

WASPERTON EARLY MEDIEVAL CEMETERY

Description of the Project

Martin Carver

FIG 1: [Top] The village of Wasperton looking north, with the River Avon (left) and the Thelsford Brook (right). The prehistoric, Roman and early Medieval site is spread over the fields between the village and the two waterways. [SP 2658]

[Bottom] The cropmarks of the Roman and early Medieval site (left) and the Bronze Age enclosure (centre) looking west. The Early Medieval cemetery lay within the larger enclosure, below, left.

FIG 2: The development of the Wasperton cemetery, 4-7th centuries AD.

FIG 3: Excavations in Progress at Wasperton (Birmingham University Field School, 1980)

Fig 4: Objects from the Wasperton Anglo-Saxon Cemetery (from top): Grave group from Inhumation 2, disturbed by the installation of a conveyor; Saucer brooches from Inhumation 11; Cruciform brooch from Inhumation 39; Square –headed brooches from Inhumation 24 and 65.

Description of Project

The archaeological site found at Wasperton on the River Avon in central England (SP 2658) was investigated over several years in extremely difficult conditions. But the opportunity was seized, and its reward was not only the complete excavation of an early medieval cemetery but of its setting in an extensive piece of prehistoric landscape (Fig 1/1). The excavated area, extending for 10 ha around the cemetery, included a Neolithic hengi-form enclosure and possible long barrow, at least one early Bronze Age burial mound, a later Bronze Age/IA double-ditched enclosure, a number of IA farmsteads, an IA/RB field system and a late Roman centre of agri-business with corn-driers, ovens and wells.

Earthworks and traces of some or all of these monuments were visible to the people who inaugurated the cemetery in the late Roman period (3rd-4th century AD) within a pre-existing or purpose built rectangular enclosure (Fig 1/2). There were

eighteen inhumations in which the diagnostic furnishings were bracelets or neck-rings or hobnails from boots and shoes. Two were buried in nailed coffins and 4 were decapitated. One unurned cremation with hobnails is also presumed to be culturally Roman. Two urned cremations were radiocarbon dated to the 4th century and are of unusual interest in that one contained an equal-armed brooch and both the pots were culturally Anglo-Saxon.

The sequence and dating of the burial rites employed at Wasperton were explored mainly through stratification, spatial analysis and radiocarbon dating, all of which are held to support the continuous use of the cemetery from the 4th to the 7th century. From the Roman period onwards the burials occurred in clusters separated by blank ribbons of ground suggesting paths. The alignments of graves, studied in these local groups, combined with a number that had intercut, provided a coarse framework for the sequence which was both independent of the objects and included all the graves. The exercise showed that while a few of the unfurnished graves were contemporary with the Roman group, a sizable contingent (39) could be attributed to the 5th century, and the remainder belonged with the Anglo-Saxon burials where they constituted some 44%. The 5th century contingent was notable for a sub-group, all W-E, which contained a high proportion of coffins, planks or stone inclusions such have been noted in post-Roman cemeteries in western Britain. This sub-group was also spatially separated, in the south-eastern half of the enclosure.

Graves furnished in the Anglo-Saxon fashion began to join the cemetery in the later 5th century. Of these, 22 were cremations in pots, of which the six dated examples centred on AD 480. One individualist was buried in the north bank of a Neolithic earthwork, but all the others were gathered in the western half of the enclosure, within an area possibly demarcated with a fence. There were 53 inhumations furnished in the Anglo-Saxon manner dated to the late 5th to the early 7th century, and it was noted that the cultural affiliations of the objects inclined first towards E Anglia and the upper Thames and then towards the longer Thames Valley and Wessex. All the graves lay within the enclosure at first, but there were major spatial developments in the later period of use. In

the mid 6th century, two groups of burials were laid outside the enclosure to the north, one possibly around a pre-existing barrow, and the other grouped around a newly erected one, with a central mid or late 6th century grave. The second expansion, in the early 7th century, saw four, perhaps five, graves buried on their own, possibly under mounds, on the N, E, S and W edges of the cemetery. This episode of high investment apparently brought the burial ground to its end.

Contents of the Published Research Report

The report is published by The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, Suffolk.

Wasperton. A Roman, British and Anglo-Saxon Cemetery in Central England

(Woodbridge: Boydell Press)

By Martin Carver, Catherine Hills and Jonathan Scheschkewitz 2009

With contributions by Christopher Bronk Ramsey Esther Cameron, Carolyn Chenery, Gordon Cook, Elizabeth Crowfoot, Jane Evans, Agostino Favaro, Derek Hamilton, Malin Holst, Frances Lee, Peter D Marshall, Janet Montgomery, Catherine Mortimer, Gundala Müldner, David Starley, Penelope Walton Rogers and Hans van der Plicht.

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Chapter 1 is an introduction to the project. Chapter 2 describes the course of the archaeological investigation (1980-85), including the latest programme of analysis which

has led to the present publication (2003-7). The cemetery was excavated in the early 1980s. It was subsequently the subject of a doctoral thesis by Jonathan Scheschkewitz, which included a major review of all the objects in their continental context. This work is not repeated in the definitive publication, but the dating and provenance are brought into service as a contribution to a newly argued and interpreted sequence. Chapter 3 reviews the prehistoric setting and the character of the burial ground, and the rites and spatial distribution of the graves. Chapter 4 summarises the assemblage, both of human remains and artefacts, and incorporates eight newly commissioned studies - on human bone, radiocarbon, stable isotope analysis, metallurgy of copper and iron objects and textiles. In Chapter 5, the burial sequence is deduced from the stratification, alignment and spatial relations of the graves, and then qualified by radiocarbon dating and by the earliest probable date of the assemblages where present. The result is a model sequence in which every burial is included, whether furnished or not. In Chapter 6 this sequence is tested against cemeteries elsewhere, and interpreted in its prehistoric and its historical context.

The research report was prepared on commission by English Heritage, funded by the Aggregates Levy, written by Martin Carver (drawing on research from Jonathan Scheschkewitz and Catherine Hills), and illustrated by Field Archaeology Specialists (York) Ltd, the project being managed by Cecily Spall.

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Location of the Archive (Field Records)

The archaeological archive of the 1980-85 Wasperton excavation project, including the finds and excavation records, is held by the Warwickshire Museum, Warwick, under the general Accession No 1989/106.

For further information contact: Keeper of Archaeology, Warwickshire Museum, Market Place, Warwick, CV34 4SA

Tel 01926 412500

Email museum@warwickshire.gov.uk

Contents of the On-Line Archive (Specialist Reports)

The on-line archive contains the specialist reports commissioned in 2005-7 in support of the published research report (Carver, Hills and Scheschkewitz, 2009). The on-line

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WASPERTON OSTEOLOGICAL AND PALAEOPATHOLOGICAL CATALOGUE

Frances Lee [Rev Jan 07]

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