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**The excavation of a double ring ditch at
Meole Brace, Shrewsbury (SA 14):
interim report on 1994 season**

by

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The excavation of a double ring ditch at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury (SA 14): interim report on 1994 season

By Gwilym Hughes

Introduction

The following report outlines the results of the first season of the excavation of a double ring ditch (Site II) at Meole Brace (SA14) on the southern outskirts of Shrewsbury (Fig. 1). The work was undertaken by the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham in June 1994 as part of the Department's training excavation.

The site was first detected as a cropmark on aerial photographs. A plot by Arnold Baker suggested that the outer ditch was approximately 40m in diameter and the inner ditch approximately 30m in diameter. A second ring ditch (Site I), approximately 400m to the northeast, was excavated in 1990 prior to the development of a retail complex (Hughes and Woodward in press). In this instance, a single ditch surrounded a centrally placed pit which may have contained an inhumation burial. A Middle to Late Neolithic date for this monument was suggested by radiocarbon dates for charcoal from the ditch fill and from a group of nearby pits. These pits also contained fragments of Mortlake Ware bowls.

Objectives

The work was undertaken as part of a broader examination of the Late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age landscape of the Shropshire part of the upper Severn valley. Several distinct objectives were highlighted before the commencement of the work:

- 1 To examine the morphology and chronology of the ring ditches and any associated features in order to obtain information relevant to contemporary ritual and mortuary practice. The southern site at Meole Brace appeared to provide an excellent opportunity for testing the funerary sequence suggested by contemporary sites. Similar excavated examples of barrows with more than one ditch circuit have frequently indicated an enlargement of the barrow mound accompanied by a change in funerary practice (eg at Four Crosses, Powys (Warrilow *et al* 1986)). Such a potential stratigraphic sequence is comparatively rare in the upper Severn valley.
- 2 To compare these characteristics with other excavated examples in order to establish the local and regional context for the site. In particular Site I at Meole Brace and the Sharpstones Hill sites (Barker *et al* 1991) provide an immediate local context.
- 3 To examine and analyse any ceramic or lithic assemblages recovered in relation to questions of chronology and socio-economic and ritual implications. The important assemblage of Late Neolithic pottery from Site I at Meole Brace demonstrates the local potential for the recovery of ceramics. It seems likely that at least one of the Mortlake bowls had been carefully placed in a pit prior to being backfilled. This apparent example of deliberate deposition near a funerary monument may have significant ritual implications.
- 4 To examine the evidence for the contemporary environment and the exploitation of wild and domestic plant species. A significant assemblage of charred plant remains was collected and analysed during the recent excavations of ring ditches at Bromfield (de Rouffignac in press). These have indicated the consumption and deposition of both domestic grain species and collected plants (including pignut

tubers and hazelnuts). The contexts of some of these plant remains suggests a possible ritual association.

Method

Evaluation Phase - An area, 80m x 60m, was initially defined incorporating the slightly differing plots of the cropmark prepared by Arnold Baker and Rowan Whimster. 75% of this area was surveyed using a gradiometer as a graduate student project. A single, east-west orientated, trial trench, 20m x 1.5m, was located across the western side of the defined area. It formed an eastern extension to a trench excavated by the Shropshire County Council Archaeology Unit. The ploughsoil, up to 0.2m deep, was removed by machine. The underlying gravel was cleaned by hand in order to facilitate the definition of any visible archaeological features. This phase of the work confirmed the location of the two ring ditches on the western side of the monument.

Excavation phase - An octagonal area, 60m across, was defined around the area of the ring ditches. The investigation was confined to the southeast quadrant (Fig 2, Trench C) and transects in the northwest quadrant (Fig 2, Trenches A and B).

Two, 1m wide, transects were initially hand excavated through the ploughsoil (0.2-0.25m deep), crossing at the central point of the inner ring ditch. Close attention was paid to the possible survival of any traces of disturbed material from cremations or pyres that might have survived in the ploughsoil. Samples of the ploughsoil were sieved for the recovery of artefactual evidence. No informative data was produced during this process. Consequently, the remainder of the ploughsoil from the southeast quadrant was removed by machine.

The underlying deposits and gravels, in the exposed area, were cleaned using hoes, yard brooms and trowels in order to facilitate the definition of archaeological features. Several sections of the ring ditches were excavated and samples of each identified fill was sieved for the recovery of small artefacts. Samples were collected from a number of archaeological contexts for the recovery of environmental information, in particular charred plant remains.

Results (Fig 2)

Inner ring ditch (F1) - The inner ring ditch was 28.5m across (from outer lip to outer lip). Three sections, each 1.5m wide, were excavated through this feature on the east, south and west sides. No trace of the inner ring ditch could be identified within the northern transect of the excavation. Closer examination of the aerial photograph suggests that the ring ditch might be penannular with an entrance on this north side. This will need to be confirmed by further excavation. The excavated sections indicated that the ditch was up to 2.5m wide and 1m deep and had an inverted bell-shaped profile. The primary fill consisted of rounded stones and a clayey silt. The upper fills were siltier with fewer stones. The only finds were a few fragments of worked flint.

Outer ring ditch (F2) - The outer ring ditch was up to 40m in diameter and appeared to form a complete circuit. Its profile was only examined on the northern and western sides. The sloping topography on the north side of the site and the variable nature of the natural sands and gravels made the outer edge of the ring ditch difficult to identify. However, on the western side it was up to 3.5m wide and 1m deep with a similar inverted bell-shaped profile to the inner ring ditch. Similarly, the lower fills were stonier than the upper fills.

Inner gully (F3/F7/1039) - Slight traces of a shallow inner gully were identified within the circuit of the inner ring ditch. This was nowhere more than 0.15m deep. Within western transect it was associated with a possible post holes (F6) 0.4m wide, 0.3m deep with vertical sides and a flat base.

Cobble spread (1010) and internal features - The inner gully surrounded an irregular shaped spread of rounded cobbles covering the central area of the monument. Fragments of cremated bone (1009) were recorded near to the western edge of the excavated quadrant although they did not appear to fill any discernible feature. A band of cobbles was also recorded on the berm formed between the two ring ditches (1037/1038). Fragments from a second cremation were recorded between the two ditches again close to the western edge of the excavated quadrant.

Finds: preliminary report by Lawrence Barfield

Prehistoric

The finds which can be roughly regarded as contemporary with the construction and use of the barrow comprised two fragments of prehistoric pottery and 28 struck flakes and other flint artefacts.

One prehistoric sherd is of a coarse fabric and is decorated with two circular impressions. The other is too small and fragmentary for comment.

Most of the flint finds comprised waste flakes (debitage). Also present are two thumb nail scrapers and a broken and reworked discoidal scraper, a serrated blade fragment and a small irregular core.

The small decorated sherd is probably to be dated between the Late Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age. The small scrapers are of a type which first appear in the Beaker period and last into the Early Bronze Age.

Roman

A denarius of Caracalla was found during a metal detector survey across the site. It probably relates to the Roman settlement in the southern area of the field (Hughes 1994).

Later and undated

A thin, worn and perforated coin or token was also recovered during the metal detector survey. This is probably of medieval date. An antler or bone point from a small hollow within the inner ditch circle could be prehistoric or more recent in date.

Discussion

Ring ditches form one of the most numerous categories of cropmark feature in the Shropshire part of the upper Severn valley (Whimster 1989; Watson 1991). Such features have generally been considered to be ditches which formerly surrounded the barrow mounds of Early Bronze Age funerary monuments. However, the recent excavation of the ring ditches at Meole Brace and Bromfield suggest that such interpretations may be over simplistic and that such features can exhibit considerable chronological and structural variety (Hughes in press; Hughes *et al* in press).

It is not possible at this stage to determine the stratigraphic sequence of the two ring ditches at Meole Brace, Site II. However, it seems likely that the outer ditch relates to an enlargement of a pre-existing barrow. The cobble spread and traces of cremations hint at a complex funerary sequence. However, again it is not yet possible to relate these features with the ring ditches. The inner gully is particularly interesting. Ring gullies and stake circles are common features of barrows (Ashbee 1960). It has been suggested that they held palisades which may have formed a revetment for the barrow mound. However, it is clear that in some cases these palisades had been dismantled before the mound was constructed. Consequently it seems possible that they may have formed pre-barrow mortuary enclosures.

It is clear that the southern ring ditch at Meole Brace will provide a further contribution to the understanding of Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age funerary practices and associated ritual activity in the West Midlands. Apart from Site I at Meole Brace, comparable sites have been excavated at Sharpstones Hill (Barker *et al* 1991), Bromfield (Stanford 1982 and Hughes *et al* in press), Four Crosses (Warrilow *et al* 1986) and Trelystan (Britnell 1982). In general the local sequence suggests that a round barrow tradition was established during the Middle to Late Neolithic with inhumation burials associated with Peterborough ware or Beaker pottery. The Early Bronze Age appears to display a preference for cremation burial under a mound often associated with Collared Urns or Food Vessels. Later burials appear to be associated with peripheral locations either in the sides of a barrow mound or outside the surrounding ditch. Subsequent funerary activity appears to be associated with flat cemeteries, either enclosed, as at Sharpstones Hill, or unenclosed, as at Bromfield.

Hopefully, the completion of the excavation of the southern ring ditch at Meole Brace will make a further contribution to the ever increasing body of information for this period in the west Midlands.

Acknowledgements

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The excavation of a double ring ditch at Meole Brace 1994-5

The first two seasons of the excavation of a double ring ditch on the southern outskirts of Meole Brace (Shropshire SMR number SA14) were undertaken in June 1994 and June 1995. The site was originally identified from aerial photographs as two concentric cropmarked ditches. The work is being carried out by the University of Birmingham and forms part of a broader examination of the Late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age landscape of the Shropshire part of the upper Severn Valley. A second ring ditch was excavated in the field immediately to the north in 1990 (Hughes and Woodward 1995). This was associated with cluster of nearby pits containing an important group of Neolithic pottery. Both ring ditches are thought to have originally surrounded funerary mounds.

At the southern site, the outer ditch (F2) is approximately 40m in diameter and the inner ditch (F1) approximately 30m in diameter (see figure). The excavation has focused on the south-eastern quadrant of the site (Trench C), although sections have also been excavated across the northern and western sections of the ring ditches (Trenches A and B). There was no trace of the inner ditch in the northern trench suggesting that there might be a causeway at this point. An area of cobbling (1010) has been exposed within the area defined by the inner ring ditch. This maybe the remains of a former ring cairn. Two shallow pits have been defined in the central area of the monument (F8 and F9). Both contained small quantities of cremated bone. Traces of third pit (F10) containing fragments of cremated bone have been recorded on the berm between the two ditches. Further areas of cobbling have been recorded on this berm (1037 and 1038).

A late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date is suggested by the small quantity of worked flint and pottery that has been recovered to date. Approximately 50 struck flakes have been recovered, two thumb-nail scrapers and a broken and reworked discoidal scraper.

Hughes, G and Woodward, A 1995 'A ring ditch and Neolithic pit complex at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society* 70, 1- 22.

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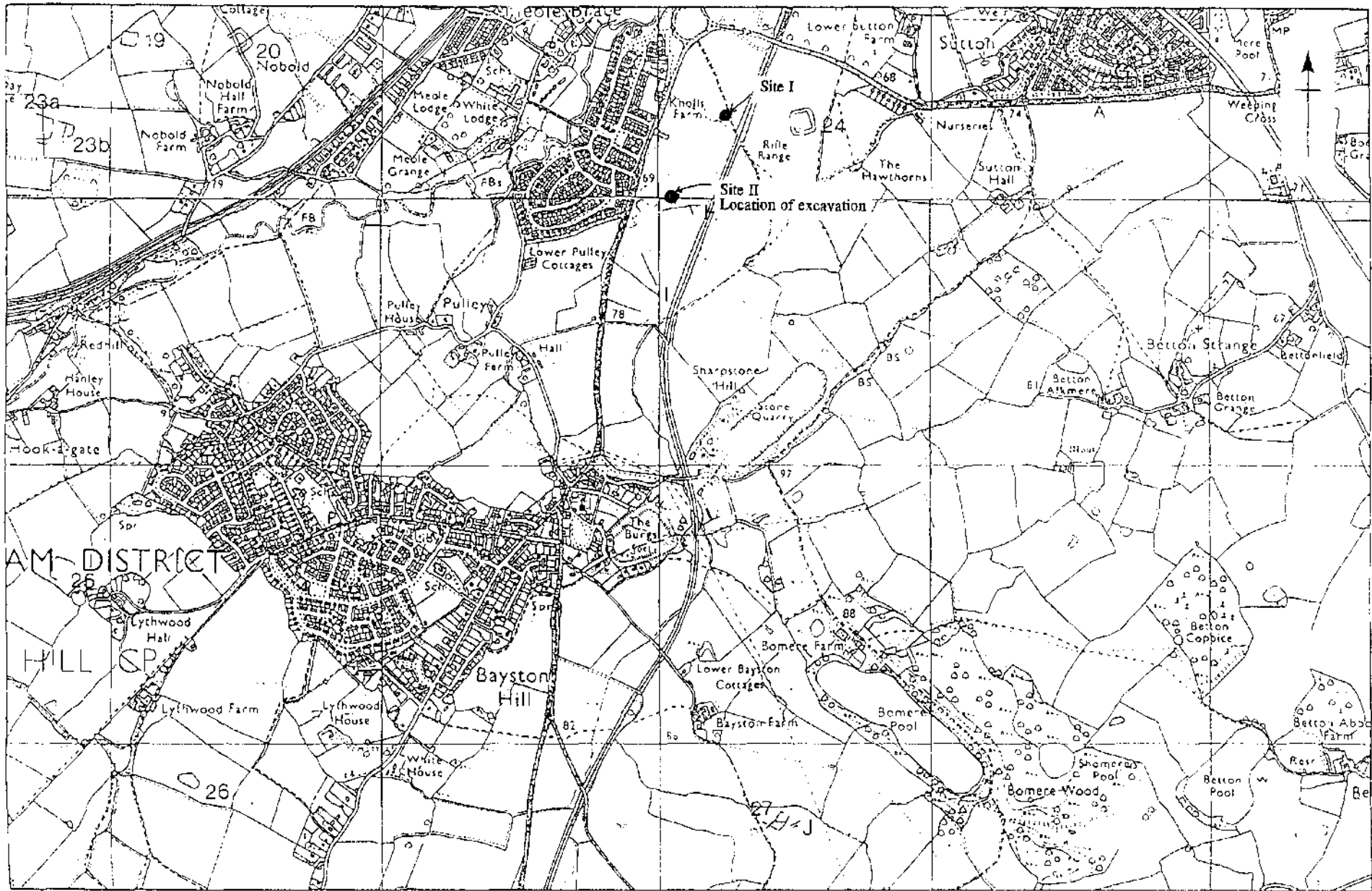


Fig 1

