4
Northamptonshire in the First Millennium BC

ALEXANDER (SANDY) KIDD

INTRODUCTION

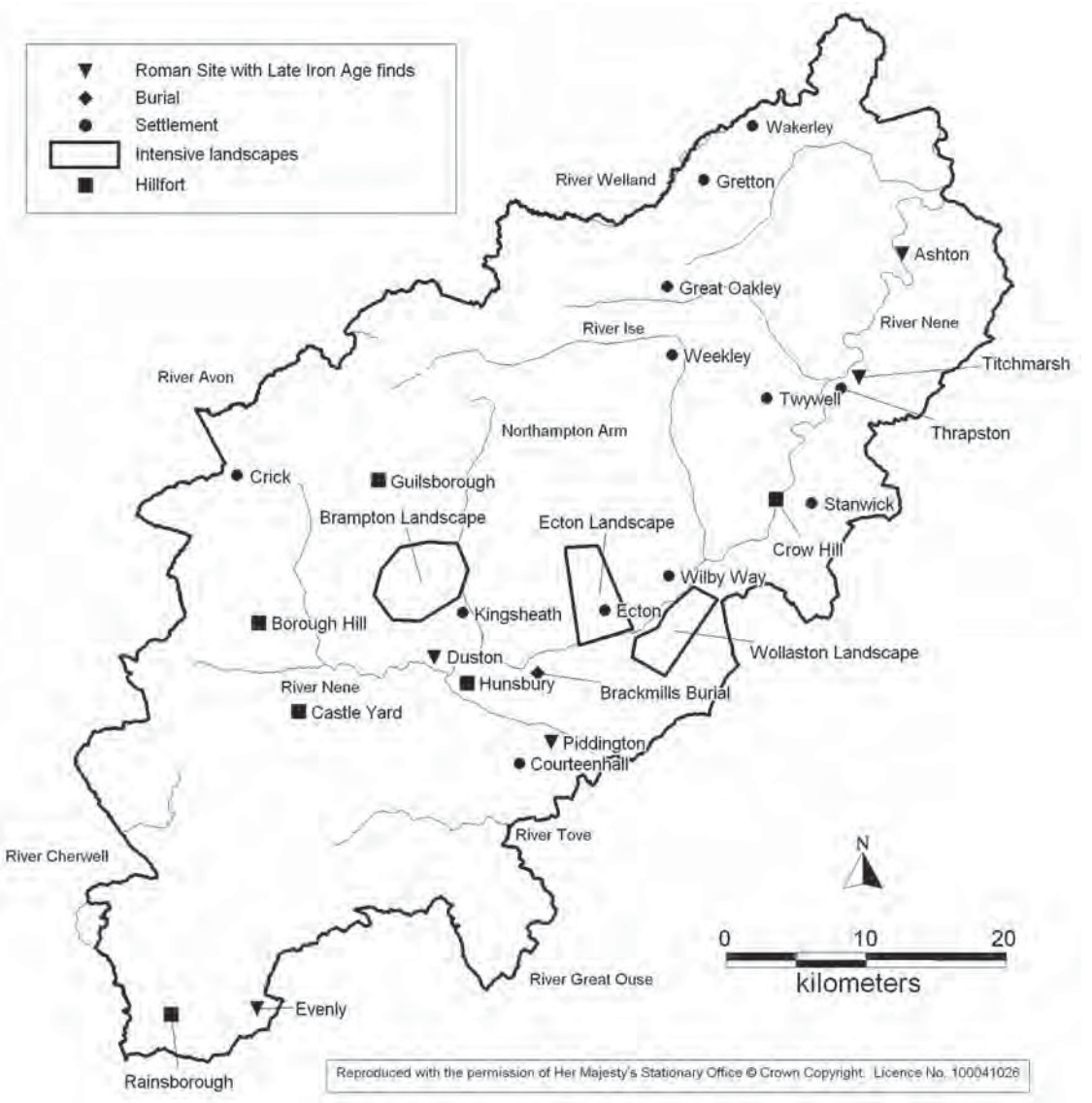
As with much of lowland England, the first millennium BC in Northamptonshire is characterised by the introduction of iron working between 800 BC and 600 BC. There is also evidence for large-scale organisation of the landscape related to the expansion of agricultural production, the construction of hill forts and other defended sites and, at least from the Middle Iron Age onwards, numerous domestic settlements. There is a considerable increase in archaeological evidence from the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age to the Late Iron Age, which is suggestive of major population growth. Distinct formal ceremonial and burial sites are very rare but there are signs of ritual activity on 'domestic' settlements. Towards the end of the Iron Age, Northamptonshire stood on the periphery of a zone of rapid social change in South Eastern England, which was heavily influenced by continental contacts. However, the Roman conquest itself did not cause widespread upheavals with most Late Iron Age sites continuing to be occupied well into the Romano-British period.

The physical geography of Northamptonshire was a significant factor influencing patterns of Iron Age inhabitation. The river valley gravels with their swathes of light free-draining soils and easy access to water had been favoured locations since the Neolithic and occupation continued to intensify. Other sizeable areas of light soils were provided by the Northampton Sands, which outcrop over large areas around Northampton and Corby, and by Jurassic limestone found primarily in the extreme southwest and northeast of the county. In contrast, glacial deposits dominate the higher ground in the southern, western and central parts of Northamptonshire, principally boulder clay that would have been more difficult to cultivate. Substantial areas of the clay lands were wooded in the Middle Ages and would presumably have been amongst the last areas to face clearance in prehistory, although the rate and extent of prehistoric woodland clearance is poorly understood. The presence of outcrops of iron-rich ores in the Rockingham Forest area will have been a new factor affecting local communities during the first millennium BC. To the north-east of the modern county lay the wetlands of the Fens, an area of considerable importance in the later Bronze Age as indicated by the extensive field systems found around the Fen edges and the impressive ritual centre at Flag Fen.

Climate is another external influence to be considered, although its significance is debatable. It is generally held that the British climate deteriorated at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC with the onset of colder and wetter conditions, which did not ameliorate until the middle of the millennium. In the Fens there is evidence of increasing wetness with marine transgression in the north and extensive freshwater wetland in the south. Although there is evidence from elsewhere in Britain for a retreat from uplands and wetlands at this time, the impacts of climate change on Northamptonshire are less easy to demonstrate. It seems possible that the increasing marginality of life in Britain's uplands and wetlands may have increased the attractiveness of, and pressure upon, the resources of Northamptonshire whilst it has been suggested that climate change may be a factor behind a major shift from pastoral to mixed farming in the Early Iron Age (Pryor 1998).

THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE

In order to understand the basis for archaeological interpretations it is necessary to briefly review the sources of evidence for this period along with their strengths and limitations. In 1999 the Northamptonshire Sites and Monuments Record contains details of 520 Iron Age sites which comprise 7.3% of all entries reflecting the county's strong tradition of Iron Age research from the 1960s up to the present day. Aerial survey, fieldwalking, geophysical survey, earthwork survey, metal-detecting and excavation have all



4.1 Iron Age sites in Northamptonshire

made significant and distinctive contributions to Northamptonshire's later prehistoric archaeological record but each has its own biases and limitations. Also, it must always be remembered that many sites have been destroyed without record whilst even more are as yet undiscovered – interpretations based on such incomplete knowledge must necessarily be somewhat tentative and provisional.

Few Iron Age sites survive as upstanding field monuments in Northamptonshire due to the destruction wrought primarily by medieval and modern ploughing. The Royal Commission for Historic Monuments has surveyed the surviving earthworks of Northamptonshire's major defended sites but sadly these are mostly heavily denuded. Other monuments survive only as isolated examples in woodland such as the undated Egg Rings enclosure in Salcey Forest, a short stretch of a triple ditch

system at 'The Larches', Stowe-Nine-Churches and a slight earthwork ditch and bank in former heath land at Harlestone Firs which appears to be a continuation of an adjacent pit alignment cropmark. Taken in isolation, these few visible monuments gave previous generations of archaeologists a false picture of Iron Age Northamptonshire as being densely wooded and sparsely populated.

Aerial survey provides a means of detecting buried sites through patterns of differential crop growth – in dry weather a buried ditch or pit retains moisture enabling the crops above it to grow more vigorously thus appearing as a dark mark. A long-term programme of aerial survey undertaken by Glenn Foard has provided invaluable coverage of permeable geologies under arable cultivation but results are patchy on clay lands (where soils tend to retain moisture) and the technique is of little value in areas of permanent pasture and woodland. Combining information from many photographs can allow extensive landscapes to be mapped thus placing more localised ground investigations into a wider context.

Structured fieldwalking to recover pottery from ploughed fields has been widely undertaken in Northamptonshire by both professionals and amateurs, although unfortunately few results have yet been fully published. The most notable examples are the Brigstock Survey (Foster, 1988 and 1998-9), the Raunds Area Survey (Parry, forthcoming) and the work of David Hall and Paul Martin. However, the technique has its limitations being restricted to arable land and affected by the friability of Iron Age pottery which tends to break down under prolonged ploughing making some sites effectively undetectable.

The limitations of fieldwalking mean that geophysical survey is now usually the technique of first preference for large-scale developer-funded surveys. Magnetometer survey has proved particularly effective at detecting the often substantial pits and ditches

4.2 The Iron Age hillfort at Crow Hill, Irthlingborough, as discovered by aerial photography in 1986. The hillfort ditch is revealed as a broad dark band. Reproduced by permission of the historic Environment Team © Northamptonshire County Council

of Middle and Late Iron Age settlements; although less substantial sites can be problematic targets.

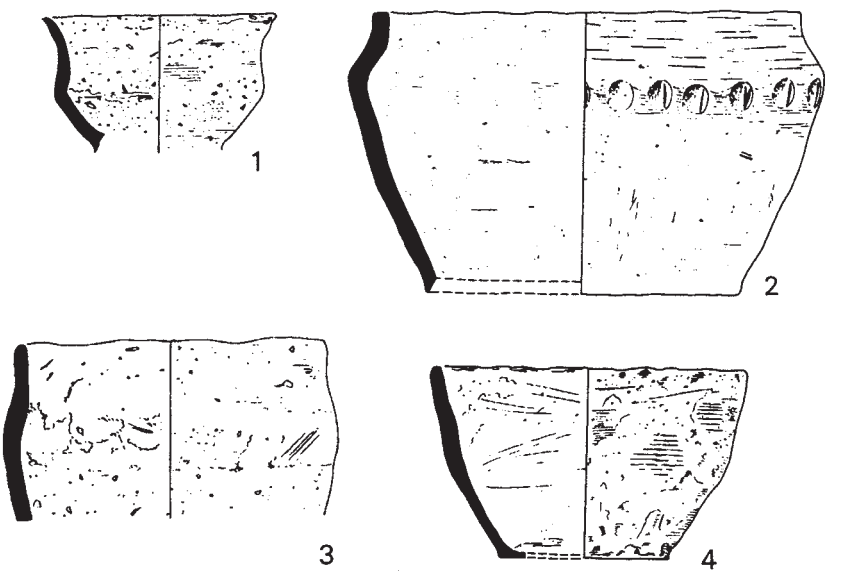
Properly recorded amateur metal detecting has the potential to enhance our understanding of this period, particularly with respect to Late Iron Age coinage (e.g. Curteis, 1996a and 1997) and Late Bronze Age metalwork. However, ensuring proper recording and reporting presents a continuing challenge.

Many archaeological excavations have taken place in advance of development beginning in the 1960s but with a gathering of both pace and scale in the 1990s under the influence of recent planning legislation. Excavations provide a wealth of detailed data unobtainable by other methods such as detailed dateable site plans, stratified artefacts and a wide range of environmental evidence. Particular mention should be made of Dennis Jackson's invaluable excavation work, primarily on the ironstone quarries of northeast Northamptonshire, and his exemplary publication record (Jackson 1998/9). Recent major excavations at Wollaston, Crick and Courteenhall promise to transform our understanding of Northamptonshire's Iron Age settlement patterns and landscapes.

Having established that Iron Age remains are widespread across the Northamptonshire landscape, another rather different way of looking at the survival of this resource is to estimate the general state of preservation of Northamptonshire's pre-medieval landscape using computerised mapping techniques. 'Condition zones' can be defined to indicate areas where the land is thought to have remained unploughed during medieval and modern times (essentially historic woodland and former heath converted to woodland); land which has been ploughed (further sub-divided into sites where earlier remains may have been partially protected by alluvium or the surviving open field ridges and fields where the ridge and furrow has been ploughed flat) and finally land affected by quarrying and modern development. Only 2-3% of Northamptonshire's land surface falls within the first, unploughed, category whilst some 12% has been largely destroyed by modern development. The overwhelming majority of land (85%) has been, and in many cases continues to be, under the plough with consequent truncation and loss of buried deposits – within this area the best preservation is likely to be found under alluvium (6%) or extant ridge and furrow (5%). The fact that there are still no effective controls on plough damage and only ten monuments of Iron Age date are legally protected scheduled ancient monuments does not augur well for the long-term survival of our better preserved sites.

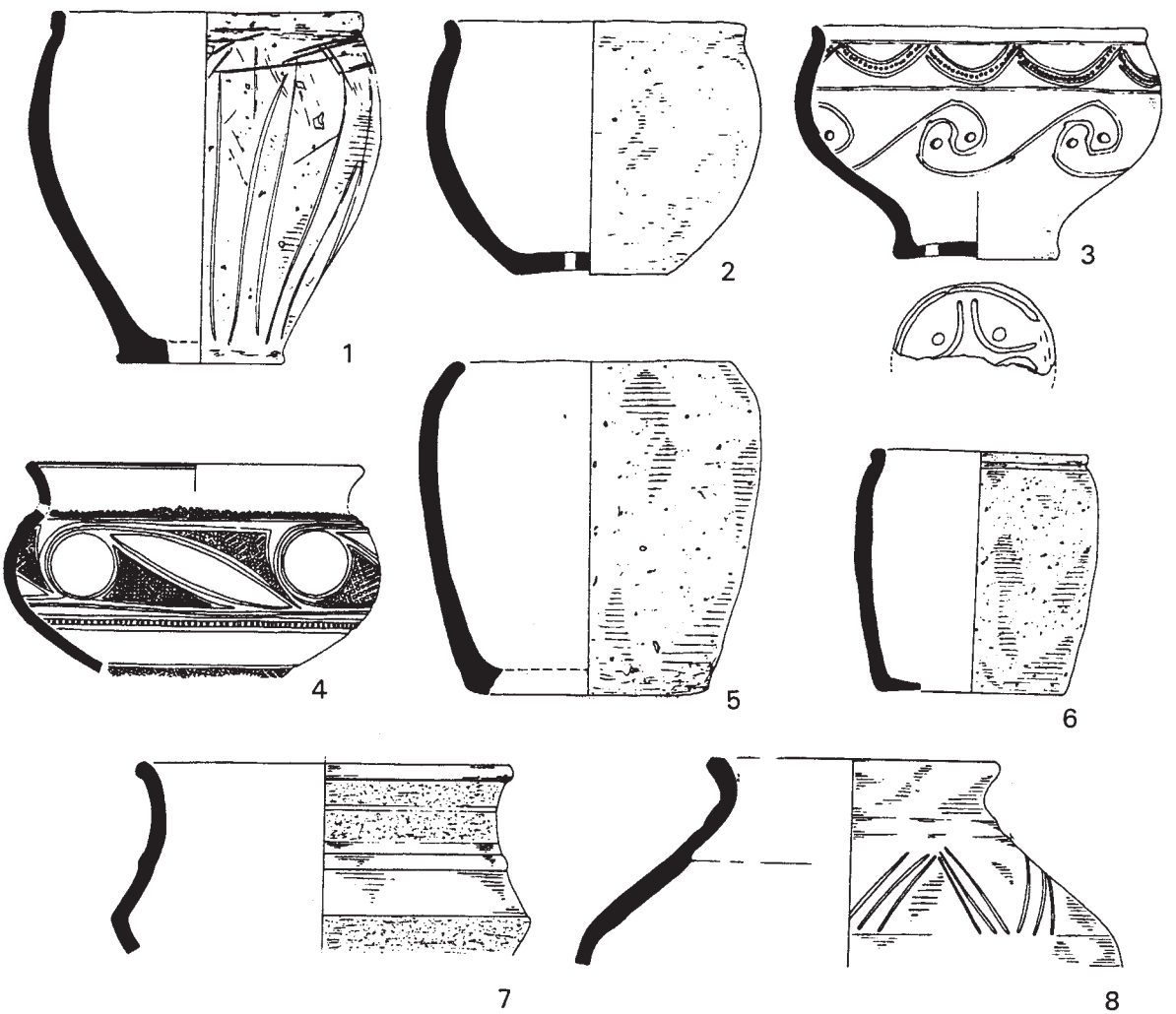
CHRONOLOGY

The first millennium BC is no exception to the general principle that a firm chronological framework is essential to understanding the development of



4.3 Early Iron Age pottery from Gretton. 1: carinated bowl; 2: round shouldered jar with finger-tip decoration; 3: ovoid jar; 4: open bowl. Reproduced by permission of the Dennis Jackson

society. Unfortunately, radiocarbon dating, which has proved so useful in earlier prehistory, is of less utility in the Iron Age because kinks in the calibration curves used to translate radiocarbon measurements into 'real' dates give date ranges of several hundred years which usually do little more than confirm dates attributable to artefacts on stylistic grounds. Although some metalwork can be closely dated it is rare and so the basic chronological framework for the Iron Age is provided by pottery. David Knight's research provides the ceramic chronology for the Iron Age of Northamptonshire (Knight, 1984 & 2002) supplemented for the Late Iron Age/Roman transition by the work of Roy Friendship-Taylor (Friendship-Taylor, 1998). Knight identifies four distinctive ceramic phases beginning with the supplanting of the Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury tradition by Post Deverel-Rimbury 'plainwares' in the late 2nd millennium BC. These 'plainwares' were replaced before 800 BC by Late Bronze



4.4 Early La Tene pottery from Weekley: 1: scored ware jar; 2: bowl with perforated base; 3: globular bowl with La Tene decoration; 4: Imported 'Glastonbury ware' bowl. Late La Tene pottery from Weekley: 5: slack-sided jar; 6: bead rim jar; 7: wheel-thrown carinated bowl; 8: round shouldered jar with everted rim. Reproduced by permission of Dennis Jackson

Age/Early Iron Age styles characterised by angular forms and geometric decoration (Fig 4.3). Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery continues until the 4th or 5th centuries BC when earlier La Tène wares appear with more rounded forms sometimes with scored or curvilinear decoration. Late La Tène style pottery develops from the mid/late-1st century BC incorporating a simplified version of the earlier tradition. It is typified locally by undecorated slack-profiled jars with channel or bead rims with more sophisticated wheel-thrown forms appearing in the 1st century AD (Fig 4.4).

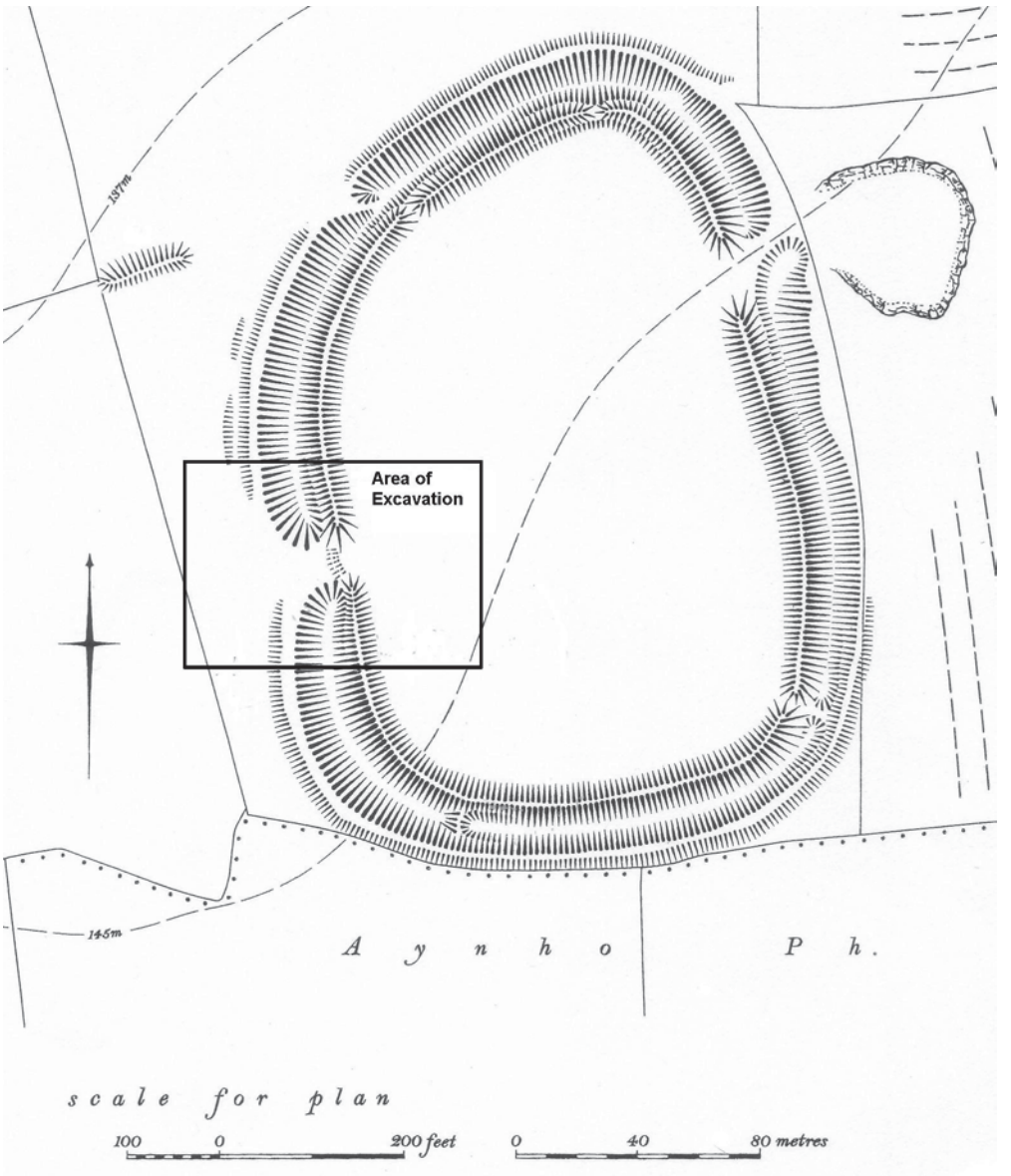
Although a basic ceramic sequence has been established there remain serious problems with closely dating first millennium BC sites in Northamptonshire. Pottery fabrics are dominated by shell throughout the period and are rarely diagnostic of a particular style. Most ceramic forms are long-lived and examples of diagnostic forms and decoration are rare in most assemblages. There are also differing views over the date range of some diagnostic types, such as early La Tène curvilinear pottery, difficulties in recognising distinctive Late Bronze Age ceramics and concerns that differences in ceramic assemblages between some sites may reflect social or functional distinctions rather than chronology.

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE LATE BRONZE AGE/EARLY IRON AGE

Evidence for Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age occupation in Northamptonshire is less common than that for the Middle and Late Iron Age. The distribution of sites is focussed on the permeable geologies along the Nene valley, although the majority of defended sites lie on the higher ground in the west of the county and a few are known on the clay lands. Recorded sites are generally fewer in the west and south of the county, probably due to the greater prevalence of permanent pasture and lower development pressures in these areas.

Hillforts and other defended sites are a distinctive feature of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Britain. A total of eleven confirmed or probable examples are known in Northamptonshire whilst others surely remain undiscovered. The earliest defended sites are a 100m diameter circular enclosure at Thrapston (Hull 1998) and, probably, the 54 hectare contour hillfort on Borough Hill, Daventry (Jackson, 1993-4b and 1996-97; RCHME 1981, 63-65). Although the Thrapston enclosure has only been partially excavated it appears comparable to the so-called 'Springfield-style ringforts' which are characteristic of high-status domestic settlement in Eastern England comprising a circular banked and ditched enclosure containing one or more large timber roundhouses. It seems likely that other ringforts of this type remain to be discovered, for example a 150m diameter roughly circular earthwork at Thenford is loosely associated with a Late Bronze Age metalwork hoard. Borough Hill represents an entirely different phenomenon - although the defensive ramparts are now much denuded and incompletely understood the entire hilltop seems to have been enclosed by multiple massive earthen ramparts and ditches which, although formally undated, bear comparison with large Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age hill-top enclosures found in Wessex (Cunliffe 1991, 346-348 & 357). Late Bronze Age metalwork and a few small pits and postholes associated with Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age ceramics have been found in the interior (Jackson 1996-7).

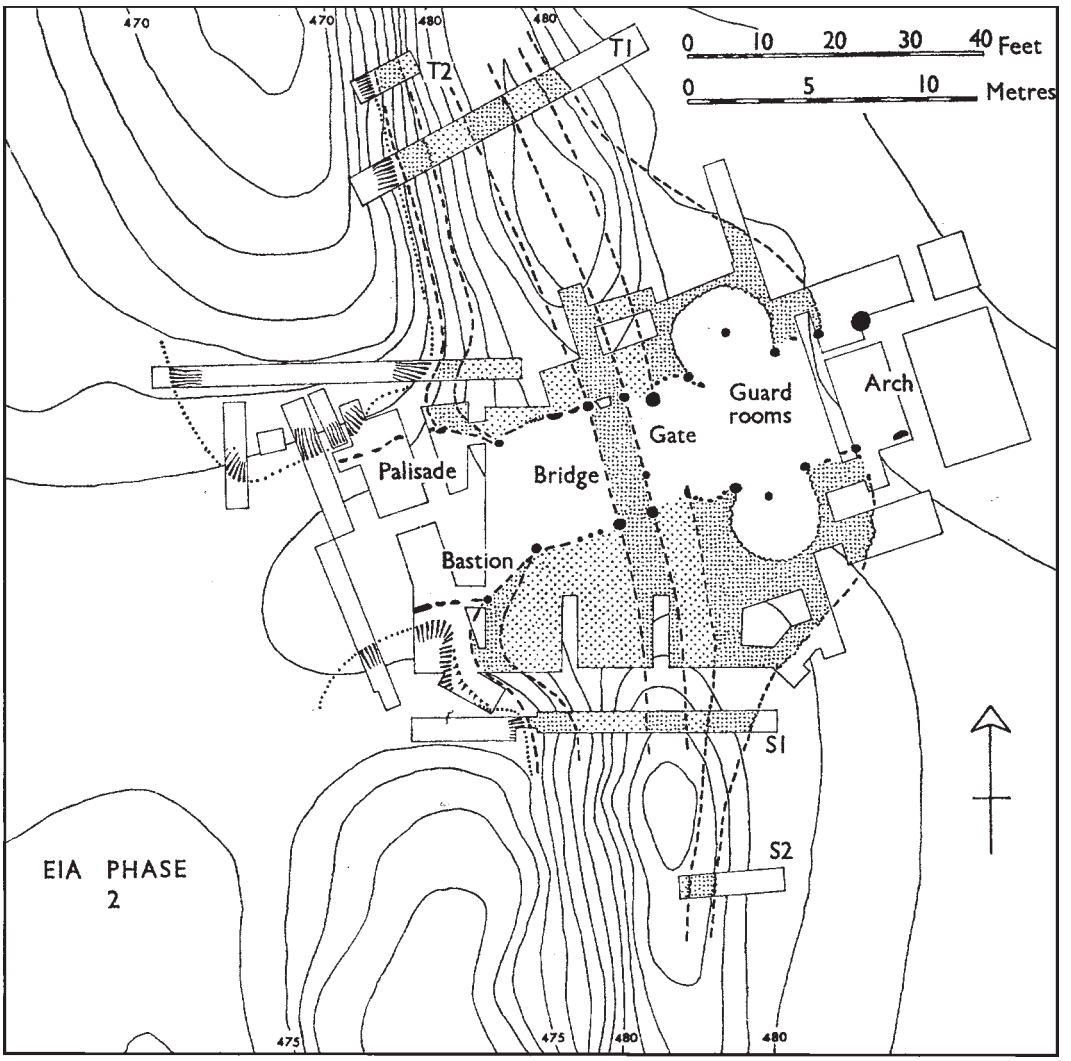
Northamptonshire hillforts typically comprise an earthwork bank and ditch enclosing an internal area of between one and three hectares sited in a commanding topographical location (Fig 4.1). Evidence for timber-strengthened ramparts have been found at a number of hillforts. This type of construction, which in Southern England is thought to be usually of Early Iron Age date, involves the retention of a rubble and earthen fill within a box-like timber structure normally secured by two rows of substantial earth-fast posts. Excavation has identified such structures within the ramparts at Hunsbury (Jackson, 1993-4a), Rainsborough (Avery et al, 1967), Guilsborough (Cadman 1989), Castle Yard, Farthingstone (Knight 1986-7) and possibly Crow Hill, Irthlingborough (Parry forthcoming, 361-386). The earliest ramparts at Hunsbury and Rainsborough hillforts have been dated to the Early Iron Age but the evidence from the other sites is equivocal. Hillforts would have appeared as ostentatious symbols of power as best exemplified at Rainsborough where the rampart was faced with stone and an elaborate entrance constructed comprising a causewayed approach between massive defensive ditches flanked by palisades and bastions to a gateway which was overlooked from a bridge and flanked by two guardhouses (Figs 4.5 and 4.6). The need for substantial defences is shown by the eventual destruction of the ramparts and gateway by fire, presumably following an attack as the remains



4.5 The Rainsborough hillfort. Reproduced by permission RCHME/ English Heritage

of a wounded and burnt skeleton were found beneath charred roof timbers in the southern guardroom.

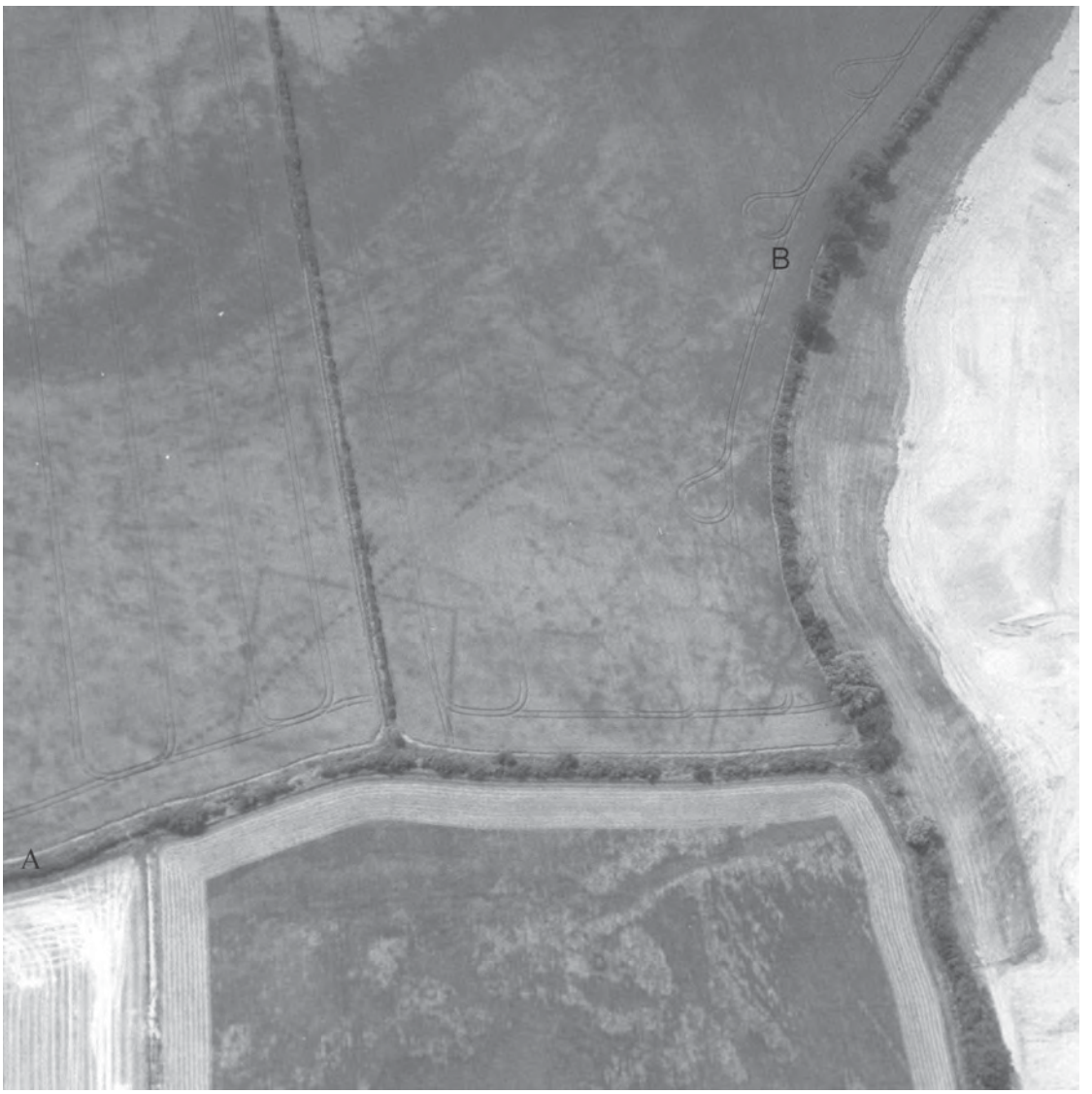
Undefended domestic settlements of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age are not well represented, probably because they are difficult to detect being typically small, lacking an enclosing ditch, and comprising a handful of post-built structures and pits. Examples have been excavated at Gretton, Great Oakley and Weekley Wood (Jackson and Knight, 1985; Jackson, 1982; Jackson, 1976). Unenclosed Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age sites apparently also represent the earliest phases of the long-lived settlements at Crick (Hughes, 1998) and Wilby Way, Wellingborough (Enright and



4.6 Plan of the Rainsborough hillfort gateway. Reproduced by permission of the Prehistoric Society

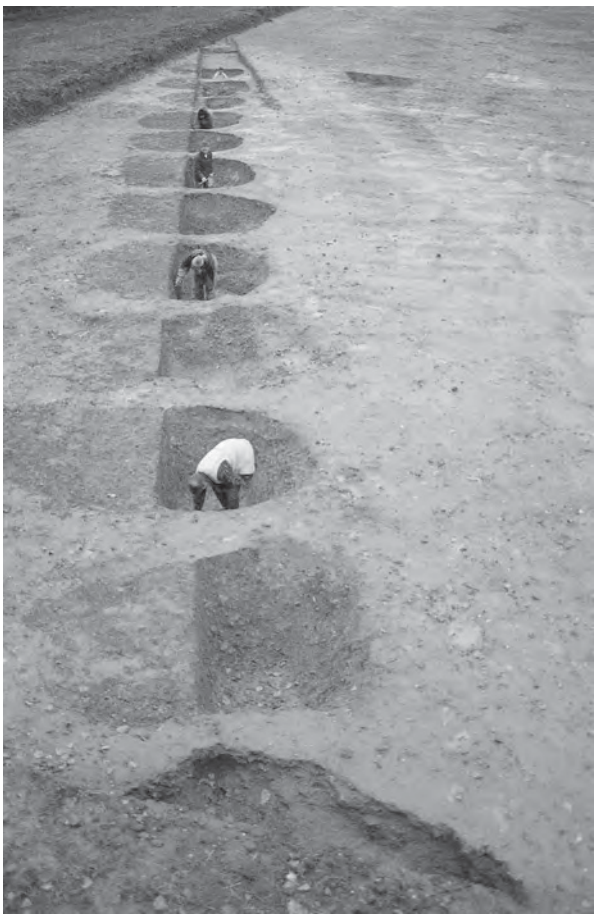
Thomas, forthcoming). In contrast, it is notable that the extensively investigated Iron Age landscape at Wollaston is seemingly devoid of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement (Ian Meadows, 1995 & pers comm). It seems possible, albeit difficult to prove, that these small short-lived sites reflect a dispersed and mobile settlement pattern not dissimilar to that of the earlier Bronze Age.

The earliest evidence for extensive field systems in Britain is attributed to the Middle to Late Bronze Age with major systems covering many tens of square kilometres now recognised in such diverse areas as Dartmoor, the Thames Valley and the Fen margins. These are planned landscapes of ditched boundaries, enclosures and droveways often laid out on a common axis (described as 'co-axial') and apparently associated with intensive livestock farming. Despite the proximity of the Fengate field systems there is so far only one example of a comparable Middle Bronze Age field system in Northamptonshire – this underlay the Roman villa complex at Stanwick (Neal, 1989; Parry, forthcoming).



4.7 A pit alignment at Wollaston (A-B). Reproduced by permission of the Historic Environment Team

Elsewhere in the county the earliest identifiable land boundaries are the 136 pit alignments, which have been recorded by aerial survey and excavation. Pit alignments are easy to describe but hard to interpret functionally. In their simplest form they comprise a line of usually sub-rectangular pits, typically 2m x 1.5m x 1m deep, set 1-2m apart and running for some hundreds of meters. Although pit alignments can appear as isolated features they also often occur in clusters as elements of complex long-lived landscapes. Most pit alignments lie on the permeable geologies of the Nene valley, although smaller numbers are known on the permeable geologies of the southwest and northeast of the county and a few have been recorded on clay geologies. Where excavated they are invariably found to be earlier



4.8 Excavation of a pit alignment at Upton. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

than Middle Iron Age settlements and, where dating evidence is available, a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date is usually indicated. The best understood example of such a complex landscape is found in the floodplain of the Nene at Wollaston where a pit alignment system of co-axial form covering an area of about 2.5km^2 was laid out during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Preliminary results suggest that the pits at Wollaston mighty be the end product of the repeated cleaning of originally shallow features and that the alignments divided up blocks of pasture (Ian Meadows, pers comm). It seems that the pit alignments develop later than the co-axial field systems although it is uncertain whether they reflect different agricultural systems or specific social/cultural practices. Whatever their origin and purpose their laying out indicates the existence of much open ground at least on the lighter free-draining soils. Pit alignments were not the only form of land boundary as both single and double linear ditches have been dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age at Gretton (Jackson 1974; Jackson and Knight, 1985). Linear ditches are a common feature on aerial photographs but are not dateable on morphological grounds, although it is tempting to suggest that a distinctive series of triple ditches which cut off spurs of higher ground in the Brampton/Pitsford area to the northwest of Northampton might be related to the complex of pit alignments in the same area.

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MIDDLE IRON AGE

Evidence for Middle Iron Age occupation is fairly common and widespread across Northamptonshire with the greatest concentration of sites along the

Nene and Ise valleys and some sites present on the clay lands. As for the Early Iron Age, western and southern Northamptonshire is noticeably under-represented.

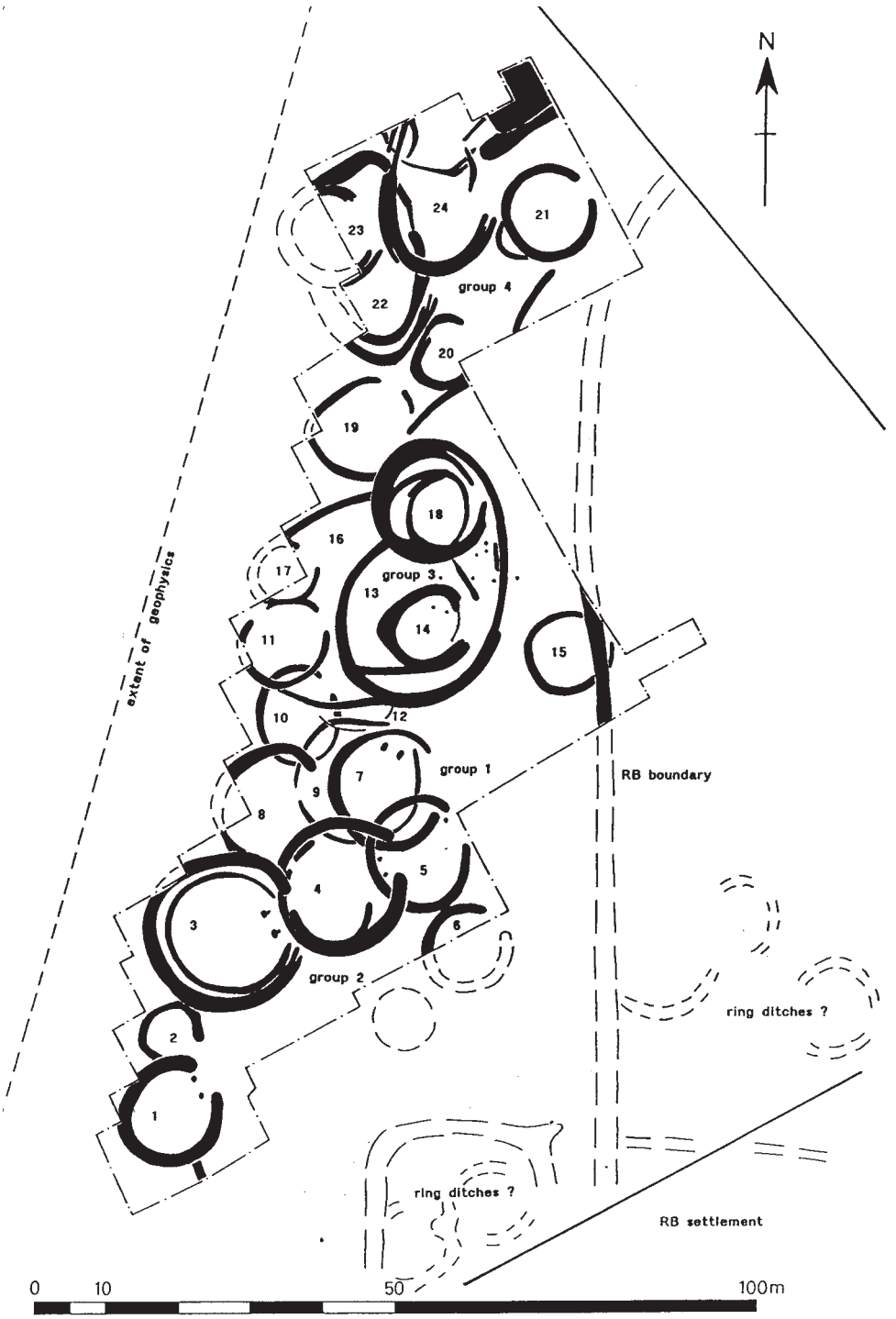
New hillforts may have been built in the Middle Iron Age at Crow Hill (Parry forthcoming) and Castle Yard, Farthingstone (Knight 1986-7), although earlier origins are equally possible given the limited evidence available. On morphological grounds, the unexcavated smaller hillfort at north end of Borough Hill (RCHME 1981, 63-65) is also likely to have been built in the Middle Iron Age. The early timber strengthened ramparts were vulnerable to destruction or decay necessitating refurbishment at Hunsbury (Jackson 1993-4a), Rainsborough (Avery et al 1967) and, probably, Guilsborough (Cadman 1989) where the timber structures were replaced by a simple ditch and earthen bank, the latter presumably topped by a palisade. The elaboration of hillfort defences by multivallation (the constructing additional ramparts and ditches) evident at both Rainsborough and Borough Hill is generally regarded as a late phenomenon but an early date has been argued for both these sites (see above) and the matter must remain open pending further investigation. However, alternative arrangements seem to have been made at Hunsbury and Borough Hill where small defended enclosures appear to have been deliberately positioned to cover dead ground outside the main fort. Information about occupation inside Northamptonshire's hillforts is sparse. Nineteenth century antiquarian accounts of quarrying inside Hunsbury hillfort recorded large numbers of pits and recovered a wide range of artefacts indicating the sort of intensive occupation expected of a 'developed' hillfort (Baker 1891; Dryden 1885; Fell 1936; George 1917; RCHME 1985) but it is unclear whether the site was continuously occupied from the Early Iron Age. Survey and small-scale excavation at Crow Hill and Rainsborough have also demonstrated occupation in the Middle Iron Age. For the other sites there is simply insufficient information to indicate whether they were major centres, short-lived refuges or simply abandoned earthworks.

Non-hillfort settlements are found across the whole county and are especially common along the Nene and Ise valleys. They can be divided into three broad morphological categories; Open settlements, Enclosed settlements and Agglomerated settlements

Open settlements typically comprise a small group of timber roundhouses with ancillary structures, such as the 4-or 6- post arrangements often interpreted as raised granaries, and pits but lack substantial enclosing ditches. Small open settlements appear to be more characteristic of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age than the Middle Iron Age but this may simply be because they are less easily discovered than enclosed sites and so under-represented in the archaeological record. The best example of an open settlement dating to the Middle to Late Iron Age is the fully excavated site at 'The Lodge', Crick (Chapman 1995).

Settlements comprising ditched enclosures, each usually less 0.5 than hectares in extent, containing at least one, more usually several, roundhouses with associated ancillary structures and pits are the most common Middle to Late Iron Age settlement type. Large numbers of this class of settlement have been recorded by aerial photography and field survey, most notably in the Upper Nene Valley. Excavations in Brigstock Park revealed a small settlement enclosure that had not been ploughed and was therefore in an unusually good state of preservation (see Chapter 1, this volume). Here a roughly circular bank and ditch enclosed an internal area about 20m in diameter containing a roundhouse defined by a wall trench, substantial entrance postholes and a drainage gully. A chalk path led up to the east facing entrance and continued into the interior to form a floor which had several burnt patches suggesting possible hearth sites. A distinctive sub-type of enclosed settlement are the so-called 'Wootton Hill style enclosures' which have been described as a localised mainly late Iron Age monument class consisting of 'small enclosures, each surrounded by an exceptionally deep ditch and additionally strengthened by banks, stockades and elaborate gateways' (Dix and Jackson 1989, 158) which normally lie on the sites of earlier settlements situated on higher ground and may be associated with hillforts and/or Roman villas. Sixteen confirmed or possible examples of this monument class can now be identified. Although Wootton Hill style enclosures have previously been described as being primarily of Late Iron Age date it is notable that many of the excavated examples (e.g. Aldwincle, Brigstock, Stanwell Spinney) are associated with early La Tène ceramics and so, in view of the uncertainties over chronology outlined above, it seems preferable to see them as a Middle to Late Iron Age phenomenon.

Agglomerated settlements are characterised by their much greater size which ranges from about 5 hectares at Wilby Way to at least 12 hectares at Crick (Plate 4) as well as by the presence of both



4.9 Iron Age settlement at The Lodge, Crick. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

enclosed and unenclosed elements and seemingly by greater longevity of occupation and perhaps diversity of function within the settlement. This type of settlement had not been widely recognised or understood in Northamptonshire (or indeed elsewhere) until recent development-led projects at Crick (Chapman 1995; Hughes 1998; Roy Kings pers comm) and Wilby Way, Wellingborough (Windell 1981; Enright and Thomas forthcoming). Agglomerated settlements are probably much more common than is currently appreciated because reliance on aerial survey and partial excavation may lead to their mis-classification as open or, more often, enclosed settlements. Other likely examples can be identified from survey at Kingsheath, Northampton (Shaw, Webster and O'Hara 1990), at the partially excavated site at Twywell (Jackson 1975) and perhaps beneath Stanwick villa where the current post-excavation programme is suggesting that the large Iron Age settlement was much longer-lived than had hitherto been recognised (V. Crosby pers comm). Whereas the smaller open and enclosed settlements represent farmsteads presumably belonging to a single family group these agglomerated sites probably had somewhat larger populations. Nevertheless it is doubtful whether any of these sites could properly be described as a 'village'. Stratigraphic evidence shows that only a small proportion of the roundhouses could have been occupied at any one time. At Crick evidence of flooding and frequent rebuilding suggests that the site was inhabited on a seasonal basis whilst elsewhere (e.g. at Wilby Way) we might be seeing the extended household of a higher-status family. Further research is needed to resolve these issues.

Many excavations have revealed evidence for field systems and trackways of Middle Iron Age date (e.g. Weekley: Jackson and Dix 1986-7) but only through aerial survey and recent large-scale investigation in the gravel quarries at Wollaston (Meadows 1995) has it been possible to begin to understand the extensive agricultural landscapes which existed in the Middle Iron Age and continued to operate into the Romano-British period. On the permeable geologies, linear ditch systems stretching for several kilometres with associated axial boundaries and settlements are a common feature. Good examples are known from Ecton/Sywell and the Bramptons in the Nene valley and near Rainsborough hillfort in the southwest of the county. Dating evidence for these systems is often limited but at Wollaston the regular blocks of land defined by Early Iron Age pit alignments continued to be used, albeit apparently now defined by hedges, into the Middle Iron Age. Settlement and ancillary enclosures were inserted into this landscape at regular intervals and are associated with a changeover from pastoral to mixed agriculture (Meadows 1995 and pers comm). A rather different and less regular landscape is emerging from current work at Courteenhall on the south side of Northampton where a localised cluster of five Middle to Late Iron Age enclosures with associated field systems has been identified situated on outcrops of glacial sand overlooking a brook on the edge of the boulder clay plateau (Ovenden-Wilson 1997; Thomas 1998). The Middle Iron Age landscapes of the clay land plateaus are less well known but enclosures have been recorded and a linear system apparently similar to those on permeable geologies is known at Brigstock (Foster 1988 and 1998-9) providing the first evidence for intensive occupation of these previously unfavoured lands.

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE LATE IRON AGE

The Late Iron Age in South Eastern England is a period of rapid social change marked by the increasing influence of the Roman Empire, initially transmitted indirectly through the Celtic tribes of Northern France but applied more directly following the conquest of Gaul in the mid 1st century BC. It becomes possible to identify the tribes, and some of the rulers, of Southern and Midland England through their Roman-inspired coinage and to detect dramatic changes in settlement patterns, funerary practices and exchange networks. Individual rulers seem to have utilised access to prestigious imported goods, such as wine and fine tablewares, to build up their power base and adopt expansionist policies. The construction of *oppida* - large high status settlements often associated with extensive dyke systems – and distinctive cremation burials, sometimes rich in grave goods are characteristic of this period with the nearest major centre being at Verulamium (St.Albans).

Northamptonshire lay on the edge of this South Eastern cultural transformation but, by way of contrast, shows a considerable degree of continuity from the Middle Iron Age. Settlements such as those at Weekley, Wakerley and Crick ('The Lodge' site) which originated in the Middle Iron Age continued to be

occupied into the Late Iron Age whilst newly founded settlement enclosures, such as that at Clay Lane, Ecton (Windell 1983), follow established Middle Iron Age traditions. Hill (1987) has suggested that the terms Middle and Late Iron Age should be used as cultural, rather than chronological, designations and that there is considerable overlap between these cultures in Eastern England – this view applies well to Northamptonshire which displays both late and partial adoption of the main facets of the South Eastern Late Iron Age. The problem is exemplified by Wollaston where enclosed farmsteads founded in the Middle Iron Age shifted to adjacent sites in the early Roman period but with little evidence for an intervening period characterised by Late La Tène ceramics (Meadows, 1995 & pers comm).

The general lack of Late Iron Age evidence from hillforts suggests they had been largely abandoned by this time, although Crow Hill may be an exception as it was apparently refortified by the insertion of a palisade (Parry forthcoming). The best candidate for an oppidum in Northamptonshire is at Duston (Friendship-Taylor 1998, 148-170; RCHME 1985, 252-257) but there are no dykes and unfortunately the site was largely destroyed in the 19th century so its status may never be properly understood. There is also evidence for Late Iron Age occupation on the sites of the Roman towns at Titchmarsh (Curteis, Jackson and Markham 1998-9), Towcester (Walker 1992) and Irchester (Hall and Nickerson 1967) hinting at pre-Roman origins for these places (Fig 4.1). Smaller sites such as Weekley (Dix and Jackson 1986-7) and Piddington (Friendship-Taylor 1989 & 1998, 225-247) appear to have been of high-status as indicated by the construction of Wootton Hill style enclosures at the former and presence of imported pottery at the latter. Villas were later constructed at both Weekley and Piddington following a general trend for villas to be constructed on sites that had been occupied during the Late Iron Age.

Considerable numbers of Iron Age coins have been found in Northamptonshire with the most significant groups coming from the Roman small towns at Duston, Oundle (Ashton) and Titchmarsh as well as the Late Iron Age settlements/Roman villas at Stanwick and Weekley and a probable Roman temple at Evenley**.** The earliest coins found in the county are Gallo-Belgic E staters, which are dated to the early/mid 1st century BC. Subsequent coinages suggest that by the late 1st century BC central and southern Northamptonshire had come within the orbit of the Catuvellauni, the most powerful tribe in Southern Britain based at Camulodunum (Colchester) and Verulamium (Colour Plate 5). A concentration of Corieltauvian coins in the northeast of the county suggests this part of Northamptonshire may have fallen within their territory whilst in the southwest the Cherwell may have marked the boundary with the Dobunni (Curteis 1996a and 1997 ; Cunliffe 1991, 110-118 & fig 7.9).

By the end of the Iron Age it is clear that most of the Northamptonshire landscape was densely populated and intensively utilised by a mixed agricultural economy. Considerable clearance and colonisation had taken place on the formerly wooded clay lands, especially to the south of the Nene and in the Rockingham Forest area, but the extent of residual woodland is uncertain. Most settlements and landscapes display evolutionary rather than radical change as an immediate consequence of the Roman conquest, although possible exceptions may be found at Brigstock (Foster, 1998-9) and Crick, where the breakdown of the agglomerated Middle Iron Age settlement pattern might relate to the construction of Watling Street.

THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

The Iron Age was a time of major population growth as evidenced, for example by the more than doubling of the numbers of sites producing Middle or Late Iron Age ceramics compared to those with Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age pottery. This increasing population will have generated a requirement for greater agricultural production. Other pressures on the agricultural economy will have been the climatic downturn of the early 1st millennium BC and perhaps an increase in non-food producing elite and craft specialists in the Middle to Late Iron Age.

There is much evidence from survey and excavation for fields and buildings presumably used for agriculture but it is to environmental evidence that we must turn for corroboration of these interpretations and a better understanding of food production and consumption. Unfortunately Northamptonshire lacks the wetlands and peat bogs which elsewhere have preserved rich organic deposits and the long pollen sequences needed for reconstructing vegetation change, although sampling of waterlogged deposits in old abandoned river channels has provided some promising results for earlier periods. Most Iron

Age sites in Northamptonshire are not permanently waterlogged and so preserve only a narrow range of environmental evidence, principally bone and carbonised plant remains. Unfortunately, published analyses of animal bone and carbonised plant assemblages are of limited value and at present it is only possible to give a broad indication of species represented. For example, spelt wheat and six-row hulled barley were found in Middle Iron Age pits at Twywell (Jackson 1975, 90-91). Spelt and emmer wheat and barley were present at Wilby Way where the assemblage was held to be representative of localised subsistence farming (Thomas and Enright forthcoming). The most common animal species are usually cattle and sheep/goat with pig, horse and dog of secondary importance and other species rare. The recent large-scale excavations should improve on these basic observations and it is to the results emerging from Wollaston that we must look for the most significant contribution to understanding the agricultural economy. The picture emerging primarily from the sampling of abandoned river channels and other waterlogged deposits at Wollaston is one of Middle Bronze Age woodland clearance creating an open pastoral landscape in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age followed by the development of a mixed agricultural regime in the Middle to Late Iron Age (Brown and Meadows 1996-97; Meadows 1995). Mollusc assemblages provide further evidence for an open landscape on the higher ground overlooking the Nene valley in the Middle Iron Age from Blackthorn, Northampton (Williams 1974) and Wilby Way, Wellingborough (Enright and Thomas forthcoming). However, unlike river valleys such as the Ouse and Thames, there is as yet little evidence for pre-medieval alluviation in the Nene Valley which might be expected as a result of extensive arable cultivation (Robinson forthcoming, 42-45), although alluvial deposits recently found in the fills of a pit alignment at Grendon might be of later Iron Age date. Away from the Nene valley there is very little comparable environmental data and obtaining such information, especially from the clay plateaus, should be accorded a high priority to investigate patterns of local diversity. For example, a model of seasonal occupation can be suggested at Crick, which might indicate a more mobile settlement pattern in northwest Northamptonshire.

As we have seen, sufficient information is available to enable morphological analysis of the Iron Age/Romano-British landscape over wide areas of the Upper Nene valley. However, the great challenge to comprehending the changing nature of Iron Age agriculture lies in moving towards an understanding of processes of woodland clearance and the expansion of agricultural production. More attention needs to be paid to identifying the archaeological correlates of expansion related to demographic growth, agricultural extensification and intensification, changes in crops, cultivation and livestock management regimes and shifts towards more specialised production. This should be possible in a period that saw such major changes as the construction of the first extensive field systems and permanent settlements, a shift from an intensive pastoral regime to mixed agriculture and major demographic growth.

CRAFT PRODUCTION

Northamptonshire Iron Age sites have provided evidence for iron and bronze working, the spinning and weaving of wool, the preparation of skins and leatherworking and possibly the manufacture of objects of bone, antler, horn, lead, jet, glass, wood and basketry (Knight 1984). Pottery was also undoubtedly produced in the county throughout this period but possible evidence for bonfire kilns is limited to Weekley (Dix and Jackson 1986-7). By far the greatest range of evidence for craft production comes from Hunsbury hillfort suggesting that this was an important local manufacturing centre (Knight 1984, 187). Elsewhere, the small quantities of craft-related artefacts and materials recovered suggest that the only industry likely to be operating on a more than local level was the iron industry. Excavations at Great Oakley have shown that the nodular ores, which outcrop in ironstones of northeast Northamptonshire, were being extracted and smelted in the Early Iron Age (Jackson 1982). Possible Iron Age smelting furnaces have been recorded at Great Oakley, Wakerley (Jackson and Ambrose 1987) and Harringworth (Jackson 1981) whilst some of the slag scatters of the Rockingham, Salcey and Whittlewood Forest areas probably date to this period. Large quantities of iron-smelting slag have also been found at Castle Yard hillfort (Knight 1986-7), and smaller quantities of smelting or smithing slag are commonly found on settlements. A hoard of iron currency bars from Gretton (Jackson 1974) and a rare iron bloom from Crick (Hughes, 1998) may also be related to this industry (Fig 4.10).

4.10 Currency bar hoard from Gretton. Reproduced by permission of Dennis Jackson

RITUAL AND RELIGION

In contrast to the Neolithic and Bronze Age, distinctive ceremonial and burial sites are, with a few well-known exceptions, a rarity in the British Late Bronze Age and Iron Age. In the Late Bronze Age the deliberate deposition of fine metalwork into water as seen at Flag Fen formed a distinctive rite but is not exemplified within the modern county and seems to have come to an end in the Early Iron Age (Pryor, 1998). Elsewhere in Southern Britain both rectangular and circular structures within hillforts and underlying Romano-Celtic temples have been interpreted as shrines (Cunliffe 1991, 510-518) but no examples are yet known in Northamptonshire, most probably due to a lack of large-scale excavation in such locations. Recent Iron Age research has placed greater emphasis on evidence for ritual activities permeating everyday life typically seen in the orientation and layout of structures and the structured patterning of deposits of artefacts and human and animal bone on domestic settlements (e.g. Hill 1995). This is an area of considerable debate for one man's ritualised deposit of animal bones can be another's disposal of butchery or kitchen waste. However, although individual cases may appear unconvincing and open to mundane explanation, seen collectively some more compelling patterns are beginning to emerge. Ritual structures have been tentatively identified within several settlements in Northamptonshire based on their orientation and associations - for example, at Weekley Early La Tène curvilinear decorated pottery was deposited in large quantities in association with a putative ritual enclosure from which three rare iron spearheads were also recovered (Adam Gwilt, pers comm) whilst placed deposits of antler, burnt pig bone and pottery have been observed in the ditch fills at the ringfort at Thrapston (Hull 1998). Most Middle Iron Age sites have some apparently structured deposits which are difficult to explain simply as rubbish disposal - examples include human and animal inhumations, the numerous querns placed in pits at Hunsbury and perhaps the frequent deposition animal skulls in the termini of enclosure ditches. The treatment of human remains is particularly enigmatic to modern eyes. There are no cemeteries and human bones appear as a minor element in many excavated bone assemblages. Small numbers of human burials occur in pits on settlement sites, although they often seem to have been accorded little ceremony and to have been treated little differently to other animals, such as dogs, which were also occasionally buried as whole carcasses. A particularly poignant example of a pit burial dated to the 4th or 5th century BC

was excavated at Brackmills, Northampton in 1996 (Colour plate 6). A 30-40 year old woman had been bound and been thrown face-down into a pit but unlike most pit burials this one was accompanied by an artefact – a unique lead torc (neck ring). An adjacent pit contained a dog burial but it is not known if the two were contemporary. Pit burials have also been found at Twywell, Wilby Way and possibly Hunsbury hillfort – in the former case dog burials were also present (Jackson 1975). The full significance of this rite is not understood but it was clearly not 'normal' practice and invites comparison with the ritual execution found in the case of bog bodies such as Lindow Man.

The situation does not change dramatically in the Late Iron Age, although two small cemeteries are known situated just outside the Roman town defences at Irchester and Towcester respectively and a decorated mirror found at Desborough in the 19th century may have come from a high-status burial (Colour Plate 1). The Irchester cemetery contained at least four Aylesford-Swarling style urned cremation burials (Hall and Nickerson 1967) whilst at Towcester an apparently Late Iron Age inhumation cemetery appears to be situated within a ditched enclosure which has been compared to continental sacred sites called *Viereckshanzen* (Walker 1992). The considerable numbers of Late Iron Age coins recovered from the putative Roman temple site at Evenley may also be indicative of a Late Iron Age shrine, and may perhaps be related to coin hoards found in North Buckinghamshire.

IRON AGE SOCIETY

What can the evidence from Northamptonshire tell us about issues such as the scale and nature of social and political units and the relationships between

4.11 Pit burial excavated at Brackmills, Northampton in 1996. Note the tightly bound posture and lead torc around the woman's neck. Reproduced by permission of the Northamptonshire Archaeology

them? We should expect the archaeological record to be complex as it is structured by such diverse factors as religious belief, kinship, clientage and political alliances as well as more immediately practical needs such as effective land management and exchange of specialist products. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to ask what progress has been made towards understanding the organisation of society in Iron Age Northamptonshire.

Northamptonshire's location in the centre of England resulted in its Iron Age societies absorbing influences from various different directions. In the Late Bronze Age the Thrapston ringfort forms part of an Eastern England tradition whilst the parallels for the contour hillfort on Borough Hill can be found to the south and west. The paucity of information for the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age restricts meaningful analysis but the collapse of the bronze exchange networks and lack of evidence for imported goods combined with the construction, and sometimes destruction, of hillforts in the Early Iron Age would perhaps be consistent with a more isolated, fragmented and unstable society.

The ubiquitous enclosed farmsteads of the Middle Iron Age suggest a more stable society based, at its lowest level, on discrete family units. Intermediate levels of social organisation, perhaps kin or clientage based, are suggested by the regular ordering of settlements within the co-axial system at Wollaston, by the clustering of some settlement enclosures into neighbourhood groups (e.g. Courteenhall) and by the grouping together of open and enclosed elements in the agglomerated settlements (e.g. Crick). By analogy with better-known hillforts in southern England, developed hillforts such as Hunsbury could have occupied the highest social level and performed specialised functions such as craft manufacturing, storage, defence and perhaps the regulation of external trade. The Upper Nene and Ise Valleys emerge as a distinctive cultural area, characterised by Hunsbury-style curvilinear decorated pottery and Wootton Hill style small defended enclosures. Within the early La Tene style curvilinear pottery there are localised sub-styles suggestive of distinct production and distribution areas (Jackson and Dix, 1986-7, 77-78).

Demonstrably imported artefacts are very rare in Middle Iron Age contexts in Northamptonshire but examples include querns found at Hunsbury from Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Sussex and Kent (Ingle 1993-4), salt briquetage (fired clay containers) from Cheshire (Hughes 1998) and pottery from Leicestershire (Hughes, 1998; Knight, forthcoming) and the Lizard Peninsula (Jackson and Dix 1986-7). Although salt briquetage is present at Crick its absence from other sites may imply that the bulk of the county's salt was imported from the salterns in the Fens and/or along the Lincolnshire coast which did not use briquetage for transportation. The likely sources of these contacts covers a broad zone across Southern and Midland England which can be interpreted in terms of Northamptonshire's integration within the regional exchange networks of the Middle Iron Age (Cunliffe 1991, 444-497). Iron was probably Northamptonshire's main contribution to these networks but unfortunately this industry is poorly understood and its products cannot be traced to source.

In the Late Iron Age there is relatively little indication of the sort of major social changes which are such a distinctive feature of the South East and South Midlands, although a shift in the location of high status sites is indicated from hillforts to settlements which subsequently developed into Roman towns or major estate centres. This is a time when Northamptonshire appears to have become politically marginalised – perhaps a contested land between competing tribal groups, which was eventually absorbed into the expanding Catuvellaunian state.

CONCLUSIONS

Northamptonshire is fortunate in having a relative wealth of information for the Middle and Late Iron Age compared to most other counties such that is now possible to suggest an outline of developments in the period. The Earlier Bronze Age landscape of ceremonial monuments focussed on the Nene Valley gave way in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age to the construction of the first field systems along with open and defended settlements; recent research both in Northamptonshire and elsewhere suggests that this phenomenon is linked to an intensification of livestock farming. By the Middle Iron Age there had been a shift to a mixed agricultural system accompanied by substantial population growth, longer-lived settlements and expansion into the previously little occupied (and presumably wooded) clay lands. By this time central Northamptonshire was probably occupied by a distinct cultural group, which was later absorbed by the Catuvellauni from whom aspects of the South Eastern Late Iron Age

culture were adopted before the Roman conquest. Although the Catuvellauni initially resisted the Roman invasion of 43 AD they rapidly accepted and adapted to the new regime. The lack of evidence for a significant early Roman military presence in Northamptonshire suggests than the transition to Roman rule was not widely contested.

Despite the considerable progress made by archaeological research in recent years there are many inadequacies with the available data and unanswered questions - a challenge for the 21st century will be to not simply to reiterate old agendas and data collection techniques, but to apply more integrated theoretically driven approaches and to embrace new research techniques and questions. Another challenge will be to ensure the long-term preservation of a representative sample of the archaeological resource – something that has not so far been achieved even for all the few surviving earthworks let alone the extensive buried landscapes revealed by aerial photography which are under constant threat from plough erosion.