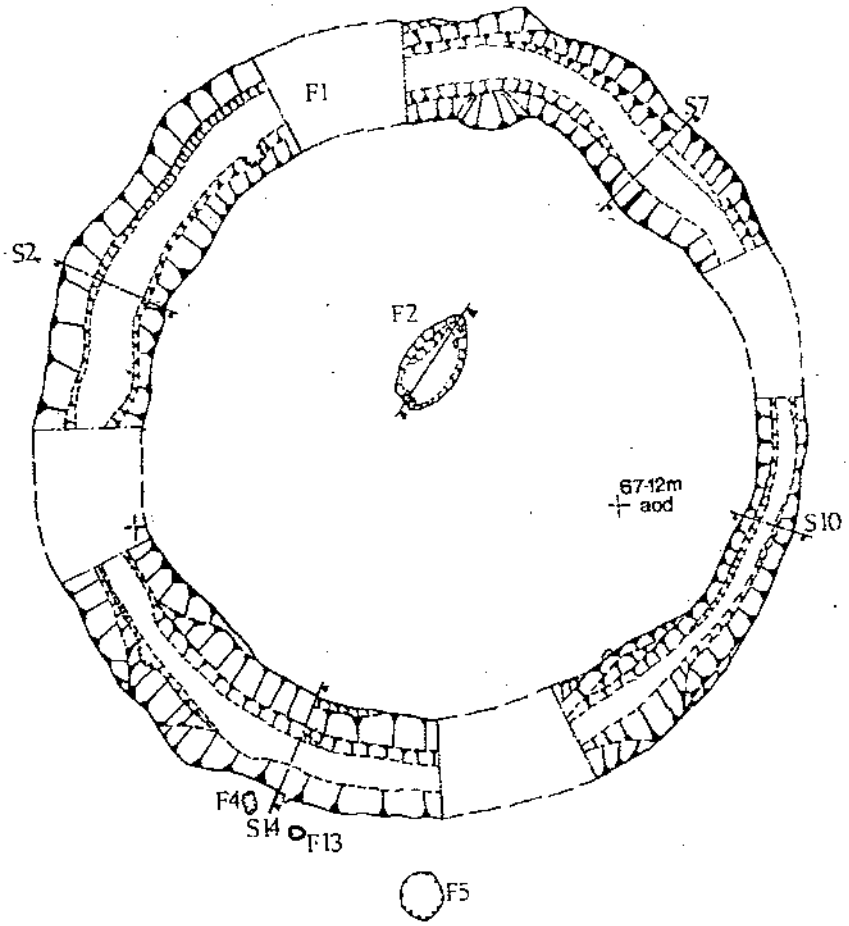
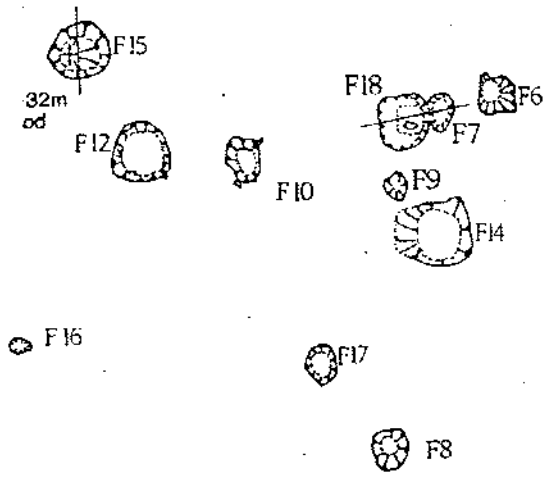
Birmingham University
Field Archaeology Unit

The Excavation of a Bronze Age Ring-Ditch and Cremation Cemetery at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury:





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The Excavation of a Bronze Age Ring-Ditch and Cremation Cemetery at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury: An Interim Report.

by Michael Cooper and Peter Leach

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Summary

The imminent destruction of two possible ring-ditches at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury, by the construction of a retail shopping complex, prompted their excavation in January/February 1990. In the event, only one was located, proving to be the remains of a Bronze Age round barrow, with a small, flat cemetery of cremation burials to the south-west. The project was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, on behalf of Shropshire County Council, and funded by London Retail Investments. The results summarised here are a preliminary interpretation of the outcome of a four-week field project.

Introduction and acknowledgements

The location of two possible ring-ditches at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury was originally established by aerial photography. Photographs taken by Rowan Whimster in 1967 and 1969 identified a series of crop-mark features at NGR SJ492103, including the sites investigated. Some of the features, identified as SA 2208 (Shropshire SMR), were due to be destroyed by the building of a retail park for J. Sainsbury. Excavation was arranged through the Leisure Services Department of Shropshire County Council. Funding by the developer allowed the deployment of a small field team from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit to investigate and record any surviving remains.

For support and assistance, acknowledgement is due in particular to London Retail Investments, and to Mike Watson, Senior Archaeologist, Leisure Services Department, Shropshire County Council. Excavations were directed by Peter Leach and supervised by Gwilym Hughes, with the support of a team comprising Ed Newton, George Luke, Richard Turnbull, John Dalton and Michael Cooper. Figures and illustrations were provided by John Dalton.

The Site

The sites investigated were located on the gentle south slope of a minor tributary stream flowing northwards into the Rea Brook (Figs 1a and 1b). The Rea Brook, flowing from west to east, is a tributary of the River Severn. The brook, actually a small river, is flanked by, and dissects, terrace and fluvio-glacial deposits of sand and gravel. The site itself lies on these drift deposits on the third terrace of the River Severn, at *c*.65m AOD. A flanking hill-ridge, rising gradually to the south, reaches its highest point at Sharpstones Hill. This ridge has a solid geology of hard-weathering Pre-Cambrian rock, forming an outlying projection of the Longmyndian formation to the west. The drift deposits overlie a band of Carboniferous Coal Beds, mined locally for coal until early this century.

Evidence for earlier exploitation of the Rea Valley and its environs comes from both cropmarks and excavation. Excavations on Sharpstones Hill between 1965-1971 (Barker, Haldon and Jenks forthcoming) revealed multi-period occupations, from Neolithic to Roman, which included two ring-ditches and cremation burials. These features were thought to date to the Bronze Age. Two palstaves and a trunnion chisel, of Mid- to Late-Bronze-Age date had previously been found at Meole Brace, provenance uncertain (Stanford 1980, 75). An unexcavated, double ring-ditch cropmark at SJ 495100 is in the immediate vicinity of the site reported on here, along with a multiple-ditched, sub-rectangular enclosure (Barker, Haldon and Jenks forthcoming). Concurrent with excavation of the present site, BUFAU was examining a Roman-period linear settlement flanking a cobbled road, less than a mile away to the south towards Bayston Hill.

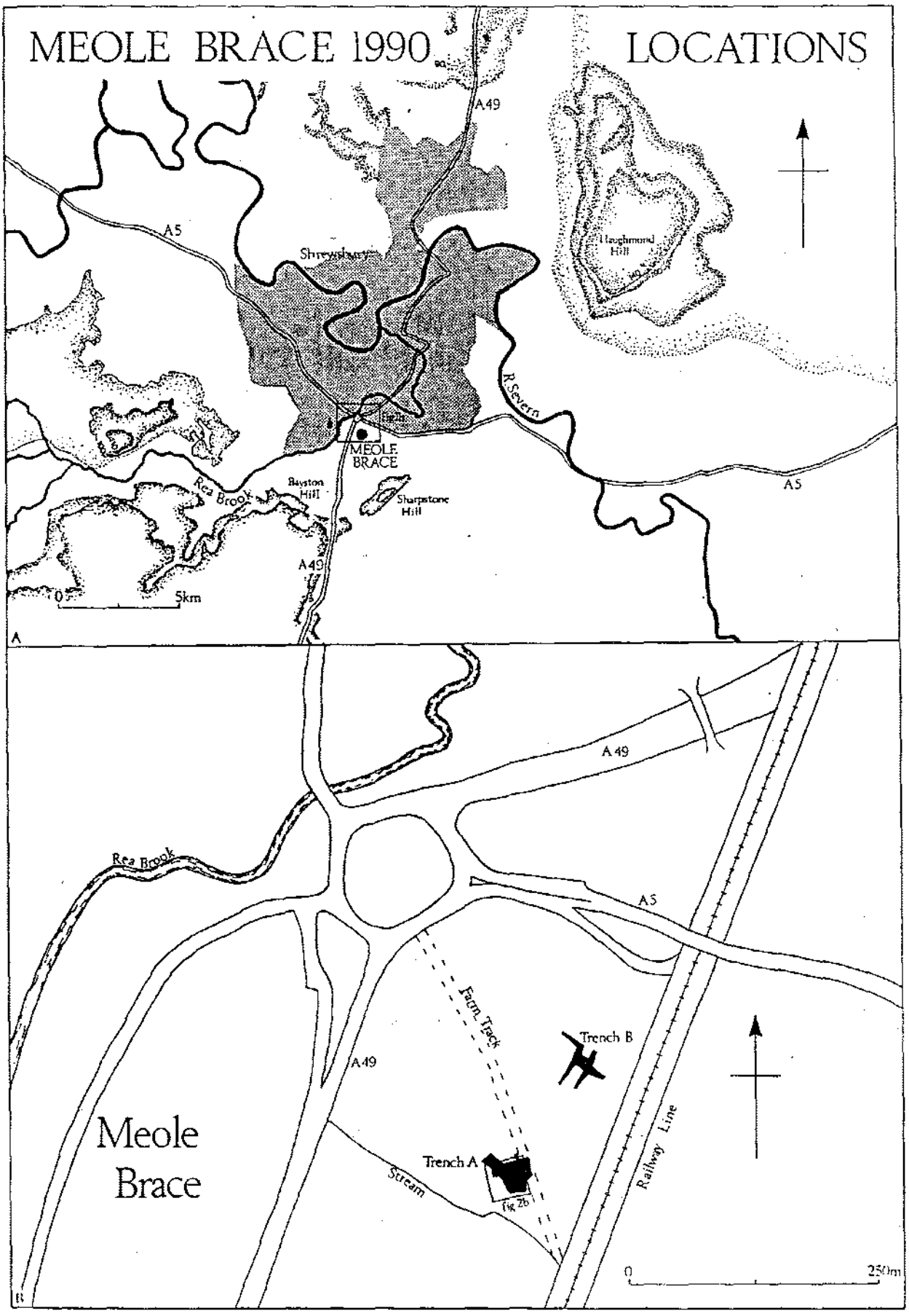
MEOLE BRACE 1990 LOCATIONS
A49
A5
Shrewsbury
Haughmond Hill
R. Severn
Fig 2a
MEOLE BRACE
Bayston Hill
Rea Brook
Sharpstone Hill
A49
A5
0
5km
A
A49
Rea Brook
A5
Farm Track
Trench B
A49
Meole Brace
Trench A
Fig 2b
Stream
Railway Line
0
250m
B

FIGURE 1

The central Severn valley river-system exhibits a wealth of cropmark evidence. Ring-ditch cropmarks are especially common and the Rea Brook valley contains a concentration of such features (Watson, forthcoming). Elsewhere in Shropshire, ring-ditches and cremation cemeteries have been excavated at Bromfield near Ludlow, where the former were recognised as the remains of denuded Bronze-Age barrows (Stanford 1980 and 1982; Leach 1989).

The Excavation

The location of the two suspected ring-ditch features present in the redevelopment area was established by linear measurement from modern features identifiable on the aerial-photograph. The southernmost site, adjacent to a former trackway, was designated Trench A and an initial area of 630 square metres was mechanically stripped to remove the topsoil. Trench B, to the north, was initially machined in a series of transects, the converging point of which was opened up as an irregular rectangle (see Fig.1b). This area totalled 380 square metres. Both sites were further cleaned using shovels and hoes. Identifiable features were recorded, drawn and photographed prior to excavation.

Trench B

Further cleaning in Trench B yielded no trace of a circular feature, and only two linear features of suspected man-made origin. These were sample-sectioned and proved to be very shallow, with depths of less than 0.05 metres, and indistinct edge definition. No dating evidence was derived from these features, but they may correspond to post-Medieval field boundaries visible on aerial photographs.

Trench A

In Trench A a prominent ring-shaped band of brown silt, *c.*16m in diameter, was defined within a truncated horizon of the natural gravels, and roughly central to this was an oval feature, F2. On its north-east side the ring was partially obscured by a relatively modern farm-trackway. Outside of the ditch circuit, to the west, several small circular features with dark fills were identified. It was thought that these features could be part of a cluster or linear arrangement of cremation graves, so a further area of 225 square metres was machine-stripped and cleaned. The farm trackway encroaching on the ring-ditch was removed at the same time. The extra area cleared yielded further circular features, bringing the total of these to fourteen (see Fig.2).

The ditch was divided into sixteen sections of *c.*3 metres, of which four were left unexcavated. Two ditch segments were sectioned longitudinally to further examine the ditch fills. Samples were taken from principal layers and particular deposits. The small features beyond the ditch and the central one (F2) were first excavated and recorded in half section. The suspected cremations were substantially sampled for bone and charred organic material, and for the purpose of radiocarbon assay, before their total excavation. The central feature (F2) had samples taken from discrete fills.

Results

The ring-ditch (F1) was shown in excavation to be an irregular circle with an approximate diameter of 16 metres. The basal form of the ditch, either flat-bottomed or showing a U-shaped profile, was steep sided and had an average width of 0.80 metres. The ditch was narrower in the southern quadrant, but the basal width remained fairly constant. The upper ditch sides were more gently sloping with a steeper incline on the outer edge of the cut. There was a maximum upper width of 2.5 metres, where the ditch was 0.75 metres deep. On the south side the depth diminished to 0.30 metres, probably the result of differential erosion. Two principal fills were identified around the entire ditch circuit. Underneath the upper fill of sandy-silt (1004) was a basal primary fill of very large pebbles and cobbles (1019) with charcoal flecks. There were indications that the ditch had originally been dug in a series of short, straight-sided segments rather than as a continuous curve.

A small quantity of very abraded coarse pottery was recovered from the primary fill (1019). One 3metre segment to the south-west contained a layer of dark-brown, stony silt with internal lenses of darker soil and charcoal fragments (1020). This layer (beneath 1004) spread down over the outer lip and sides of the ditch to a more dense layer of charcoal (1021) which overlay the

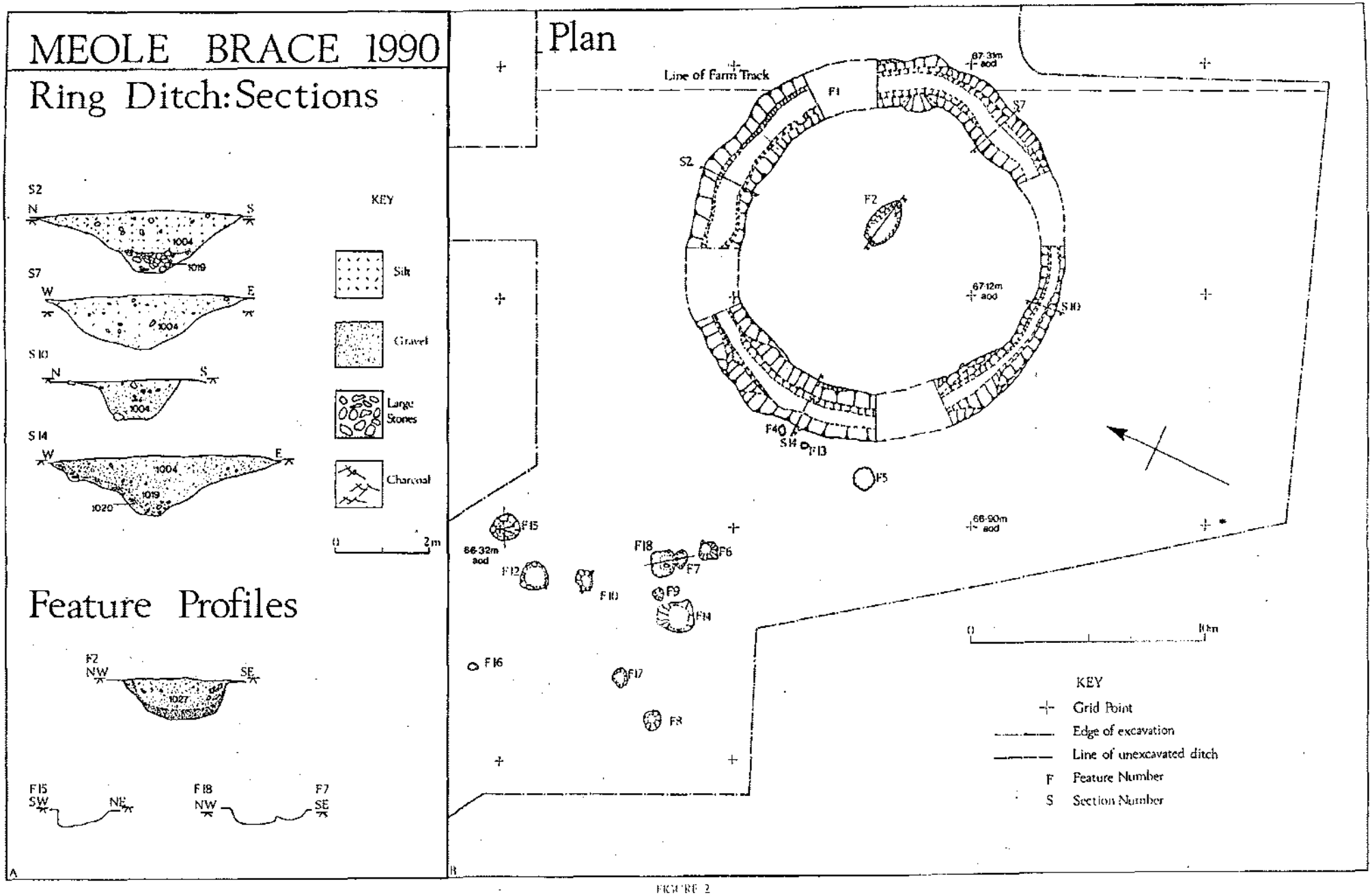
MEOLE BRACE 1990
Ring Ditch: Sections
S2
N
S
1004
1019
S7
W
E
1004
S10
N
S
1004
S14
W
E
1004
1019
1020
KEY
Silt
Gravel
Large Stones
Charcoal
0
2m
Feature Profiles
F2
NW
SE
1027
F15
SW
NE
F18
NW
F7
SE
A
Plan
Line of Farm Track
F1
S7
S2
F2
67·12m aod
S10
F40
S14
F13
F5
F15
66·32m aod
F18
F6
F12
F7
F10
F9
F14
F16
F17
F8
66·90m aod
0
10m
KEY
Grid Point
Edge of excavation
Line of unexcavated ditch
F Feature Number
S Section Number
B

FIGURE 2

basal rubble (1019) (see Fig. 2 and S14). At this point on the ditch circuit there were two small external features (F4 and F13). Both features were very shallow (0.07 metres and 0.14 metres respectively) and yielded no pottery. In F4 burnt stones were concentrated on the western side of this small (*c*.0.40 metres diameter) feature, along with charcoal flecks (1007). F4 and F13 were encompassed by a deposit which may have been contiguous with the layer of fill (1020), which spread down into the adjacent segment of the ring-ditch (F1). The small, vertical-sided cut (F13) contained a very dark grey soil deposit, with much ash and charcoal (1003).

The central pit (F2) proved to be sterile of finds. It was cut to a depth of 0.40 metres, with very steep sides and a flat base cut into sand. Its two fills (1027 and 1028) were divided longitudinally on the surface, however, upon excavation, one (1028) was proved to underlie the other (see Fig.2, F2) and thus 1027 is interpreted as a primary fill of redeposited gravel.

The postulated cremation pits to the west of the ditch generally exhibited a flat-based, bowl shape. They averaged 0.70 metres in diameter and 0.16 metres in depth. Eight pits yielded pottery but all had in common charcoal, 'ashy' soil deposits and burnt stone. Cremated bone flecks were noticed in two pits (F8 and F9), and more bone may be identified when the samples taken are examined. Two pits (F18 and F7) abutted and formed a 'lobed' shape, with evidence for one (F7) cutting the other. A further pit (F15) with a deeper circular impression, off-centre, was possibly a post setting. Pit F12 yielded the largest fragments of pottery, some high up in the fill, but the majority lying on the pit base. The general disposition of the large fragments suggested to the excavator that the pot had been broken prior to burial, possibly *in situ*. Only a preliminary investigation of the pottery has so far been undertaken, but stylistically it should date from the Early Bronze Age – Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 BC).

The Pottery

Although no detailed topological or analytical investigation of the pottery has yet taken place, some preliminary description is necessary. Firstly, of the ten contexts (including the eight pits) that yielded pottery only five had rim as well as body sherds (F8, F10, F12, F14 and F18), and the content of these five are briefly summarised.

F10 - 1013

A total of 14 sherds. Very coarse with large quartz inclusions. Sandy, grey - light grey/brown, fabric, buff-coloured surface. Heavy rim moulding with whipped cord impression on inside bevel. Plaited cord decoration on body. Pot possibly 100mm. diameter.

F18 - 1006

A total of 7 sherds, one basal. Large quartz inclusions, grey fabric, buff/brick-red surface. Fingernail impressed decoration inside bevel of heavy rim. Deep cavetto zone, body with plaited cord impressed decoration. Possibly an Enlarged Food Vessel of approximately 250mm.diameter. One sherd may be from another pot, fabric less coarse with smaller quartz inclusions.

F8 - 1024

A total of 6 sherds, small quartz inclusions, sandy, buff/grey fabric, red/orange surface. No decoration.

F14 - 1014

More than 20 sherds. Very coarse grey fabric, light buff/yellow surface. Whipped cord impressions on body sherds,stab-and-drag decoration on rim, inside and out. Pot possibly 160mm. diameter.

F12 - 1023

More than 50 sherds. Large quartz inclusions, sandy buff/grey fabric throughout. Deep cavetto zone, heavy moulded rim. Possibly bipartite form Enlarged Food Vessel, over 200mm high. Whipped cord impression over whole body (no basal sherds). Cordons in zig-zag panels on belly of pot (Fig.3).

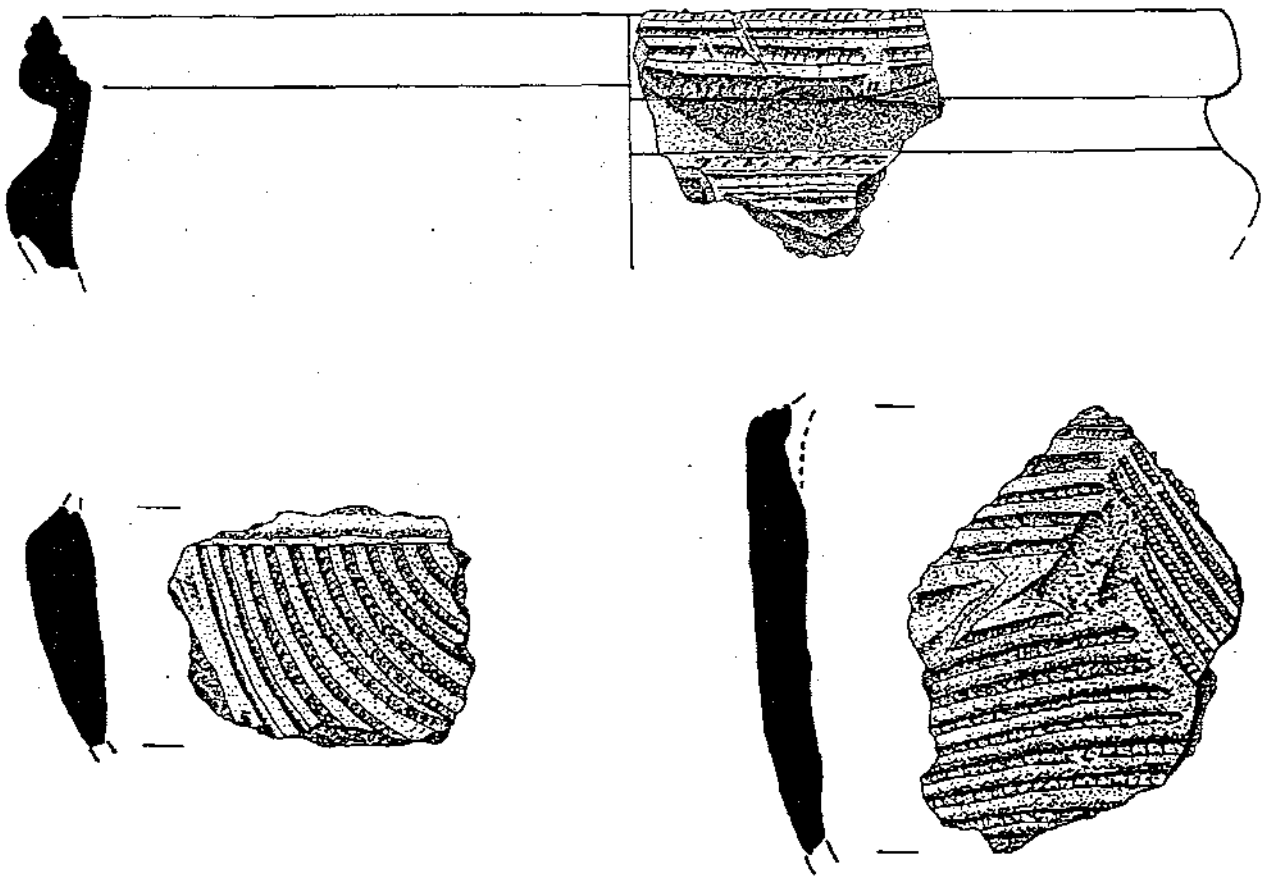

FIGURE 3

Interpretation

In Area B the trenches proved to be almost sterile of archaeological features, despite their location to investigate a potential ring-ditch. It could be argued that the trenches had simply missed the cropmark, however some care was taken in their location based upon the evidence of air photographs, and features surviving on the ground. In view of this, and the somewhat indeterminate and poorly-defined cropmark evidence on available photographic sources, a ring-ditch feature of human origin can now be discounted in this area. Some possible field boundaries were however located, while other cropmark features can probably be attributed to natural or geological phenomena.

Discussion of Trench A must begin by defining whether the ring-ditch represented a ploughed-out barrow. Locationally, it would have been positioned upon ground marginally higher than its surroundings, a fairly prominent spur within the undulating fluvio-glacial gravels. All the other features, except perhaps F2, seem to cluster in relation to something prominent and visible at the time of the cutting of the pits. These pits also respect the area bounded by the ditch. There is no evidence for any other upstanding structures, and it is reasonable to assume that the ring-ditch represents the quarry ditch for a now-vanished barrow mound. Both the ditch and pits show varying degrees of truncation. All above-ground features of the barrow would have been removed by plough action, or, perhaps, by deliberate removal for agricultural reasons. Very few upstanding barrows remain in the region, and apparently none upon the Severn flood-plain gravels.

The ditch sections suggest greater truncation on the southern side (see Fig.2 and sections), where the upper, more oblique-angled profile of the northern sections is lost. Weathering produced a similar 'trumpet-shaped' profile at the Overton Down Experimental Earthwork, within a few years (Jewell and Dimbleby 1966). This weathering of the upper edges suggests that the lower part of the surviving ditch profile is a better representation of its original form, which appears to have been U-shaped. There is also a tendency for the outer edge of the ditch to be steeper than the inner edge (see Fig 2). It is difficult to see how weathering could have produced such a profile, and the 'skewing' was possibly the result of the original excavation. The upper ditch fill (1004) varied in its composition, becoming progressively less silty and more gravelly from north to south (see sections). This perhaps reflects the naturally variable geological drift. The primary fill was mainly composed of large stones, some fairly angular. Work at Overton Down (*op. cit.*) suggests that this is an artefact of weathering of the ditch sides. Possibly in this instance the quantity of stones shows weathering from the barrow as well.

In plan, the ditch seems to have been dug in a chordate fashion as eight separate conjoined sections (see Fig.2), presumably marked out from a central point. By simple calculation it is postulated that the volume of spoil derived from the original ditch could have provided a mound over 4 metres high, covering the entire inner area. It is hard to imagine how else such a large volume of spoil could have been utilised; the features F4, F5 and F13 to the south-west argue against an exterior bank for example.

From its position it was hoped that F2 would prove to be a primary burial under the former barrow. In the event the sterility of the feature could be explicable as the later robbing of a grave-pit. The primary fill (1028) could be a remnant of original backfill cut into from the side by a robber pit, represented now by the backfill (1027). If this interpretation is correct, all evidence of a central burial would have been lost.

The small pit features located to the south-west of the ring-ditch were very shallow. Excluding F4, F13 and F5, which were locationally near the ditch and not part of the discrete cluster, only three pits failed to yield some pottery (F6, F15 and F16). The generally low frequency of potsherds in pits, and a lack of relatively complete vessels (except that in F12), could be a product of truncation and plough disturbance of the cremation burials. It is interesting that the pot in F12 seems to lack base sherds, perhaps having been 'sliced' off an inverted pot. However, pits with or without

pottery appeared to have received their contents - charcoal, dark ashy soil and burnt stone, as well as pottery – from elsewhere, not as material burnt *in situ*. Possibly this represents the deposition of materials from pyres.

The large sherds of pottery in F12, representing c.50% of an Enlarged Food Vessel, suggest deposition of one formerly complete pot, albeit perhaps smashed upon burial. Elsewhere, the smaller number of pottery fragments within features could indicate a token inclusion of sherds. In some cases fragments from more than one vessel fabric appear to be present. Whether or not the cremation burial deposits were tipped directly into the pits or enclosed within containers, now perished, is difficult to determine. No other artefacts were recovered, except for one flint waste flake from the upper ditch fill (1004), and very little cremated bone had survived in the acid soil environment.

There was no real evidence forstructures. Some pits and features could have held posts (see F15), but there is no suggestive coherence in the arrangement of the cremation pits or other features to produce structures.

Finally, it must be asked whether there are any demonstrable relationships between the pits and the ring-ditch. Unfortunately they cannot be stratigraphically linked. The dark, burnt material (1020 and 1021) recorded as a series of lens-shaped layers entering the ditch from its western edge, does look like a deliberate introduction, possibly to be linked with the pits F4 and F13 . This material overlies the primary weathering rubble and must have been introduced whilst the ditch was virtually unsilted, at a time relatively close to the initial rite of mound construction. It is not possible to link this burning and dumping episode with any of the satellite cremations, but it is probably to be interpreted in a context of religious/ritual observance early in the life of this monument.

Conclusions

The excavation of this Bronze Age funerary monument at Meole Brace has demonstrated and recorded the remains of a truncated and plough-damaged site. The surviving stratigraphic sequences were relatively simple. Organic preservation in the acidic gravel environment was very poor, but carbonised material and a good ceramic sample were recovered. At this preliminary stage of interpretation, prior to sample analysis, detailed pottery investigation and radiocarbon assay, very little more can be concluded. A suspected primary rite, regrettably obliterated by later robbing, was either cremation or inhumation under a barrow. A probable secondary phase resulted in a satellite cremation cemetery involving funerary pyres, and the subsequent deposition of material in small pits.

The Meole Brace ring-ditch and cemetery fits into a local pattern of very similar sites, two of which have already been excavated nearby at Sharpstones Hill (*op. cit.*), while others appear to be represented as cropmarks. The preparation of a full report on the results of this excavation must be the next objective, the finds and records from which will eventually be deposited in the Shrewsbury Borough Museum.

M.E. Cooper and P.J. Leach.
B.U.F.A.U.,
March 1990.

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