

AN EARLY MESOLITHIC CEMETERY AT GREYLAKE, SOMERSET, UK

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The Somerset Levels contains numerous islands of hard geology that rise up above the peat and clay deposits of the floodplain. One such island at Greylake, near Othery has produced evidence of the disposal of human remains from three distinct prehistoric periods, the early Mesolithic, the early Bronze Age and the later Bronze Age. The Mesolithic and Beaker material was derived from an old sand quarry in the early 20th century. Dating of the earliest remains to the later 9th millennium BC was conducted recently as part of a project examining the archaeology of the islands. The earliest remains represent unique evidence for an early Mesolithic cemetery on an 'open site' in the UK. Detailed examination of the bones and associated early Mesolithic flint remains is underway and palaeoenvironmental investigation of the surrounding landscape is planned.

INTRODUCTION

The island at Greylake is situated in the central Parrett valley (ST3894 3360) just off the north-east corner of a larger island that contains the settlements of Othery, Middlezoy and Westonzoyland (Figure 1). The kidney shaped island of c.16ha is roughly 700m north-south by just over 300m east-west at its widest southern end. It consists of a significant depth of Burtle Bed sand deposits overlying Mercia mudstone (Hunt and Clark 1983). The island is surrounded by Holocene peat deposits, the top of which have been dated to the later Bronze Age in one location.

At the northern end of the island a small sand quarry operated in the early 20th century, covering an area no greater than approximately 140m by 140m. Numerous finds were retrieved from the quarry by Arthur Bulleid and Stephen Dewar, from Pleistocene fauna to Beaker burials (Bullied and Jackson 1938 and 1941, Gray 1926 and 1928). In 1997 excavations undertaken as part of a

Time Team programme revealed late Bronze Age human remains and artefacts deposited in peat deposits a few metres off the northern end of the island (Bunning 1998) in an area where timber structures of uncertain date had previously been reported (Bullied and Jackson 1941 and Gray 1926). Subsequent small excavations to retrieve samples for preservation *in situ* analysis took place in 2009. Dating and isotopic analysis of the Beaker remains took place in 2005-6 as part of the Europe wide Beaker project (Jay 2006). Dating of the other human remains from the quarry took place in 2011 as part of a 'Lost Islands' project funded by the Somerset Levels Local Action Group and are reported here.

MESOLITHIC BURIALS

Human remains were discovered in Greylake sand quarry on the 1st of June 1928, although there is a suggestion that they had been found during earlier quarrying on the site and had been reinterred in the area being quarried that year (Bullied and Jackson 1938). Harold St George Gray, the curator of the Somerset County Museum, visited the site on the 8th of June and saw five skulls in the quarry shed, two of which he took back to the museum along with some other long bones he collected 'on the ground' 2 feet below the surface of the sand (Gray 1928). The latter still exist in the collection and consist of four tibiae fragments.

A local man, Mr Martins, had taken 'all the best of the long bones' before Gray arrived (Gray 1928) and he seems to have gone back to get the remaining three skulls as well because in 1929 he donated them all to the Blake Museum in Bridgwater. One of the Bridgwater skulls and both the skulls collected by Gray were sent to Sir Arthur Keith of the Royal College of Surgeons but it appears that none were ever returned. They may have been destroyed during bombing of the RCS in World War II and do not appear among the



Figure 1. Location map of Greylake

material that was rescued and transferred to the British Museum.

In 1931 Dina Dobson, the first county archaeologist of Somerset, also sent Sir Arthur Keith an unspecified number of skulls from 'Middlezoy'. Neither these skulls nor any further paperwork about them has yet been found, but the location and date raise the possibility that more than five bodies were discovered, that Mr Martins had already taken his three skulls as well as the best long bones before Gray arrived and that Dina Dobson acquired the three left in the quarry shed by Gray.

During the 1930s a large collection of flint was collected from the quarry by H.S.L. Dewar, a local amateur archaeologist. A much smaller number of flint tools were also recovered by Arthur Bulleid around the same time. Dewar's collection is now in the County Museum and consists of approximately 4,000 flint and Greensand Chert items. Several interim accounts of this collection have appeared in print (Clarke 1933, Wainwright 1960 and Norman 1982 and 2007) but the entire collection has never been

subject to full analysis. The collection appears to date exclusively to the early Mesolithic period and consists of both tools (microliths, microburins, scrapers and an axe) and waste (around 83% of the assemblage) including cores, core trimmings, blades, primary flakes, chips and spalls (Firth and Faxon 2008, 18-19). Full analysis of this assemblage will shortly be completed by Beccy Scott and Andrew Shaw.

Dating and Analysis

The two remaining skulls in the Bridgwater collection and an associated mandible have been examined by Katie Tucker of the University of Winchester. Both are in fairly good condition although there were modern spade marks and the crania remain filled with the compacted sand of the quarry (Figure 2). Skulls E22 and E23 both consisted of the frontal bones, part of both parietals, both temporals, the sphenoid and part of the occipital bone. In both cases the cranial base is completely encased in sand but was probably complete. Part of a metacarpal or clavicle partially encased in the sand was noted in crania E23. There was no evidence for pathology or trauma on either skull.



Figure 2. The two crania after conservation

The crania were both probably of young adult males although it will probably be possible to be more definitive about age and sex once the sand has been removed and the crania conserved. The mandible fragment, which contains three teeth (M1-3), was also probably from a young adult male but could not be associated with either cranium.

Sir Arthur Keith identified the skull sent to him from Bridgwater as a female. His measurements of that skull survive but there is no record of any observations he made on the two skulls sent by Gray.

The four tibiae fragments in the County Museum were briefly examined by Jacqui McKinley. They were all short fragments with modern breaks at the ends and recent damage (presumably during quarrying). They consisted of two right proximal tibiae, one possibly female and one probably male, and two left distal tibiae, also one possibly female and one probably male. The right proximal tibia from the probable male had a platycnemic Index of 61.8.

Rick Schulting is carrying out detailed examination of the human remains, including sampling of the bones for isotope and possibly a DNA analysis. The skulls themselves have been conserved by the Wiltshire Conservation

Laboratory and the sand removed from one cranium. This revealed the presence of two small bones, a phalanx and half a metatarsal (R. Schulting pers comm) which supports the evidence for the burial of more body parts than just the skulls.

Radiocarbon dating of the two crania was undertaken by Dr Fiona Petchey of Waikato University as part of the ‘Lost Islands of Somerset’ project funded by Somerset County Council, Leader, Defra, SWRDA and the European Union. Subsequent dating was attempted for the tibiae and the mandible at the Oxford University Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit. The tibiae lacked enough collagen to provide a result but the mandible was successfully dated. The results are shown in Table 1. One of the skulls is now on display in the Blake Museum, Bridgwater.

Significance of the finds

The presence of at least five individuals and the mention of associated long bones suggest that complete bodies were being buried on the sand island. Both males and females appear to be present. The flint remains suggest that the island was also a focus for activities other than burial.

The setting of the cemetery and the association with a significant flint collection are unique in the British Mesolithic as the recent review clearly demonstrates (Meiklejohn *et al* 2011). This limited evidence from one site provides a suggestion that the long-standing dominance of cave sites may be obscuring a less archaeologically visible type of Mesolithic burial practice.

The date of the Greylake burials is indistinguishable from dates from human remains from Aveline’s Hole and Gough’s Cave on the Mendip hills just 15 miles to the north. This suggests that the disposal of human remains in caves was taking place at the same time as open air burial in a nearby locality. Perhaps open air

Date (BP)	Number	Burial	δ13C	δ15N	Cal BC
9118 +/- 37	Wk-30930	E22	-19.40	9.05	8445-8360 (19.2%) 8355-8260 (76.2%)
9134 +/- 37	Wk- 30931	E23	-20.41	9.59	8460-8275
9170 +/- 40	OxA -25666	mandible	-18.76		8534-8515 (3.2%) 8481-8288 (92.2%)

Table 1. Radiocarbon dating of Mesolithic bones from Greylake

cemeteries were the norm for the Mesolithic where no caves were located nearby.

The Mesolithic interface of the island with the surrounding floodplain must still be deeply buried under later Holocene deposits. This raises the possibility that Mesolithic waterlogged evidence may be present. Palaeoenvironmental investigation of the adjacent Holocene deposits to determine the environmental setting of the site will be carried out by Dr. Keith Wilkinson as part of the project. Several other islands of hard geology in the Somerset floodplain have produced Mesolithic flint assemblages, raising the possibility that this site type might not be as uncommon as it currently appears.

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