

A Bronze Age Cremation Burial from Upton, Northampton

by

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with contributions by

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SUMMARY

Between September and November 2007, an archaeological watching brief was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology during flood attenuation works on the north side of the River Nene, between Kislingbury and Upton, Northampton. The topsoil was stripped in three separate areas. In one area a small pit contained the cremated bones of an adult within an inverted Collared Urn. This burial has been radiocarbon dated to the early 2nd millennium BC, the early Bronze Age. A number of postholes lay nearby, one of which cut the cremation pit and may have contained a grave marker. However, there is no indication that this burial lay close to a round barrow or any other funerary deposits, so it appears to have been an isolated burial. A series of undated shallow, parallel gullies and postholes, possibly part of a water-meadow management system, and a post-medieval or modern boundary ditch were recorded in the other watching brief areas.

INTRODUCTION

Between September and November 2007, Northamptonshire Archaeology maintained an archaeological watching brief during groundworks for the Upton Flood Attenuation Scheme (Phase 2), Northampton (NGR SP 703 599 to SP 719 593, Fig 1). The Collared Urn burial lay at SP 7065 5987.

The work was commissioned by Birse Civils and was undertaken in order to meet the archaeological conditions, requested by Northampton Borough Council's Archaeological Advisor, which had been attached to the planning consent for the flood alleviation works. The purpose of the archaeological investigation was to mitigate against the impact of groundworks on archaeological remains in three areas, comprising two spurs for the construction of banks and an area of floodplain lowering.

The fieldwork was carried out in accordance with a specification written by Northamptonshire Archaeology (NA 2007) based on the specification produced by Halcrow (2007), who were advised by the former Archaeological Planning Officer for Northamptonshire County Council Historic Environment Team (NCCHET).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was sponsored by English Partnerships, and was managed by James Goad for the Halcrow Group Ltd, as archaeological consultants, and by Anthony Maull and Simon Carlyle for Northamptonshire Archaeology. The fieldwork was carried out by Anne Foard-Colby, Mark Patenall and Yvonne Wolfram-Murray. The illustrations are by Carol Simmonds and Andy Chapman. This published report focuses on the Collared Urn cremation burial, but further details of the other features and finds recorded can be found within the client report (Foard-Colby 2008).

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The watching brief area was situated to the north of the River Nene, between the village of Kislingbury to the west and Upton, Northampton to the east (Fig 1). The ground rises from 60m aOD on the floodplain to 72mOD on the lower slopes to the north of the river. The land comprised water meadow and pasture for grazing sheep and cattle.

The British Geological Survey has mapped the area as a mixture of alluvium and glacial boulder clay, sand and gravel, overlying Middle Lias clay, mudstone and ironstone (BGS 1980). The soils belong to the Fladbury 2 soil association, comprising stoneless clayey soils, variably affected by groundwater (SSEW 1983).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A search of the Historic Environment Record (HER) shows that the area of the flood attenuation works lies within a landscape containing archaeological remains ranging in date from the prehistoric to the post-medieval periods. The Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure of Briar Hill lay 2.5km to the south-east on the southern slope of the river valley (Fig 1), and was excavated in the mid-1970s (Bamford 1985). A small cremation cemetery, dated to the middle Bronze Age lay within the Causewayed Enclosure at Briar Hill (Bamford 1985), and another small cremation cemetery of possible middle Bronze Age date has recently been excavated at Pineham Barn, also south of the river (Fig 2, Brown 2007).

Possible prehistoric ditches were investigated between 1991 and 1992 by Northamptonshire Archaeology (Fig

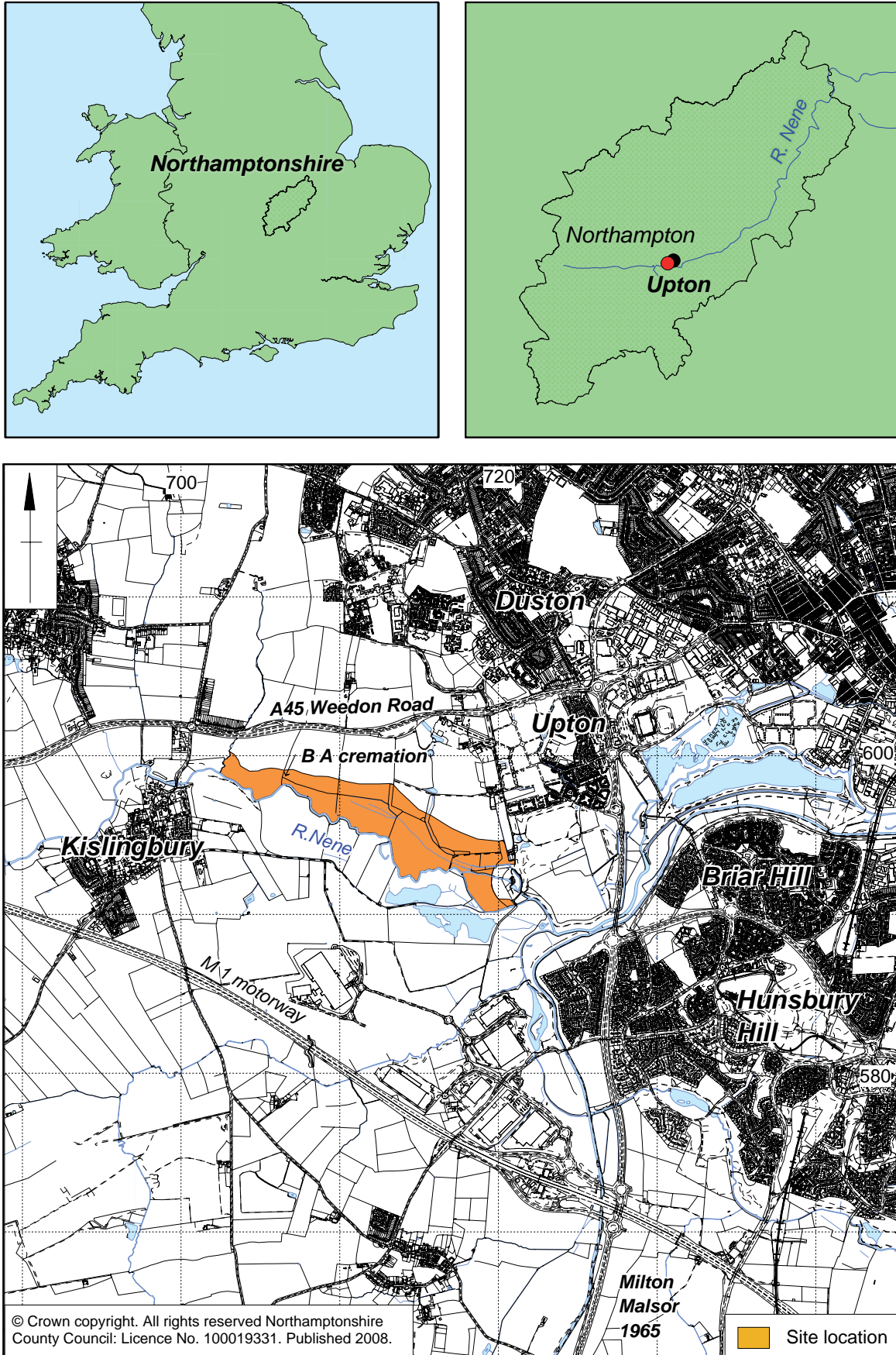


Fig 1 Site location

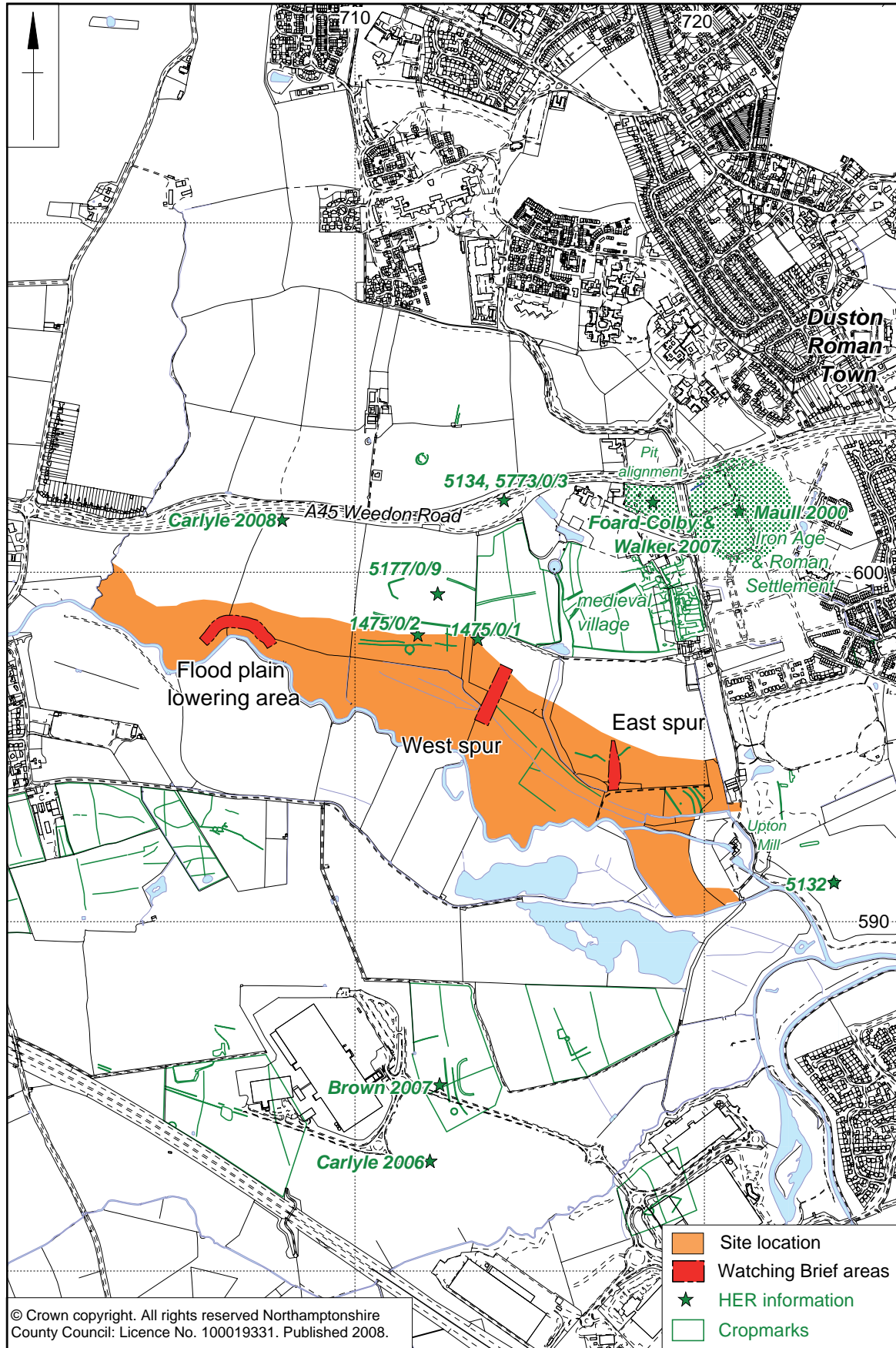


Fig 2 Historic Environment Record (HER) sites

2; NSMR 1475/0/1-2; Jackson 1993a; 1993b, 74-75).

Hunsbury Hillfort, a major Iron Age tribal centre overlooked the valley from the ridge to the south-east (Fig 1). To the north of the watching brief area, Iron Age pits and ditches were excavated during the widening of the A45 in 1965 (NSMR 5134; Jackson *et al* 1969), and to the north-east an Iron Age pit alignment was excavated at Upton, east of Quinton House School (Maull 2000, Foard-Colby and Butler 2006). A further pit alignment lying to the north of the watching brief area has been identified and examined prior to the construction of the Cross Valley Link Road (Fig 2, Carlyle 2008).

To the north-east, Late Iron Age and Roman settlement was excavated prior to residential development at Upton, and has been shown to continue westward into the grounds of Quinton House School (Maull 2000, Foard-Colby and Butler 2006, Foard-Colby and Walker 2007). These sites lie at the south-western margin of Duston Roman town.

To the south of the river, extensive Iron Age and Roman settlement has recently been excavated at Pineham Barn

(Fig 2; Carlyle 2006 and Brown 2007; and NSMR 5088/0/1 and 5092/0/6; JSAC 1999; 2000; Buteux & Jones 2000; Morris 2000; Pears 2005), with further Iron Age and Roman settlement to the south-east at the Swan valley area (Holmes and Chapman 2005).

A Saxon *Grubenhäuser* was excavated during widening of the A45 in 1965 (SMR 5773/0/3; Jackson *et al* 1969, 213) and possible Saxon or early medieval ditches were identified from aerial photographs (SMR 5177/0/9).

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the watching brief were to provide monitoring of selected areas of groundworks where there were known archaeological features in the vicinity, or where there was deemed to be areas of archaeological or palaeoenvironmental/geoarchaeological potential. If possible, environmental samples would be collected from peaty deposits exposed within the river realignment works, which could be used as the basis for an environmental assessment of the historic landscape in

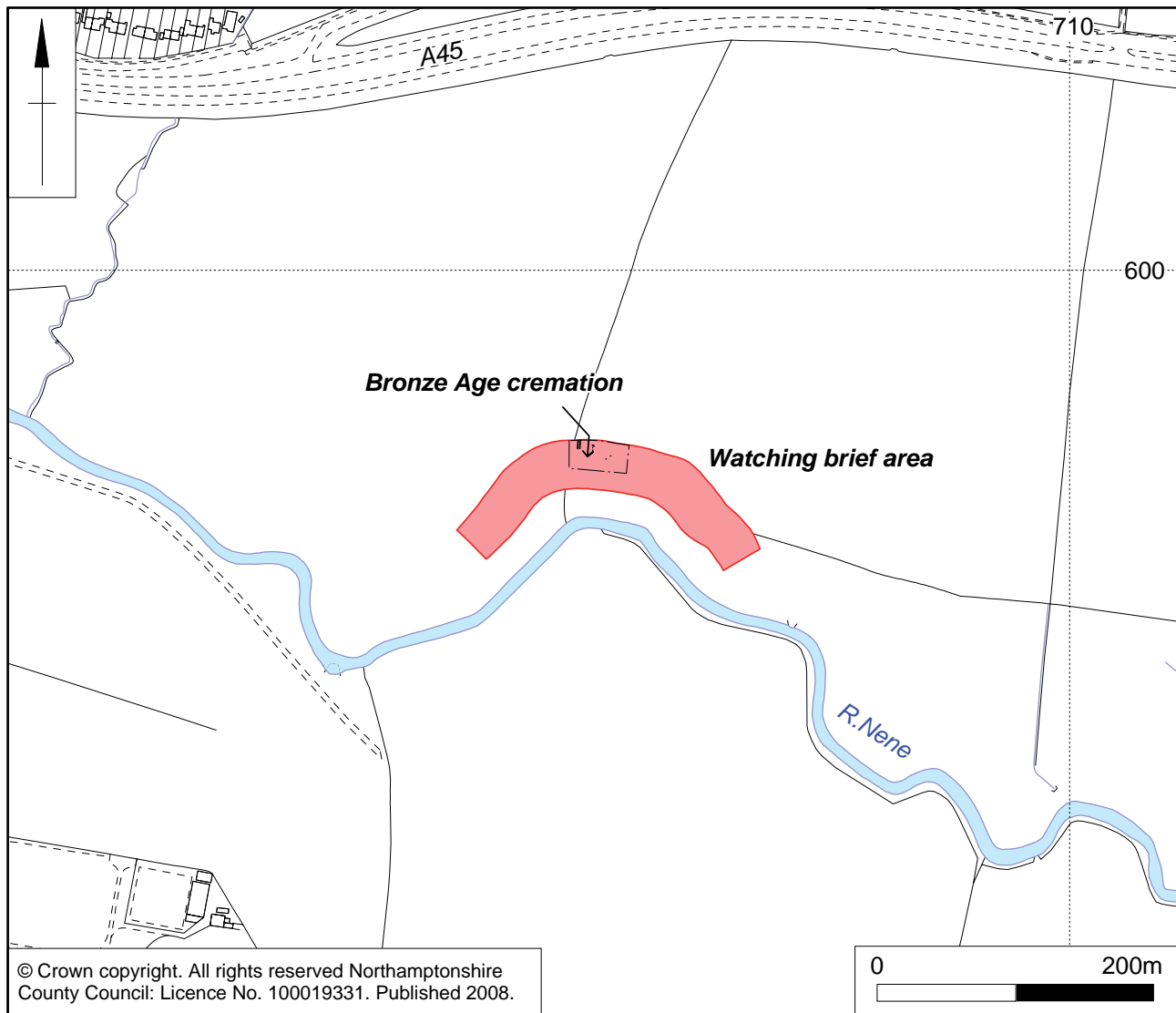


Fig 3 Location of western area (flood plain lowering area)

this part of the River Nene valley. No such deposits were encountered.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Topsoil stripping was undertaken by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision. All potential archaeological features were examined by hand excavation. The location of the stripped areas was related to the Ordnance Survey National Grid. Contexts were recorded on *pro-forma* sheets with a unique context number being allocated to each distinct deposit. Plans and sections were drawn at the appropriate scale. A photographic record comprising both 35mm black and white negatives, with associated contact prints, and colour transparencies was maintained, with additional digital photographs. The site code is UFA 07.

All works were carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Code of Conduct* (IFA 1995, revised 2006) and *Standards and guidance for archaeological watching briefs* (IFA 1994, revised 2001), and complied with the *Policy and Guidance for Archaeological Fieldwork Projects in Northamptonshire* (NCCHEP 1995). All procedures complied with the Northamptonshire County Council Health and Safety provisions.

THE WATCHING BRIEF

WESTERN AREA (AREA OF FLOODPLAIN LOWERING)

The area of floodplain lowering was at the western end of the watching brief area (Figs 2 & 3). Here excavation revealed a sequence of alluvial deposits, into the surface of which was cut a number of archaeological features, including a Bronze Age cremation burial.

At 1.2m below the stripped surface there was dark blue-grey silty clay with gravel inclusions, succeeded by a layer, 0.6m thick, of light yellow-brown silty clay. A layer of light to mid grey and yellow-brown silty clay, of a similar thickness, slightly overlay or abutted this layer. Together, they may be terraces associated with the nearby River Nene. Sealing these deposits was mid orange-brown alluvium with river gravel inclusions.

Close to the northern edge of this area there was a cremation burial within an inverted Collared Urn of early Bronze Age date (Fig 4). The urn had been intact but the base was damaged during stripping of the topsoil (Fig 5). It lay within a pit [306] with an adjacent pit/posthole [316] that may have held a marker-post (Figs 6-8). The burial deposit is described in detail below.

To the south-west of the cremation was a shallow posthole [309], 0.29m in diameter and 0.12m deep, and

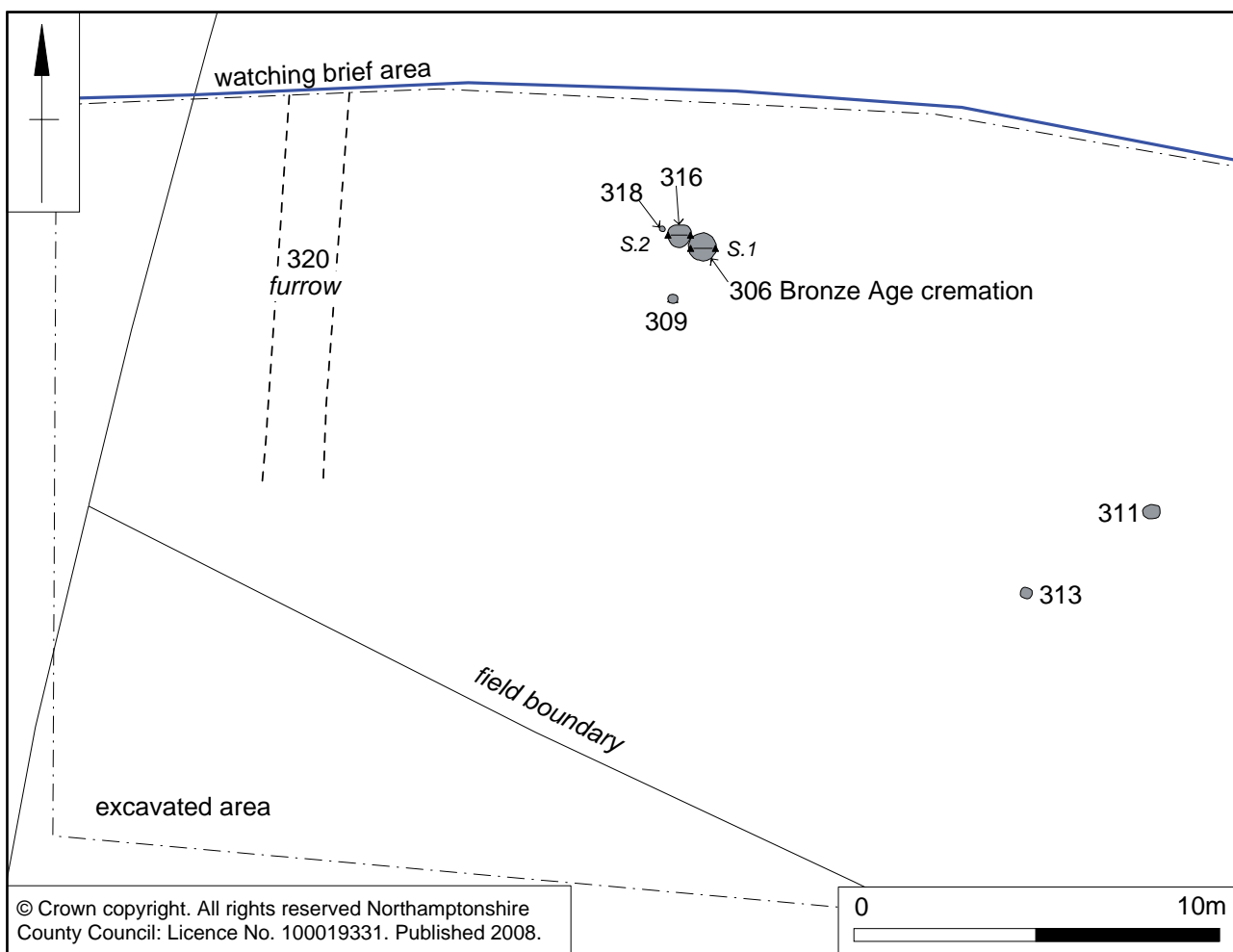


Fig 4 Flood plain lowering area, plan of features



Fig 5 Base of urn exposed and damaged in machine stripping



Fig 6 The inverted urn exposed for lifting

immediately to the north-west of posthole [316] was a shallow stakehole [318] (Fig 4). Both features were filled with mid grey-brown silty clay loam with gravel and charcoal flecks.

Two further shallow postholes lay to the south-east. Postholes [311] and [313] were 0.29m and 0.43m in diameter and 0.07m to 0.09m deep, and filled with mid grey-brown silty clay loam with occasional river gravels. The fill of posthole [311] contained two pieces of worked flint.

Approximately 8m to the west of the cremation there was a shallow, linear feature [320], probably a furrow, aligned north to south, 1.5m wide by 0.08m deep. Its fill of light brown silty clay contained sherds of abraded medieval pottery dated to the 13th to 14th centuries.

All of the features were sealed by topsoil (301), which ranged from 0.3m to 0.4m thick.

WEST SPUR

The remains of a north-west to south-east aligned boundary ditch was visible in the fields to the east and west of the watching brief area (Fig 2). It was parallel to field boundaries to the north and south. Within the stripped area, the ditch, which was cut into alluvium, was 1.4m wide and was filled with dark grey brown silty clay loam with gravel inclusions. It was overlain by topsoil. No dating evidence was recovered, but it is probably post-medieval or modern in date.

EAST SPUR

In this area there were two ditches (Fig 2). One contained eleven pieces of residual worked flint, the other contained abraded fragments of brick, tile and a piece of fuel ash slag. In addition, there was a series of short, roughly parallel, undated shallow gullies and a scatter of shallow pits and postholes, all cut into the alluvium. The topsoil was 0.25m to 0.40m thick.

THE BRONZE AGE CREMATION BURIAL

A cremation burial within a Collared Urn (304) was recovered from a pit [306] (Figs 4-6). The pit was steep-

sided, 0.69m in diameter and 0.34m deep (Fig 7, Section 1). Although the fill (305) was fairly homogeneous, there appears to have been two phases of soil deposition as the urn was apparently placed upon a primary fill, 0.06m thick. The pit was backfilled around the urn with red-brown sandy-silt, with gravel inclusions (305), which contained no pyre debris. The contents of the urn are described in detail below.

The north-west edge of the pit was cut by a pit/posthole [316], 0.55m in diameter and 0.28m deep (Fig 7, Section 2 & Fig 8). It was steep-sided with a deeper hole in the base. It is possible that this was a post-pit that had held a grave marker post.

THE BRONZE AGE URN

Andy Chapman

The Collared Urn (Figs 9-11) stands *c* 250mm high, with a flat base, 105mm in diameter, and a rim diameter of 215mm. The fabric contains no evident mineral inclusions and is black throughout, apart from the outer skin, 1-2mm thick, which is red brown. The colour differentiation indicates that the pot had stood rim down in a bonfire, so that only the outer surface was oxidised. The base is 16-18mm thick, while the body is consistently 10mm thick, but slightly thicker at the carination and at the base of the collar, at 15mm thick. There is an oblique coil join just above the carination, which had been a major point of fracture. The rim is rounded and undecorated.

This is a tripartite vessel, with a shallow collar, 43mm thick, above a concave neck, 65mm deep, with a marked carination at the base of the neck. The collar and the neck are decorated with a herringbone motif, executed in incised lines. There are six lines on the neck while on the collar there are abrupt changes from five to four lines (Fig 12). In some places adjacent lines meet at an apex or overlap slightly, while in other places there is a gap between the adjacent lines.

The narrow collar and the presence of decoration below the collar, places this urn in Longworth's Primary Series and in Burgess's Early style (Gibson & Woods 1997, 126-131).

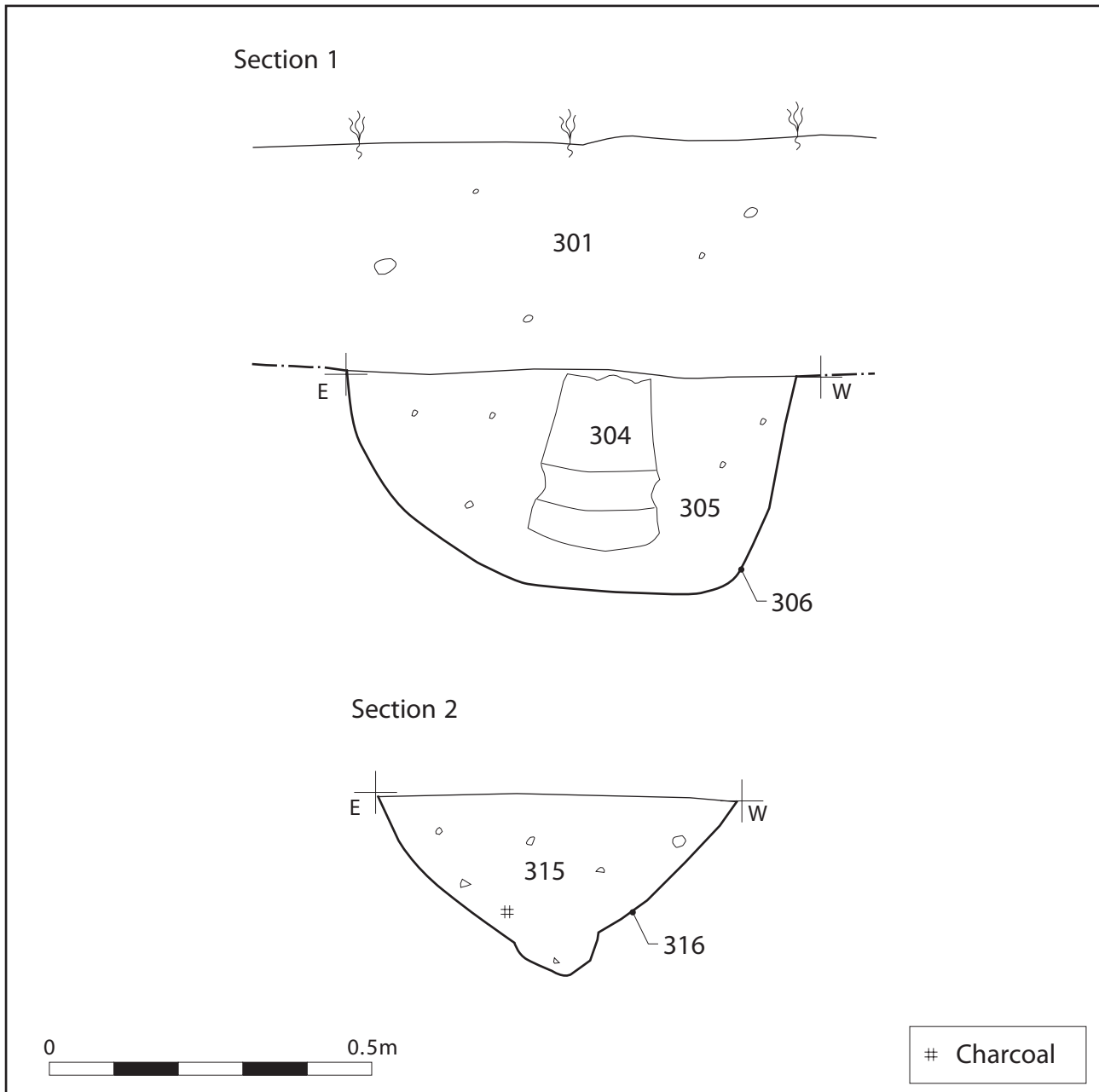


Fig 7 Pit 306 containing inverted Collared Urn (304), and posthole 316



Fig 8 Pit 306 and adjacent posthole 316, looking south

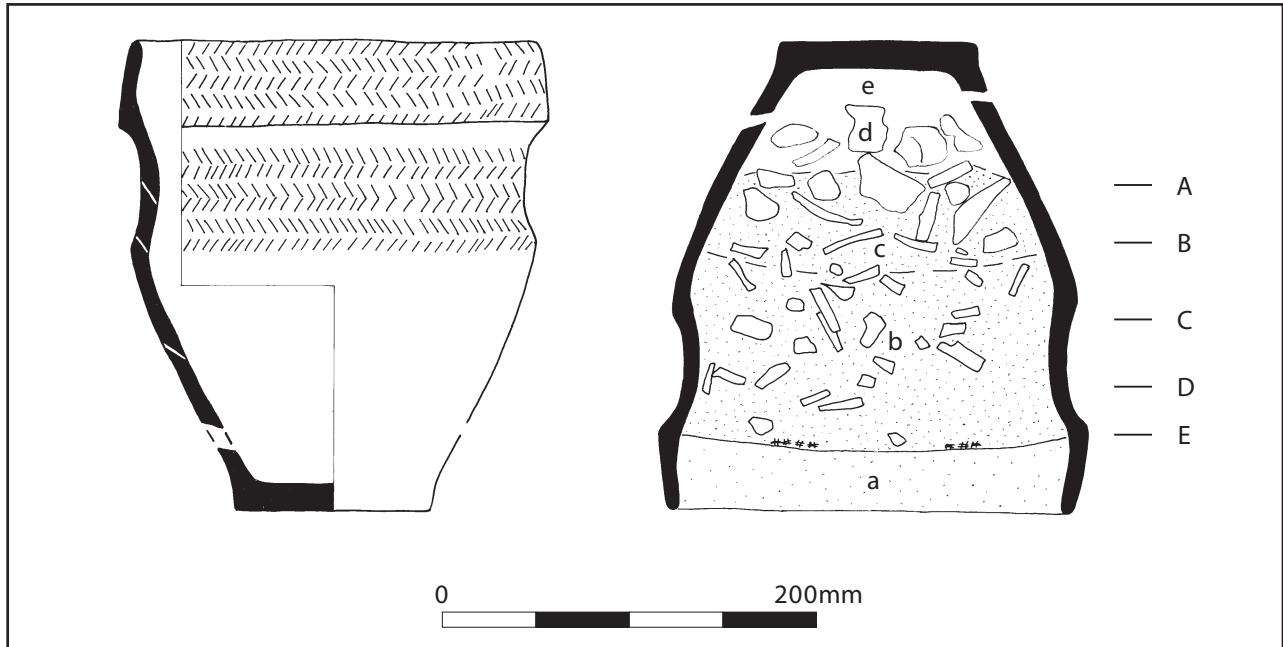


Fig 9 The Collared Urn 304 and section showing contents of urn



Fig 10 The Collared Urn, after initial cleaning and before excavation of its contents

Fig 11 The Collared Urn after excavation and dismantling





Fig 12 The Collared Urn, showing the change from four to five rows of herringbone decoration on the collar

THE CONTENTS OF THE COLLARED URN/THE CREMATION DEPOSIT

Andy Chapman and Pat Chapman

METHODOLOGY

The base of the inverted urn had been removed by the excavating machine when the urn was uncovered. However, the urn was evidently already fractured at the base before this. This fracture had permitted water to trickle in, and loose bone within the void at the base of the pot had become coated with a thin layer of silt. The extent to which the soil content, or a proportion of it, may have come into the pot following deposition is uncertain.

Following cleaning of the exterior of the pot, the outside was treated with a weak solution of PVA to provide some strength to the fabric. One side of the vessel was in particularly poor condition, with an old oblique fracture along a coil join near the carination, so that the lower



Fig 13 The cremated bone deposit in section

body had slipped down and slightly overlapped with the upper body. In addition, there were numerous other fractures throughout the vessel, which had essentially been held together by the soil adhering to its surfaces. The more damaged side of the vessel was removed to provide both a section of the contents (Figs 9 & 13) and access to the interior for the excavation of the contents (as it was not possible to turn the urn upright given the damage to the base and the presence of a void). The bone and soil deposit was taken down in a series of five spits, each *c* 30mm thick, over a total depth of 180mm (Fig 9, A-E). The uppermost spit comprised loose bone (Fig 14), while the others were all in a matrix of sandy loam. At each level the exposed surface was drawn and photographed (Fig 15, level A). The matrix was retained for wet sieving, which produced nothing of significance. Once the contents of the urn had been removed, the remainder of the urn was in such a fragile condition, with multiple fractures, that it was not possible to keep it together (Fig 11).

THE CONTENTS OF THE URN

The void in the base of the pot was up to *c* 30mm deep and extended down parts of the sides for up to 60mm (Fig 9, e). At the base of the pot, the first material to be deposited in the urn, there were loose large bone fragments often up to 60mm across (Figs 9, d and Fig 14). There was a mixture of body parts, including fragments of skull, long bone and a number of recognisable fragments of the drums and the detached processes and spine of vertebra. Below this there were similarly large bone fragments, with the same broad mix of body parts, in a matrix of clean brown sandy loam (Figs 9, c and Fig 15). At a depth of 120mm from the top of the bone deposit (60mm above the base of the deposit), there was a gradual change to smaller bone fragments, of up to 30mm, closely packed in a firm deposit of brown sandy loam (Fig 9, b). The



Fig 14 The loose bone in the base of the urn



Fig 15 The bone deposit in plan, level A

bottom 20mm of the deposit was very densely packed in a compact matrix of brown sand, which also contained sparse small flecks of charcoal. This still contained some pieces of bone of up to 30mm, but the proportion of small fragments was higher. The lower half of the deposit still contained a mix of body parts.

It was notable throughout that, apart from very sparse and small charcoal flecks, the matrix was of clean sand, which had evidently not come from the pyre. There were no stone inclusions, even down to the smallest pebble.

The base of the bone deposit lay 35mm above the rim of the urn, with a slight hollow in the top of the underlying deposit (Fig 9, a). At the interface between the cremated bone and the underlying sand there were a few fragments of oak charcoal, measuring 40-60mm long, which suggests that a few lumps of carbonised wood had been deliberately placed on top of the bone deposit before the urn was inverted for deposition. It is this charcoal that has given a radiocarbon date in the early 2nd millennium BC (see below). In addition, there was a single piece of natural flint.

The top 30-40mm of the urn was filled with clean light brown sand, containing fine gravel, closely similar to the light brown sand adhering to the outer surface of the pot.

Given the presence of a void at the base of the urn, it seems unlikely that the pot had been "topped-up" with sand prior to being inverted and deposited, as this would have prevented the contents from settling to form a void. It seems more likely that some organic filler or cover had been used to prevent the contents from falling out on inversion. It is suggested that the decay of some organic filler had allowed the formation of a void at the base of the inverted pot. The pot may also have sunk into the underlying sand by up to 40mm.

THE HUMAN BONE

Sarah Inskip

(The full report is included in the client report and will be available from the Northamptonshire HER, online through ADS and in archive.)

The bone deposit weighed 2.3 kg. This is average for a complete, adult modern cremation. The total weight and virtual complete representation of skeletal elements suggest that the very complete remains from a single entire individual had been collected and placed in the urn. Every long bone is represented and furthermore, the small bones of the hand and foot were recovered, including three sesamoid bones and many distal phalanges. All the major bones of the skull are present as well as a large number of each of the four types of vertebrae. The deposit was checked for the presence of more than one individual but no repeated, sided fragments were found.

The colour of the bone, 90% of which is cream/white, indicates a pyre temperature above 600° C. There were few fragments of black and grey bone. There were no significant colour differences between the groups and uniformity in bone fragment colour suggests that the high temperature of the pyre was consistent around the body. There was a large variation in bone fragment size; the largest was a tibia fragment measuring 62mm x 40mm, while the smallest fragments were less than 1mm. The majority of the bone (82%) was in the 10mm and 5mm sieve fractions.

The osteological evidence suggests that this person was adult and the auricular surface indicates that they were a middle adult onwards (at least 25 years old). This is further reinforced by the presence of age related pathology, as there are changes in the spine that are consistent with osteoarthritis, which would also suggest an older adult, although such changes can also be activity related. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine the sex of the individual.

THE CHARCOAL

Rowena Gale

A sample of charcoal recovered from the Collared Urn at the interface between the bone deposit and the underlying sand, was identified to genus level prior to radiocarbon dating.

The charcoal was extremely friable and also infiltrated with sediments, which made it rather difficult to examine. The sample was prepared using standard methods (Gale and Cutler 2000). Anatomical structures were examined using incident light on a Nikon Labophot-2 compound microscope at magnifications up to x400 and matched to prepared reference slides of modern wood; where possible, the maturity of the wood was assessed (i.e. heartwood/ sapwood). The samples were identified as:

Context (303) 1 x oak (*Quercus* sp.) sapwood, <1g
26 x oak (*Quercus* sp.) heartwood

RADIOCARBON DETERMINATION

A sample of oak sapwood charcoal from the fill (303) of the Collared Urn was submitted for radiocarbon determination (Table 1 - see p. 25).

WORKED FLINT

Andy Chapman

Eighteen pieces of flint were recovered during the

Table 1: Radiocarbon determination of the charcoal from cremation pit [306]

| Lab no. and sample no. | Origin of sample | Sample details | 13C/12C ratio | Conventional radiocarbon age BP | Cal BC 68% 95% |
|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Beta-238910 UFA07/303 | Fill 303 of urn | Oak (<i>Quercus</i> sp.) charcoal | -24.0 0/00 | 3560 +/-40 | 1940-1870 1980-1750 |

Radiocarbon dating laboratory: Beta Analytic, University of Florida, Miami, USA

Method of analysis: AMS - standard

Calibration: Reimer *et al* 2004; OxCal v3.10; Bronk Ramsey; curb r:5 sd:12 prob usp (chron)

fieldwork. Four pieces came from the subsoil and eleven from the fill of the ditch on the eastern spur, and two pieces are from context (310), posthole [311] from the floodplain lowering area, near the cremation burial.

In addition, there is a single piece that had been placed within the Collared Urn on top of the cremated bone (303). This was a piece of natural flint, 45mm long by 36mm wide and 15mm thick, from a patinated and rolled pebble that had probably fractured along a natural plan of weakness.

The raw material is either grey, or occasionally brown, vitreous flint with a brown to light brown cortex or a grey granular opaque flint with a light brown to white cortex. Most pieces are between 20-30mm long, often with some cortex surviving, indicating that most come from quite small pebbles, as can be found within the local gravels.

The group includes 13 flakes, two blades and two cores. The flakes are typically short and squat, and only a couple show clear edge damage, perhaps from utilisation. There are two blades, one of which shows both edge damage and some retouch.

The two cores are both crudely worked pebble cores, 50mm and 52mm in diameter. One has a single platform while the other is discoidal, with small flakes removed around the circumference. Both cores are in grey opaque flint, with white cortex.

This small group of flint contains too few diagnostic features to enable any general characterisation, although all would be broadly appropriate to Neolithic to early Bronze Age assemblages utilising poor-quality flint obtained as pebbles or small cobbles from the local gravels.

DISCUSSION

Anne Foard-Colby and Andy Chapman

In the early second millennium BC, the early Bronze Age, a Collared Urn containing the cremated remains of a single mature adult, was inverted and buried in a small pit, close to the banks of the River Nene. This cremation deposit is unusual in that it contains virtually the entire individual, with all the major bones present along with the small hand and foot bones. This indicates that great care had been taken in recovering this material from the pyre. The lack of charcoal and burnt soils also indicates that care had been taken to exclude other pyre debris, perhaps through a combination of careful selection from the pyre and subsequent cleaning, possibly washing, of the bone. The distribution of the material within the urn indicates that the larger bone fragments had been placed

in the bottom and then progressively smaller bones were added above this. The bone was probably deposited within a matrix of clean sand, as it seems unlikely that this had all accumulated as a result of silts infiltrating through fine cracks in the urn, although this had certainly been occurring. Once all the bone had been deposited in the urn, a few token fragments of charcoal, presumably taken directly from the pyre, which had been fuelled with oak timbers, had been placed on top of the bone, along with a square piece of natural flint. The urn was then inverted and placed in its pit for burial.

Immediately adjacent to the burial pit there was a second pit, which may have held a timber post as a grave marker. However, there was no evidence for a surrounding ditch to indicate that this burial had lain beneath a round barrow, or for the presence of a nearby barrow. Four small, shallow postholes lay close by, but the lack of dating evidence precludes establishing an association with the grave. This would therefore appear to be an isolated cremation burial with no relation to a round barrow or other funerary deposits.

There are only a few known funerary sites of Bronze Age date in the immediate vicinity. A supposed round barrow, the Upton Barrow (Scheduled Ancient Monument 13674; NSMR 5132/0/3), lies approximately 285m south-east of Upton Mill, but investigation in the early 1990s was inconclusive in establishing a date, and it was suggested that the monument probably post-dated the Roman period (Jackson 1993a, 8-9; 1993b, 72-73). A cremation deposit within a Collared Urn was discovered in a sand pit at Milton Malsor in 1965 (RCHME 1982, 102), but the context of the burial is unknown (Fig 1, Milton Malsor 1965). It would have lain quite close to a tributary stream running into Wootton Brook, itself a tributary of the River Nene. In Northampton, a small Collared Urn was found at St. Peter's Street, and is believed to have been an accessory vessel, perhaps associated with a nearby round barrow (Humble, in Williams *et al*, 1985, 46).

Of a slightly later date, at Pineham Barn, to the south of the River Nene, a small cremation cemetery contained the remains of seven individuals, one of which was contained within a vessel probably of middle Bronze Age date (Brown 2007). A nearby cluster of pits produced early Bronze Age pottery and a nearby ring ditch is interpreted as a possible barrow, although this is undated.

Within the broader landscape, the site lies 2.5km to the west of the Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure at Briar Hill, which was a major focus for ritual and funerary activity in this stretch of the Nene valley from the Neolithic to

the middle Bronze Age periods. A small, unenclosed cemetery dated to the middle Bronze Age and containing the remains of at least 22 individuals, lay within the Neolithic enclosure (Bamford 1985).

The Upton cremation therefore adds a further footnote to the earlier prehistory of this area, which lies on the western margin of Northampton and is progressively being lost to the expansion of the town.

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