suggested by the buckle.

The significance of the burials

The copper alloy buckle belongs to a type group typical of the period during which Christianity was being adopted in Anglo-Saxon England (the 'conversion period'). This date does not define it as Christian, but indicates that it was buried at a time when the prevalence of Christianity was increasing in Anglo-Saxon England. The east to west orientation of Graves F2003 and F2006 should not be seen as indicative of Christian practice, as earlier Saxon inhumations on this alignment are also known. Similarly, the absence of grave goods does not necessarily indicate Christian burial practice: it is possible that inclusion of grave-goods was such a fundamental aspect of burial that

it was not abandoned by those who converted to Christianity (Crawford 2004), especially as this practice was never condemned by the Church as being pagan (Blair 2005, p. 234). Rather than the spread of Christianity and Christian burial practice, the decline in the occurrence of grave goods in the seventh century may reflect the emergence of better established social hierarchies which did not require demonstrations of power and status through elaborate funerary displays (Hadley 2001, pp. 92–3).

The discovery of the site at Barnwell Road adds to the number of Anglo-Saxon burial sites identified in the Cambridge area in recent years and, being located further east, extends the area over which such sites have been reported. Other burial sites have recently been discovered towards the eastern side of Cambridge at Chesterton Lane Corner (Mortimer & Regan 2001), at King's Garden Hostel (Dodwell 2001) and at the new Institute of Criminology building on the University of Cambridge's Sidgwick Site (Armour, Evans & Tipper 2003, p. 1). Dating of the burials at Chesterton Lane indicates that there is a high probability that they were contemporary with the East Anglian/Mercian settlement that existed at Cambridge until 875 (Cessford & Dickens 2005). The Middle Saxon period date suggested for the Barnwell Road burials may therefore make them broadly contemporary with the Chesterton Lane Corner execution cemetery. Although this indicates human presence in the Barnwell Road area at broadly the same time as the East Anglian/Mercian settlement, the nature of that presence cannot be extrapolated from such a small group of burials.

Considered as a whole, if small, cemetery, the Barnwell Road site can be seen to display some characteristics that may be regarded as common to burial grounds of the conversion period. A variety of burial practices existed during the Middle Saxon period, including both continued use of some older cemeteries and also burial in small groups, such as the one described here. Such burials are overtly indicative of neither pagan nor Christian funerary rites, and may reflect practices that were just as strongly influenced by social and political changes as by religious factors. In fact it may be that the burial rite was deliberately chosen to symbolise socio-political links or to highlight differences (Williams 2006, p. 43). Geake (2002) indicates that conversion period burial sites can be broadly divided into three categories. The Barnwell Road burials would appear to fall into the second of these, termed 'churchyard type'. These are cemeteries with very few grave-goods, perhaps a single item in one grave only, or none at all. They are difficult to date accurately and are mostly located around a known church, although in some cases (as at Barnwell Road) the excavated area has been too small to ascertain whether a church was present and in a few cases it is unlikely that the cemetery was ever associated with a church (Geake 2002). These latter cases may represent pagan burial grounds where burial practices similar to contemporary Christian ones were practised, although in some parts of later-converted northern

Europe churchyards coexisted for several centuries with traditional village cemeteries, were accepted by the clergy and were possibly even consecrated (Blair 2005, pp. 228–9). It seems that the Barnwell Road site may be considered to be of the type of seventh-century and later unfurnished cemeteries from which Geake (1997, p. 135) considers churchyards to have developed.

Conclusions

The site contributes to the evidence for Saxon activity in the Cambridge area and adds to the number of Saxon burial sites that have been recorded within the city in recent years. The presence of the Anglo-Saxon period buckle with SK3002 suggests that this burial is of sixth- to eighth-century date, or slightly later. The other burials at the site are tentatively dated to the same period, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary. The burial group displays characteristics consistent with this date, although nothing was recovered from the excavation or the watching brief to rule out completely the interpretation of the burials as Romano-British, as put forward in the report of the initial evaluation of the site (Kenney 2005).

There was little evidence of the social or religious groupings to which the individuals in these burials belonged. Circumstantial comparative evidence may suggest that these burials were slightly later than those excavated at King's Garden Hostel and at the Institute of Criminology site, and almost contemporary with the execution cemetery recorded at Chesterton Lane Corner. This suggests that the Barnwell Road burials were interred late in the time frame suggested by the presence of the copper-alloy buckle, towards the end of the conversion period. This may be regarded as increasing the probability that the individuals excavated here were Christian, although this supposition cannot be supported by any archaeological evidence recovered from the site. Based on the characteristics of the burials and the presence of the buckle, the site may be tentatively suggested to fall into the group of conversion period burial sites that Geake (2002) terms 'churchyard type', the seventh-century and later unfurnished cemeteries from which churchyards developed (Geake 1997, p. 135).

Acknowledgements

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Crummy, ceramic building material by Andrew Peachey, human and animal bone by Carina Phillips and environmental samples by Val Fryer. Finds were co-ordinated by Claire Wallace. Illustrations are by Tamlin Barton. The site archive can be accessed at the Cambridge County Archaeological Store. A grey report containing full specialists' reports is available at the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record and the National Monuments Record.

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