Northamptonshire Archaeology, **37**, *2012, 69-87*

Flat-grave Beaker burials at Warmington and Ashton

by

STEPHEN PARRY, BRIAN DIX and ALEX GIBSON

with a contribution by Andy Chapman

SUMMARY

Excavation of late medieval and post-medieval buildings in 1995 near Warmington Mill, Eaglethorpe, Warmington, close to the River Nene, produced the unexpected bonus of a crouched Beaker inhumation burial of the Early Bronze Age. An adult male, 35-45 years of age, lay in a flat grave, with no encircling barrow ditch. He was accompanied by a Beaker, two V-perforated jet buttons, a broken flint dagger, a flint fabricator and a superb barbed-and-tanged arrowhead. The burial has been radiocarbon dated to the 20th century BC.

Beaker graves with no encircling ditch and perhaps never covered by substantial mounds, are known in small numbers across England, but finding them is necessarily a matter of chance, as at Warmington, so they are likely to be underrepresented in the archaeological record. However, only 3.5km to the south of Warmington, a further two flat graves containing crouched Beaker burials had also been found by chance during excavations at Ashton Roman town in the early 1980s. These burials are also briefly described, and one has also been radiocarbon dated to the 20th century BC.

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1995 Northamptonshire Archaeology excavated areas near Warmington Mill at Eaglethorpe, Warmington in advance of the construction of the A605 Warmington bypass (NGR: TL 0737 9158; Fig 1). The objective of the excavation was to examine the development of settlement through the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods. However, in this article it is the unexpected bonus of finding a Beaker burial of the Early Bronze Age that is the subject of interest. The Warmington burial was also similar in nature and date to two Beaker burials uncovered 3.5km to the south during excavations at Ashton Roman town between 1982 and 1985, led by Brian Dix, prior to the construction of the A605 Oundle bypass (NGR TL 0472 8893; Fig 1). These burials and the accompanying finds are also briefly described.

BACKGROUND

Archaeological geophysical survey, excavation and watching brief were undertaken ahead of and during construction of the A605 Warmington bypass in 1995 and 1996. The A605 Warmington bypass, together with other works at Tansor crossroads, formed part of Northamptonshire County Council's strategy to improve communication between the A14 at Thrapston and the A1 at Peterborough.

As part of the environmental assessment prior to road construction, from 1991 to 1993 archaeological evaluation of the adopted and alternative routes was undertaken by the Contracts Section of Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit, which led to the identification of a series of archaeological sites along the route (Shaw 1993).

The Curatorial Section of the former Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit assessed the archaeological importance of the remains and defined the objectives of subsequent work. In early 1995 excavation of two of a group of three suspected round barrows at Tansor Crossroads (Fig 1) demonstrated that the largest mound was a Neolithic oval barrow, possibly containing a mortuary enclosure, which was probably mounded over in the Early Bronze Age (Chapman 1997). The mound was also reused for burial in the Anglo-Saxon period, probably the 7th century AD.

At Eaglethorpe, excavation was undertaken along the line of the bypass at either side of the lane leading to Warmington Mill, on the River Nene, with the Beaker burial lying to the west of the lane, in Trench 1 (Fig 2).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was funded by the Planning and Transportation Department of Northamptonshire County Council. The excavations were supervised by Michael Webster under the direction of Stephen Parry. Steve Critchley carried out the metal detector survey. The Beaker burial was excavated by Rob Atkins. Subsequent stratigraphic analysis was carried out by Joe Prentice. Dr Alex Gibson has reported on the pottery and grave goods, but it should be noted that this report was provided in 1996 and has not been revised to take account of the latest research on Beaker pottery, while the report on the Beakers from Ashton dates to the late 1980s. The present report has been abstracted from the draft report on the excavations on the Warmington bypass and on an unpublished text by Brian Dix describing the Ashton Beaker burials. The texts have been edited for publication by Andy Chapman.

SUMMARY OF SITE CHRONOLOGY

Five major periods of activity were identified through excavation along the length of the bypass adjacent to Warmington (Table 1). Fieldwalking during the initial evalu-

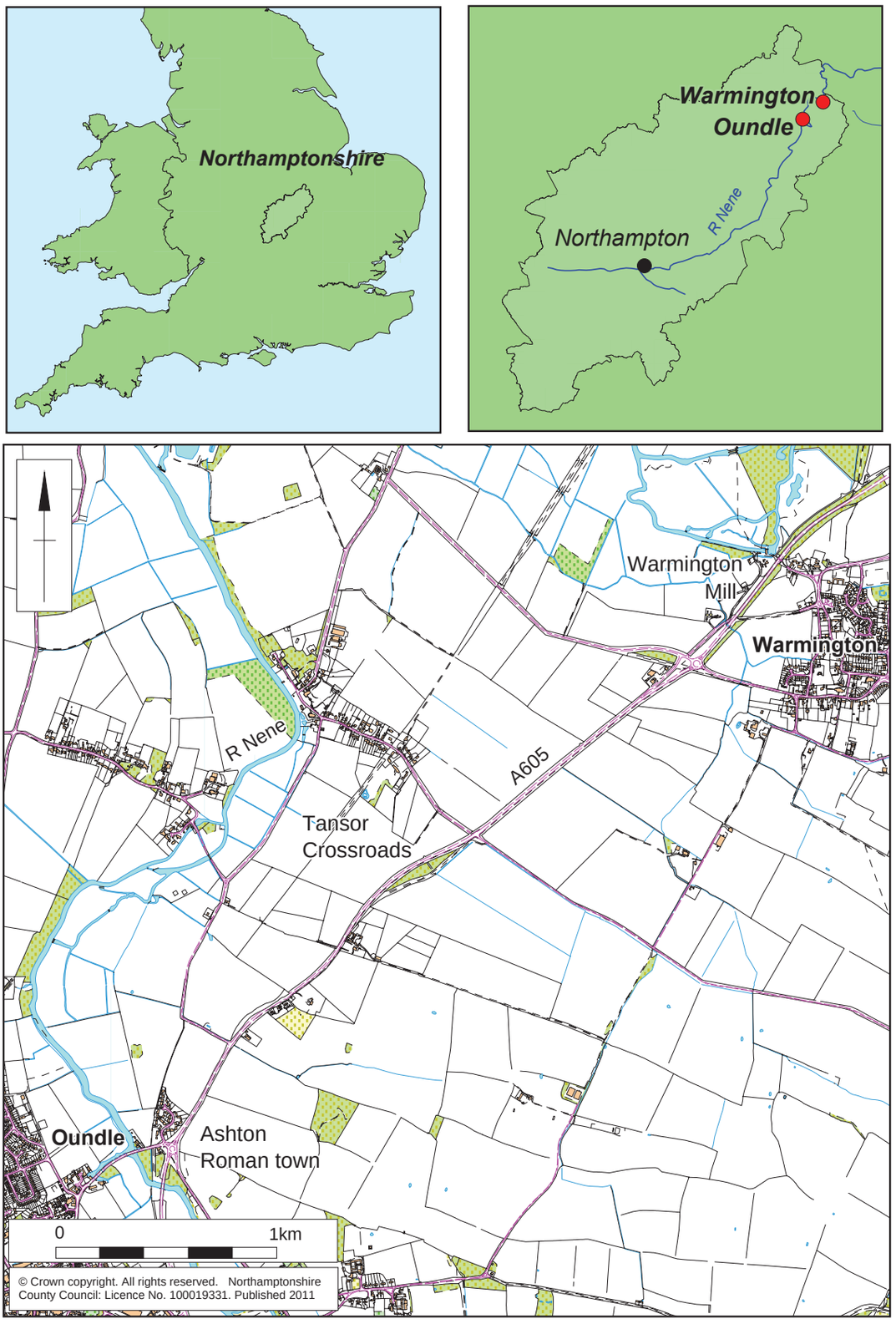


Fig 1 Location plan for Warmington and Ashton sites

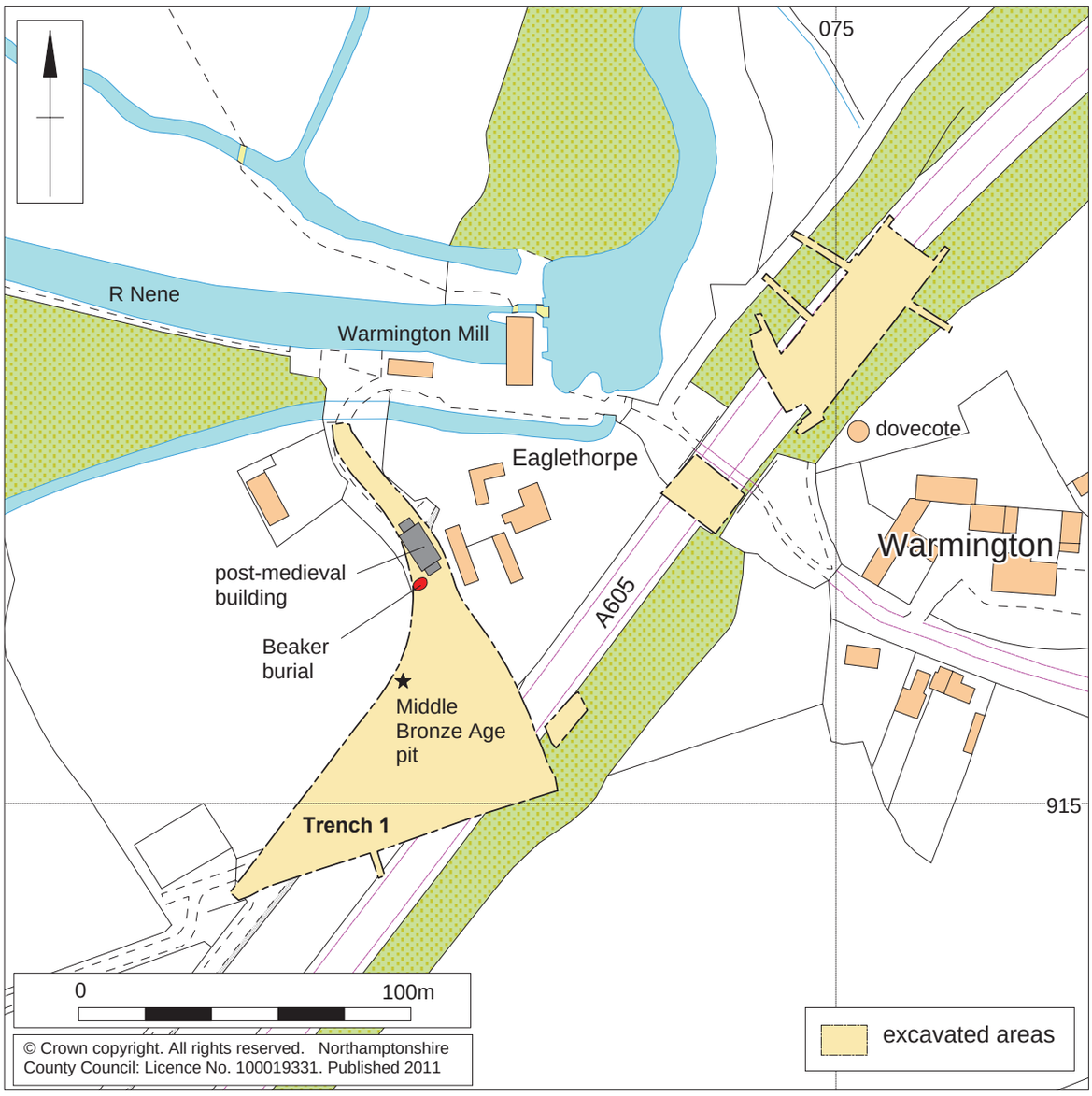


Fig 2 The excavated sites at Warmington

Table 1: Summary of identified sites on the A605 Warmington bypass

Date	Activity
Bronze Age	Early Bronze Age Beaker burial (Trench 1) Middle Bronze Age pit (Trench 1)
Iron Age	Pit alignments
Roman	Field enclosures and associated pits
Saxon	Fieldwalking scatters only
Medieval	Late medieval building and possible malt house within rectangular plots Medieval pits Fragmentary stone structures and yard surfaces (Trench 1 and elsewhere), possibly part of the Burystead manor shown in the village survey of 1621, late medieval and later Furrows
Post-medieval	Substantial building with ovens, 17th century (Trench 1)

Fig 3 The Beaker burial, looking north

ation had identified early-middle Saxon pottery scatters, but these did not relate to any underlying deposits.

THE WARMINGTON BEAKER BURIAL

The remains of the Beaker burial lay adjacent to the 17th-century building on top of a ridge parallel to the River Nene (Fig 2). The inhumation lay within a shallow oval grave, which measured 2.30m east-west and 1.45m across its shorter axis, with steep sides and a flat base, cutting into the natural gravel to a depth of 180mm (Fig 3). To the east, the edge of the grave was cut by a medieval pit and the upper parts of the grave fill of brown sandy loam had probably been truncated by recent ploughing.

The body lay on its back, but with the limbs and head facing towards its left side, looking north (Figs 3 and 4). The limbs were flexed so that the hands were placed by the breast bone with the knees drawn up to the lower chest. The right shoulder appeared to have slumped away from the body and the right leg may have dropped slightly due to settling within the grave. While the major parts of the skeleton were present, the skull was crushed and distorted, the long bones were all split and fragmented, the vertebrae and pelvis were in poor condition and many of the smaller bones, such as the fingers and toes, had decomposed completely.

The skeleton is that of an adult male aged between 35 to 45 years old and about 5ft 9ins (1.80m) tall. He was well above average height for the time, and had been well fed when young, and had suffered no physical injuries to cause any bone damage.

The burial was accompanied by a Beaker and at least five other grave goods (Figs 5-7). The Beaker, the first object uncovered during excavation, stood behind the burial, close to the pelvis (Fig 3, 100). Next to the Beaker there was the larger of the two V-perforated jet buttons (100), and on the other side of the Beaker there was half of a large flint dagger (91) and a large flake that had been utilised but not retouched (92). Close to the right shoulder there was the smaller V-perforated jet button (101), and the enlongated flint fabricator (102). In addition, a superb barbed-and-tanged arrowhead (15) was recovered from the fill of the adjacent medieval pit, but is likely to have been re-deposited from the Beaker grave, where it would have lain in the disturbed north-eastern corner. A broken point, worked on both sides (79), was also recovered from the medieval pit, and may have come from a second arrowhead. A further eight undistinguished flint flakes were recovered from the grave fill, and another two from the adjacent medieval pit.

A small oval pit, up to 0.7m in diameter by 0.07m deep, lay at the base of the southern side of the ridge, some 30m from the Beaker burial. This contained part of a larger thick-walled vessel with applied decoration in the Deverel Rimbury tradition, and dating to the Middle Bronze Age.

RADIOCARBON DATE

A radiocarbon date was obtained for the Beaker burial based on the submission of leg bones from the skeleton using the standard radiometric technique (Table 2). At 95% confidence there is a wide margin of error, spanning 400 years, 2140-1740 cal BC, but at 60% confidence the indicated date range is centred on the 20th century BC, 2040-1870 cal BC.

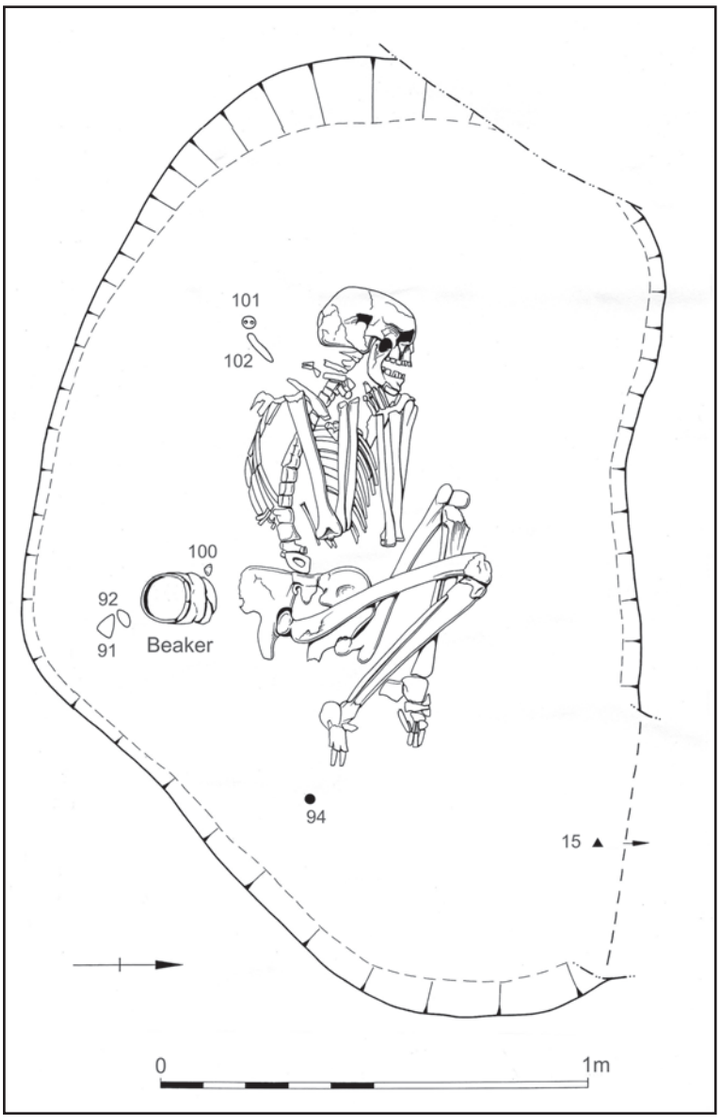
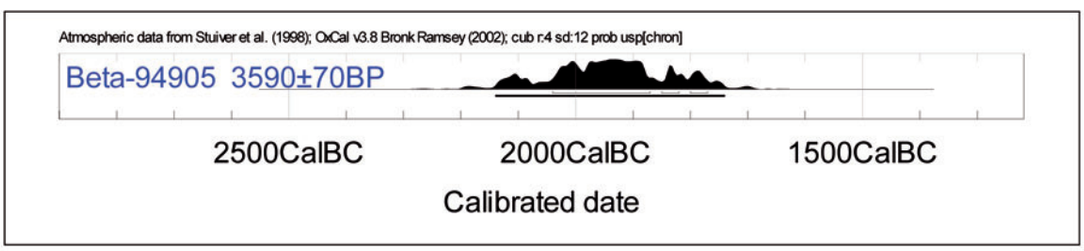


Fig 4 Plan of the burial showing location of grave goods

Table 2: Radiocarbon determination of bone carbonates from pit 205

Lab no.	**Sample details**	**Conventional radiocarbon age BP**	**Cal BC** 68% confidence ***95% confidence***
Beta-94905	Human bone	3590 +/- 70	2040-1870 (59.5%) 1850-1820 (4.5%) 1800-1770 (4.2%) ***2140-1740***

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



THE GRAVE GOODS
by Alex Gibson

THE BEAKER

The Beaker is in a hard well-fired and well finished fabric with fine smooth surfaces (Figs 5 & 6). The outer surface is reddish-brown while the inner is light brown. The fabric averages 5mm thick and has a black core. The fabric appears to contain finely crushed grog inclusions as well as some rounded quartz, usually small but occasionally up to 6mm across and occupying the complete thickness of the vessel wall.

The rim is slightly in-turned and has a diameter of *c*120mm. The rim itself is pointed with a small internal bevel, 3mm wide. The pot has had a wide flaring neck and rounded bulbous body with the belly diameter matching the rim. The base diameter is 60mm, and the height is 170mm. The decoration, which covers the entire body of the vessel, comprises fine incision or fingernail impressions and toothed-comb impressions. The comb lines degenerate to short straight lengths towards the base of the pot suggesting that a comb approximately 25mm long with some 12-14 teeth.

The decorative scheme, from the rim down, is as follows (Figs 5 & 6):

three horizontal combed lines // zone of finely incised vertical ladder motif interrupted by a narrow comb defined reserved chevron // three horizontal combed lines // zone of finely incised vertical ladder motif // three horizontal combed lines // two zones of finely incised vertical ladder motif interrupted by comb defined reserved chevrons and the zones separated by three horizontal combed lines // three horizontal combed lines // zone of finely incised vertical ladder motif // three horizontal combed lines // two zones of finely incised vertical ladder motif interrupted by comb defined reserved chevrons and the zones separated by three horizontal combed lines // three horizontal combed lines // a broad zone of four alternating filled and reserved running chevrons (the filled elements contain fine vertical incisions) // two or in places three horizontal lines immediately above the base.

The decorative motifs fall within Clarke's (1970) Southern British Motif Group 4 (motif 32).

OTHER GRAVE GOODS

Two V-perforated conical buttons of jet (100 & 101) (Fig 8). The larger example (100) is oval measuring 36mm by 33mm, and 14mm high, with the perforations along the long axis. The oblique drilled perforations are 9mm wide

Fig 5 The Beaker (170mm high)

Fig 6 Close up of the neck of the Beaker, showing the detail of the decorative scheme

at the surface but taper in, and the aperture where they intersect is no more than 2mm in diameter. The smaller button is circular, 24mm in diameter and 8mm high. The perforations are off centre, and only 4mm wide at the surface and again the aperture where they intersect is no more than 2mm in diameter.

A broken flint knife (91), with a longest measurement of 70mm, and 10mm thick, in light grey flint. It has been retouched around the surviving edges (Fig 9). This is probably the butt end of a small flint dagger, with the break running obliquely across it. The complete dagger would have been 60mm wide and perhaps *c* 110-120mm long. It is possible that it broke during manufacturing.

A flint fabricator (102), 89mm long by 20mm wide and 14mm thick, in black flint, with the classic ridged back. It has seen considerable use, with all surfaces at least lightly worn, and the distal end in particularly is highly polished (Fig 10).

A flint barbed-and-tanged arrowhead (15), 34mm long by 23mm across the base, and only 2-3mm thick, in a light grey flint (Fig 11). The point is extremely fine and there is delicate pressure flaking on both surfaces. The arrowhead is near perfectly symmetrical, and apparently pristine and unused. The slightly inward sloping barbs place the point in Green's (1980) Green Low type which has exclusively Beaker associations.

Flint flake (92) 63mm long by 32mm wide, in a light grey flint with a patch of cortex remaining at the proximal end (Fig 12). The bulb survives and irregular damage to both edges shows that the flake has been utilised but not retouched.

From the fill of the adjacent medieval pit there is a broken flint point (79), 27mm long, in a dark brown flint. It has been worked with pressure flaking on both sides and may be from a further arrowhead, possibly an unfinished tanged arrowhead, abandoned when it broke

Fig 7 The grave goods: fabricator, jet buttons, arrowhead, flake and broken knife (Scale 20mm)

Fig 8 The jet buttons (100 & 101), showing the conical tops, and the angled V-perforation (36mm and 24mm diameter)

Fig 9 The broken flint dagger (91) (70mm wide)

Fig 10 The flint 'fabricator' (102), plan and side views (89mm long)

Fig 11 The barbed-and-tanged arrowhead (15) (34mm long)

Fig 12 The utilised flint flake (92) (61mm long)

across the tang when only one half of the tang was finished.

At the foot end of the grave there was a small fragment of fossil shell (94). Scattered through the grave fill there were six flint flakes (93, 95, 96, 97, 103 & 104), which are probably all accidental inclusions within the soil backfill, along with a small calcined flint flake (98) and a flake (402) from the fill of the adjacent medieval pit. At the head end of the grave there was a blade-like flake (99), 50mm long and 24m wide, which had been utilized, and a similar blade (401), 54mm long and 17mm perhaps even from the same core and utilized on one edge came from the adjacent medieval pit. It is unclear whether these two better worked pieces were grave goods or accidental inclusions.

DISCUSSION

The Warmington Beaker falls within Clarke's (1970) Developed Southern British (S^2) group and step 6 of Lanting and van der Waals's (1972) scheme. In both typochronologies, the Warmington vessel is late in the sequence, though in the light of a study of radiocarbon dates this may have little relevance to absolute chronology (Kinnes *et al* 1991). The form and decoration of the vessel may be paralleled at Chippenham V in Cambridgeshire (Clarke 1970, No. 64) and at Fengate, Peterborough (Gibson, in Pryor 1980), and late vessels have also been discovered in burials at West Cotton and Irthlingborough, in the Raunds Area (Harding and Healy

2007). Other parallels for the decoration, particularly the chevron and vertical ladder motif may be found at Houghton, Huntingdon (Clarke 1970, No.366), Bishops Cannings 54, Wilts (ibid. No. 1078) and on a Primary South British (S^1) vessel from Denton, Lincolnshire (ibid No. 445).

According to Clarke's analysis (1970, appendix 3) jet buttons occur most frequently with S^2 beakers, 8 out of a total of 17 finds. They may also be found frequently with S^1 and S^3 vessels (twice each) and are infrequent with other styles. They also tend to be found with male burials though the association is not exclusive.

A similar tool kit grave was found at West Cotton associated with an adult male burial, comprising a flint dagger, flint flake, jet button and a chalk fragment (Harding and Healy 2007, 226, fig 4.4). At Irthlingborough the associated inhumation was accompanied by a tool kit comprising a flint dagger, five jet buttons, a wristguard, a whetstone, a flint arrowhead, a boar's tusk, nine flint flakes, an amber ring, three bone spatulae and a "sponge finger" stone (Harding and Healy 2007, 236, fig 4.6); these latter associations generally considered to be leatherworking equipment (Smith & Simpson 1966).

The Warmington arrowhead is of Green's (1980) Green Low type being symmetrical and with slightly inwardly angled barbs. They are exclusively found with Beaker burials, and are exclusively associated with stylistically late vessels (Green 1980, 130) belonging primarily to Lanting and van der Waals's step 5 and 6, and to vessels in Clarke's (1970) Southern British Series, particularly $S^{1\text{-}3}$.

The flint fabricator association is altogether much rarer and indeed is not at all documented in Clarke's corpus. Longworth (1984) records the possibility of three, certainly two, associations of Collared Urns with this enigmatic artefact, and so again it is a rare association. The Warmington example is highly abraded and worn, particularly at the distal end. It may be considered in the same light as stone "sponge fingers" and bone and antler spatula, which are again chiefly associated with $S^{1\text{-}2}$ vessels (6 out of 8 associations recorded by Clarke); as part of a presumed leatherworker's tool kit, although usage as striking flints for fire lighting is a further possibility.

Flint knives or daggers are also more frequently found with S^2 vessels, 16 instances out of a total of 53 associations. Indeed, 50 of the flint flake knife and Beaker associations are with late vessels, step 4 or later and principally with male graves. The Warmington example may well be a broken flint dagger, in which case the parallels with the Irthlingborough and West Cotton dagger graves are even more relevant (Harding and Healy 2007). Clarke (1970) records twelve flint daggers ten of which are associated with late vessels (S^1 - 5, S^2 - 3, S^3 - 2).

THE HUMAN SKELETON

by Simon Chapman

The analysis of the human bone was undertaken in 1996 at the bone laboratory of the School of Archaeological Studies at the University of Leicester. It followed standard accepted methodologies used in studies of this nature. The archive report has been edited for publication.

CONDITION

As the skeletal remains were fragile they were sent to the laboratory unwashed, and it was necessary to clean and prepare each of the bones before further analysis could be carried out. Due to the particularly poor state of preservation and the fragility of most of the bones, rather than washing in water the bones were dry washed. This involved the removal of muddy encrustation's with the use of a wooden spatulae, a mounted needle and occasionally an engraving tool. The medullary cavity of many of the long bones was filled with dry soil, and this was occasionally left in place to lend support to otherwise fragmentary bones, especially useful for measuring purposes.

The cranium had sustained considerable post-depositional transverse flattening and was grossly distorted, badly shattered and was only held together by an internal matrix of dried mud. The skull was dry cleaned externally to aid observation and to display the general morphology of the cranium. The skull was then photographed from both sides to provide a record of its appearance. Once recording of the external surface had been completed it was necessary to completely dismantle the skull to make the internal surfaces accessible for analysis. The fragments of cranium were cleaned and bagged according to type.

Once cleaned and laid out it was possible for a full inventory of the surviving remains to be compiled. The skeleton was fairly complete, with most parts of the body represented to some extent. The larger missing elements appear to have fallen victim to unfavourable acidic soil conditions, which caused the degradation of the broad bones of the pelvic region and of the scapulae, and the thin bone of the thoracic cage. Acidic soil may also be held responsible for the overall poor state of preservation of the remaining skeleton.

The poor state of the surface bone and the incomplete/shattered condition of most of the long bones has limited the scope of the investigation, particularly in terms of the metrical analysis, the estimation of living stature and potentially in the diagnosis of pathological conditions, since many of these require the good preservation of surface bone. However, although the cranium had been badly crushed and weathered it retained its complete dentition (which was invaluable to the following discussion), one of the auditory ossicles of the left middle ear, and well preserved styloid processes of both temporals (each preserved at a length of *c*10mm).

METRICS

Where possible, broken bones were fitted together for the purpose of measuring though this only occurred in instances where the joins were very close and inaccuracy was deemed to be negligible. Refitting was especially necessary in the case of the right femora since this represented the only complete long-bone (Table 3). Several of the metrics were also employed during sex determination. Some difficulty was experienced in the recording of cranial metrics due to the fact that the

skull had been badly crushed and fragmented in post-deposition. A few measurements were nonetheless obtainable from the mandible.

Table 3: Post-cranial metrics for the right Femur

Metric	Right femur (mm)
FeL_1	504
Fel_2	493
FeD_1	28.9
FeD_2	36.8
FHD_1	50.9
FeD_3	31.9
FeD_4	28.5
FeE_1	80.7

It was possible to calculate a few standard metrical indices, which can be used in describing certain individual characteristics of this person. The Robusticity index of the right femur is 12.25. The Robusticity index of femora expresses the relative size/robusticity of the limb shaft, giving a quick and easy method of determining the degree of robustness (of the upper leg only) of distinct individuals. The index value combined with a study of ossified muscle attachments or *enthesophytes* can give some indication of the build of an individual. From the robusticity index in this instance, and by the fact that muscle attatchments were slight to medium, we can say that this was an individual of roughly medium build. The Platycnemic index, expressing the degree of mediolateral flatness of a tibia, for the right tibiae is 67.18. The value falls between 63.0 and 69.9, so the tibia can be described as being of medium flatness or *Mesocnemic*. Although much has been written on the incidence platycnemia it remains unclear as to the causes of the variation. Authors have cited mechanical adaptation, childhood strains and nutritional deficiency as possible causes of this variation. There does, however, appear to be a trend for more flattening of these bones in antiquity than in modern societies.

NON-METRIC VARIATIONS

Some observations could be made on the occurrence of certain 'non-metric' or 'discontinuous' skeletal variations. These are usually non-pathological 'normal' variations of the human skeleton which cannot be expressed in terms of numerical size variation.

Third femoral trochanter, present and large;
Calcaneal double facet, present left and right side.

AGEING

The criteria on which this individual was aged depended largely on the nature of the bones available. Unfortunately the most reliable bones, the pubic symphyses were missing and alternative, less reliable, criteria had to be sought. The ossification centres (epiphyses) of the major bones suggested that this individual had reached full skeletal maturity. The epiphyses of the proximal humerus and distal femora were fully fused, which occurs between the ages of 16 - 25 years.

Examination of dentition is also a well accepted method for aging a skeleton. The full eruption of all four 3rd molar teeth (wisdom teeth), indicated an age over 21 years of age (3rd molars usually erupt between the ages of 16-21 years), and as the 3rd molars were also considerably worn this suggests that a much greater age might have been reached.

The most distinctive wear patterns were on the upper/maxillary dentition. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd molars are worn according to their relative periods of use, with the 3rd molar (since it was the last to erupt) displaying less attrition than the 1st (the first to erupt). The degree to which each of the molar teeth had been worn in this individual is consistent with an adult that had reached the age of *c* 35-45 years.

SEXING

Most of the diagnostic bones were either missing (the pubic bone) or in a highly fragmentary state (long-bone ends and cranial morphology), but the fragmentary remains did produce enough information on which to base a reasonably accurate assessment. The dimensions of the humeral and femoral heads, the most sexually dimorphic metrical characteristics of the skeleton, suggested that this individual was male, as did the overall robust appearance of the cranium. The skull possessed large nuchal crests, mastoid processes and supra-orbital ridges, though this is not always an infallible indicator of sex. In addition, one fragment of the pelvis bore the remnants of a narrow sciatic notch, so it is possible to classify this individual as almost certainly male.

STATURE

Refitting of long bones to obtain a length measurement was only possible, to any degree of accuracy, for the right femur. The stature as estimated from the length of the right femur was 1.825m (5ft 9.7in), with a mean from all long bones measurement of 1.80m (5ft 9in)

The stature calculated for this individual appears to be somewhat above the average stature usually observed for this period, making the individual from Warmington relatively tall among his peers. Other studies of Bronze Age males have given mean values of 1.72m for the Danish Bronze Age (based on seven individuals, Bennike 1985.51), and 1.72m for four individuals from Portway, Andover (Cook & Dacre 1985.71).

PATHOLOGY

For an individual of this age, 35-45 years old, it is interesting that the skeleton displays little in the way of degenerative change (osteoarthritis, vertebral osteophytosis, rheumatoid arthritis etc) which is known to have been a common complaint for individuals of middle age and older since the earliest of times. The only manifestations of degenerative change came from some slight eburnation and slight surface porosity on some vertebra, though even these were so slight as not to have effected the individual. Since all of the vertebral bodies were missing it is possible that the true extent of the arthropathy has been under diagnosed, as usually it is the vertebral body that is most heavily affected by complaints such as *osteoarthritis*. That the vertebral spines of this individual displayed both surface

porosity and eburnation, due to the deterioration of the joint surfaces and the abrasion of the underlying bone is, however, sufficient to suppose that osteoarthritis had begun to set in.

The poor condition of the surface bone of the remainder of the skeleton meant that further diagnosis of subtle pathological conditions would be impossible. It is, however. possible to state some conditions which were conspicuous by their absence. Certainly none of the bones present had ever been fractured, and none had been affected by gross pathological alteration. There was no sign of deficiency disease (aenemia, rickets etc) and so we can presume, especially in the light of the healthy stature, that this individual had been well nourished, at least during the period of bone growth (up to 21 years).

DENTITION

The dentition of this individual was complete, and none of the permanent teeth had been lost, either during life or in post-deposition, which suggests that oral health was generally very good. Similarly, none of the teeth had been affected by caries or hypoplasias. Calculus (concretions of calcium) had, however, built up on the lower 1st and 2nd molar teeth, mostly on their buccal surfaces, though this is a common feature in populations with little or no concern for dental hygiene.

That the build up of calculus was only very slight and carious lesions were non-existent is not, however, as it is frequently the case that early populations suffer less from dental disease; possibly by virtue of a more simple coarse diet which effectively cleaned the teeth naturally (this is not the case during the middle ages when diet became more diverse and infinitely richer). The coarseness of the diet may also have contributed to the heavy wear associated with the crowns of these teeth, especially of the maxillary dentition.

The only dental problem diagnosed was that the alveolar bone (gumline) had began to recede, presumably, in the absence of dental caries, as a result of periodontal disease. The existence of this condition implies the co-existence of inflammation and tissue repair in association with a persistent stimulus, usually either irritation from calculus or its precursor, bacterial plaque.

TWO BEAKER BURIALS FROM ASHTON ROMAN TOWN

by Brian Dix and Alex Gibson

Two Beaker pit graves were recorded during archaeological rescue excavation in the 1980s in the north-eastern part of the modern parish of Ashton, near Oundle (NGR TL 0472 8893; Fig 13). The burials lay towards the edge of the first terrace gravels which rise above the present alluvial floodplain on the eastern bank of the River Nene, in an area where an unwalled Roman town was later established.

The excavations which led to these discoveries were undertaken by the Northamptonshire County Council Archaeological Unit between 1982 and 1985 prior to the construction of the A605 Oundle bypass. The threatened area formed part of a protected Ancient Monument and statutory consent was given for investigation to complete work which had been organised locally since 1972. Although existing finds included a few pieces of Neolithic pottery and prehistoric worked flints, no clearly associated features had been identified previously.

Permission to excavate was kindly given by the Ashton Estate and the Hon Mrs M L Lane, and work was funded by the Northamptonshire County Surveyor and the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, with additional support from the Manpower Services Commission. The finds from the excavation, copies of original site-records and other information will be placed in Peterborough Museum upon completion of analysis and reporting.

Two separate interments, each containing a comb-zoned Beaker, were located on the sloping edge of the terrace river-gravels at heights of approximately 20m OD, lying *c* 60m apart. The absence of surrounding quarry ditches perhaps indicates that neither of the graves was elaborately covered at the surface, but sufficient material to form a low mound over the earliest interment could have been obtained given the depth to which that grave had been dug, as well as from a possibly contemporary pit which had been opened nearby.

BURIAL 1

Burial 1 lay within the southernmost part of the excavated area, with an adjacent contemporary pit (Fig 13). The earliest grave showed in the subsoil as an oval patch of dark earth, 1.8m wide by 2.1m on its longer axis, which lay roughly north-south. It may have been dug originally as a circular pit, but the top-edges and sides had weathered in a number of places before the feature was eventually backfilled. The greatest collapse had occurred in the loose gravel and sands exposed around the sides, but the sides had remained fairly steep where pockets of clay protruded. The pit was 0.94m deep, and deepened to the west where there was a rectangular depression *c* 1.0m long on its north-south axis by *c* 0.8m wide (Figs 14 & 15). A layer of dirty gravel and sand, up to 120mm thick, covered most of the floor in this area and extended partly up the sides of the pit. Whilst it is possible that it may have resulted from a rapid, initial weathering of the sides, it could equally represent an accumulation of loose materials which collected in the bottom of the pit during the final stages of its original excavation. Alternatively, the deposit may have been laid intentionally and it could be significant that the crouched burial had been placed upon it.

The condition of the skeleton was poor and precluded any positive identification of its sex and age at death. The shafts of the leg bones and pelvis survived, but very few bones from the upper body, although the position of the head was indicated by the preservation of five teeth towards the southern end of the grave (Fig 16). Since the arms and most of the axial skeleton had totally decayed, the posture remains uncertain. However, the position of the pelvis and the lower limbs suggest that the body lay on its right side, perhaps half on its back, with the legs drawn up at right-angles to the spine and folded over to the east. Despite being more complete than any other part of the skeleton, these elements were also badly decayed,

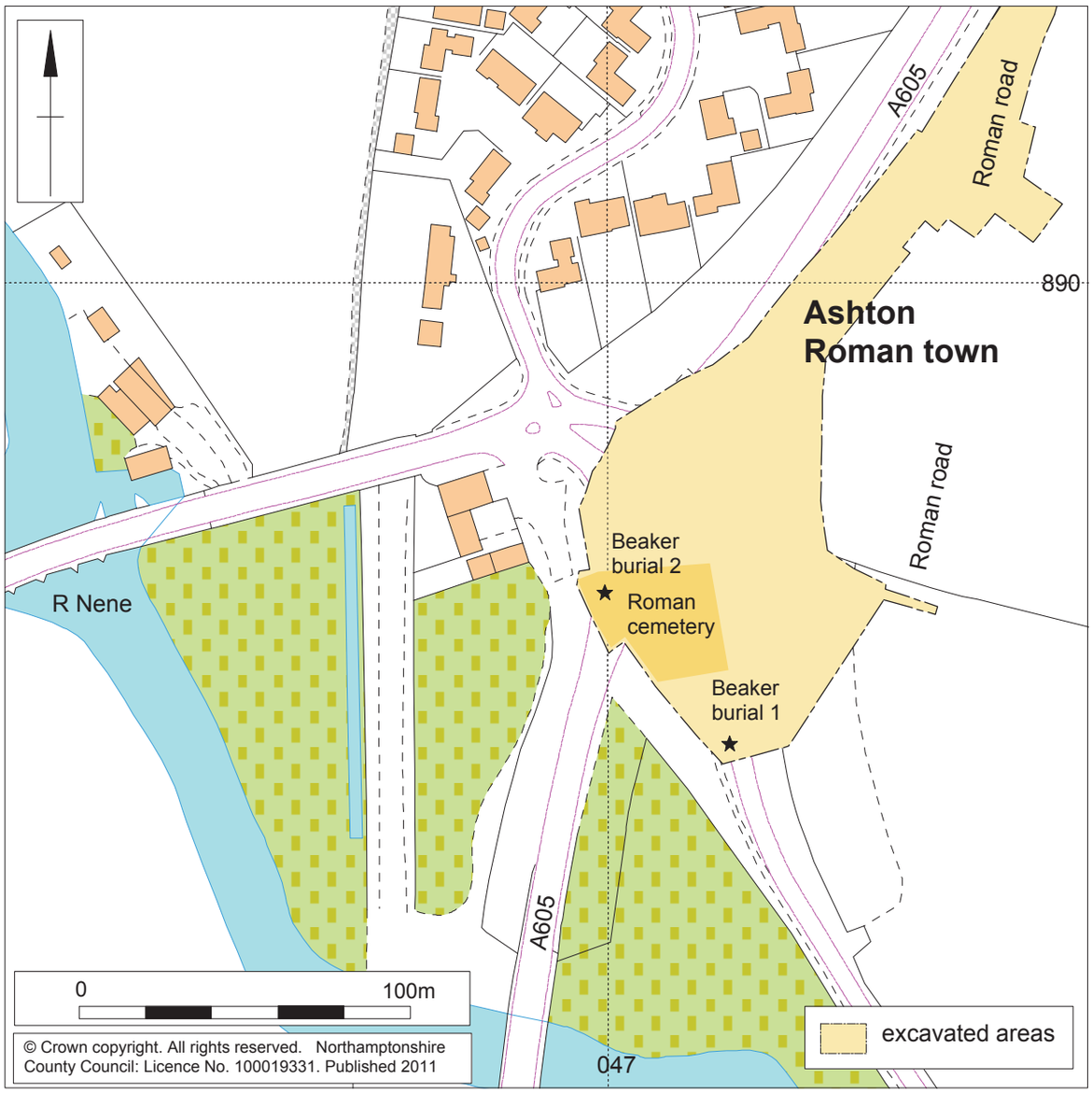


Fig 13 The location of the two Beaker burials at Ashton

particularly at the epiphyses, and the bones were in a cracked and spongy condition. Although their remains were too fragmentary to provide measurements for an estimation of original stature, the size and structure of the individual bones suggests that they were those of a young adult. Bones were submitted for radiocarbon dating but contained too little collagen for measurement.

A group of five flints lay a short distance to the south and west of the pelvis but, these are mainly undistinguished. The comb-impressed Beaker was found resting at an angle of *c* 45° from vertical, but had probably been disturbed from an original upright position. It had been at the head end of the grave. Although surviving intact, the walls of the vessel had become cracked through pressure from the surrounding earth, necessitating modern restoration at the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, London. The vessel and other finds have been deposited at Peterborough Museum (Fig 18).

Traces of some form of cover on top of the corpse were preserved in three strips of oak-bark which rested upon the body in an approximately north-south direction (Figs 14-17). The most complete piece, surviving to a width of 100-150mm and up to 5mm thick, lay centrally across the body, extending from the ankles to the head. At a short distance on either side the decayed remains of other lengths of wood occurred along the spine and in the region where the knees would have rested. The upper surfaces of all the timbers had been charred, but there was no evidence of scorching in the surrounding soils or on the body beneath. However, the light combustion required to produce the surface effect that was observed need have left no lasting traces within the grave, and it

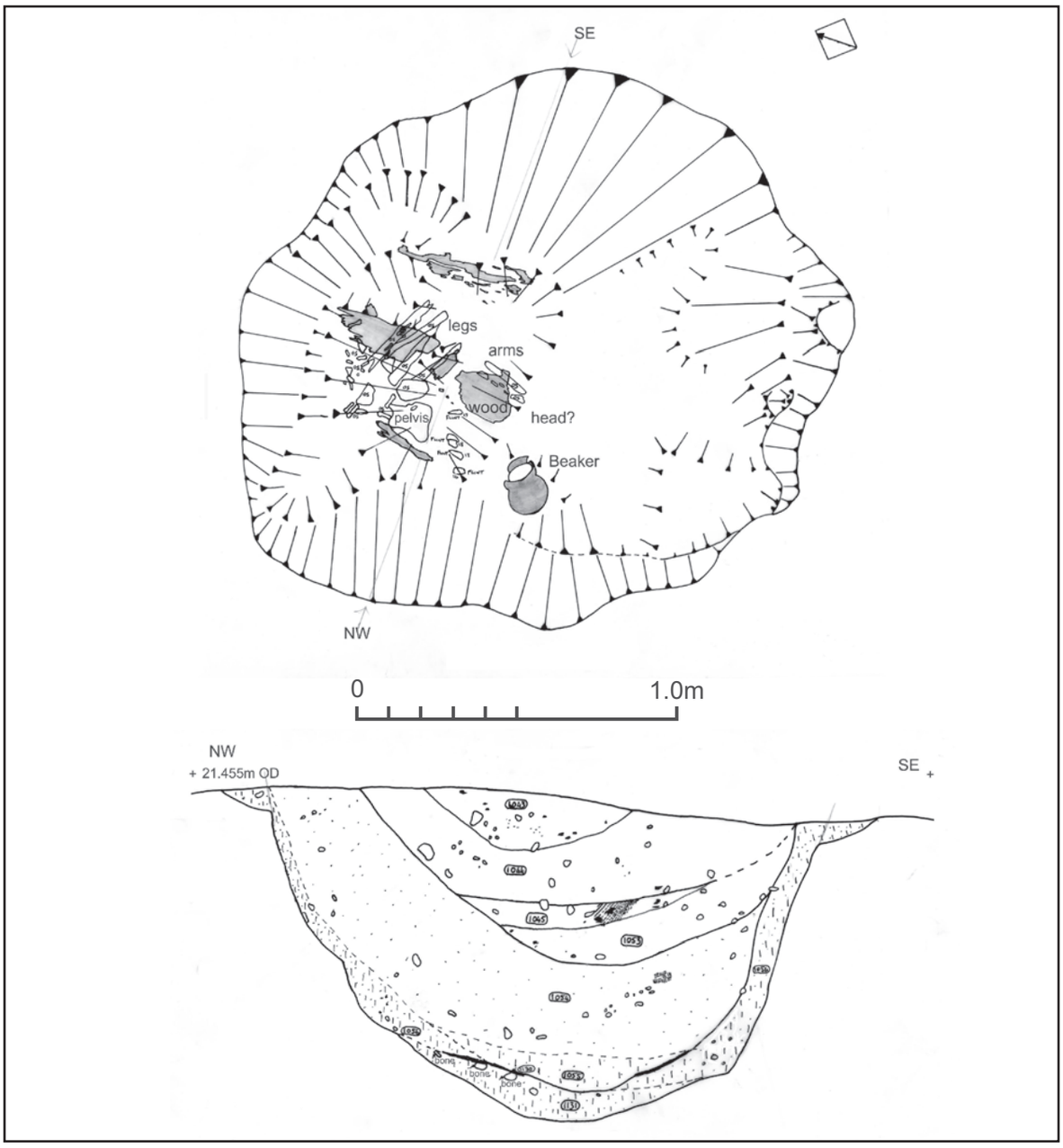


Fig 14 Inked site plan and section, with digital annotation, of Ashton Beaker burial 1

Fig 15 Burial 1 at Ashton, showing the burial deposit within the grave pit, looking north (Scale 0.5m)

Fig 16 Burial 1 at Ashton, showing the exposed leg bones; the head would have lain to the south, bottom right (Scale 0.5m)

Fig 17 Burial 1 at Ashton, showing the Beaker and the carbonised wood of the possible timber chamber (Scale 0.5m)

is therefore not impossible that burning took place *in situ*, either as part of some ritual practice or more simply for fumigation.

The body appears to have lain exposed in the grave before being finally covered with earth and during this interval several falls of material from the sides had collected above the remains. Eventually the pit was backfilled with a mixture of natural and other soils which contained rim sherds from two separate grooved ware vessels in addition to smaller body sherds from Beaker and Grimston ware types of pottery.

Editor's note: Many Beaker burials have provided evidence for the presence of either wooden coffins, such as the tree trunk coffin at Aldwincle (Jackson 1976, Barrows 1 &2, fig 12 & plate 8), or for the presence of timber-lined and roofed chambers, as at Irthlingborough (Harding and Healy 2007, Barrow 3, 148-166 & fig 3.98) and Gayhurst, Buckinghamshire. At Gayhurst a crouched secondary burial lay within a timber-lined and roofed chamber, at least 1.3m long by 0.60m wide, whose former presence was partly indicated by partial soil stains and partly by the movement of the contracted but raised legs, which had evidently slumped to one side before the chamber had decayed (Chapman 2007, Burial 3, 119-121). In the primary burial at Gayhurst, the survival the portions of the oak walls of a chamber, 2.7m long and perhaps only 0.6m wide, where the surface had been burnt and carbonised most likely before construction, was also evident (ibid, 98-104 & plate 7). The remnants at Ashton may have been parts of the side walls and roof of a chamber at least 0.60m wide, into which the crouched burial would just have fitted. The carbonised wood only extends for a length of 0.6m, but it is perhaps more likely that the chamber was up to 1.0m long, with the Beaker placed in the corner of the chamber, behind the head.

THE BEAKER
by Alex Gibson

As reconstructed, the Beaker has an average height of 125mm with a diameter at the rim and belly of 116mm, closing to 75mm at the base, where there is a short foot (Fig 18). The profile is slightly asymmetric with an uneven bulge in the belly, though this is probably due to restoration. The hard fabric has a reddish-brown external surface with a black core and a grey-brown interior. Small pits in the inside surface and a large pit on the exterior near the belly suggest that a small amount of organic material may have been included amongst the sand filler.

The outer surface has been burnished and is decorated with four zones of comb-impressed ornament within which a series of encircling lines were executed using a tool with 15 or 16 fine teeth. Whilst the other motifs could have been produced by a smaller comb with a maximum of five teeth, a logical assumption is that a single comb was used throughout; a curved instrument like those from Northton, Harris would allow either short or long impressions to be made (cf Simpson 1976).

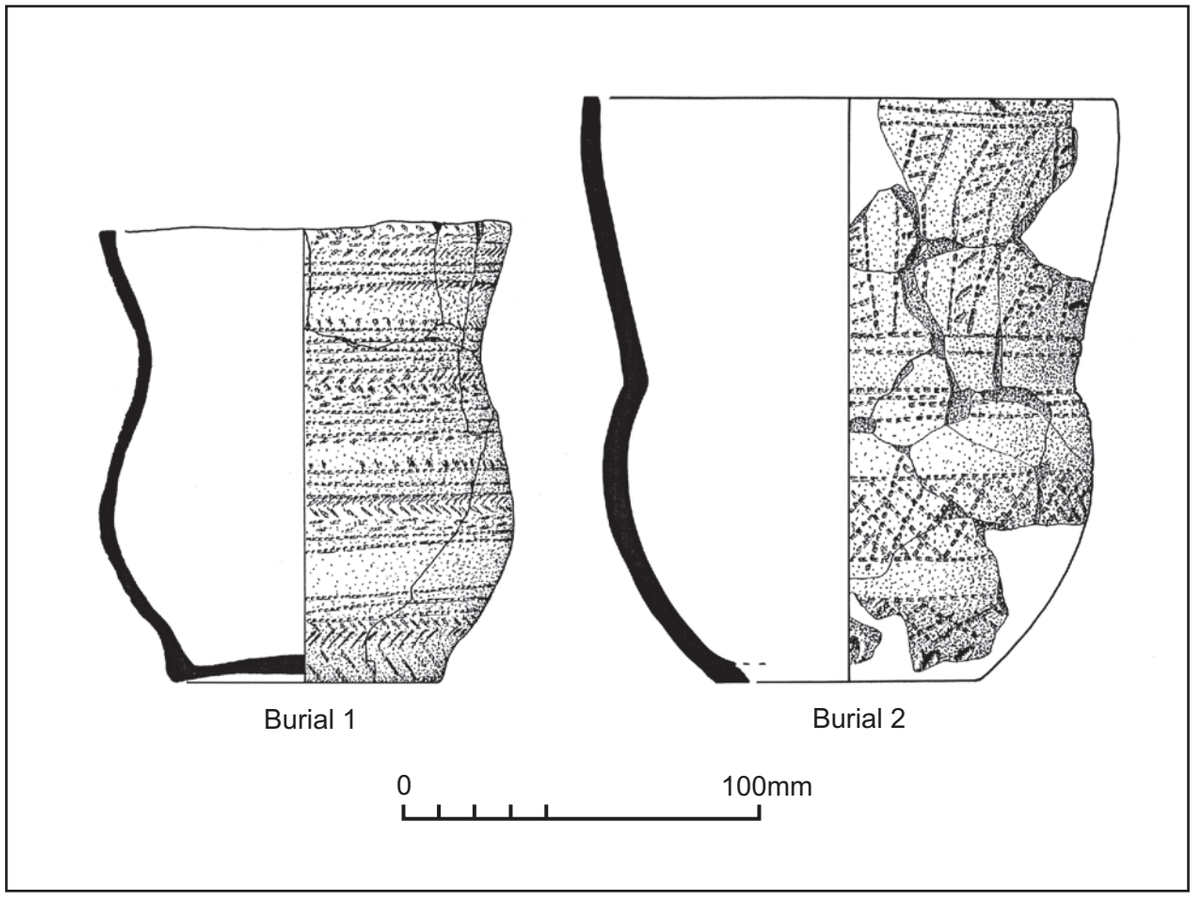


Fig 18 The Beakers accompanying the burials at Ashton Roman town

The scheme of decoration is as follows:

1st zone (20mm deep)
An abraded row of herringbone impressions occurs at the rim; each component contains up to four tooth-impressions (Clarke 1970, motif 3).A similar comb was used to produce the double row of ermine-impressions which follow (ibid motif 6), above a line of short oblique impressions slanting from right to left. A fringe of related ornament (ibid, motif 12) concludes the decoration beneath the last of three encircling lines. A plain band, 11mm deep, intervenes before the next series of decoration.

2nd zone (32mm deep)
This is bordered at the top and bottom by Carke's motif 12. Below the upper fringe five encircling combed lines lie above a single row of herringbone impressions and a double row of ermine-ornament, which mirror the scheme of the 1st zone. Three encircling combed lines follow, with the fringe beneath the lowermost. It is separated from the 3rd zone by a narrow undecorated area up to 7mm wide.

3rd zone (22mm deep)
As the last, but the fringe-motif is only present at the top and the number of encircling lines is reduced to three in the upper border and two below. An undecorated band, 18mm deep, follows.

4th zone (28mm deep)
This zone extends to the base. It begins with three encircling lines and the remainder comprises herringbone impressions in which the lengths of the individual strokes increase towards the base.

The Beaker lies within Clarke's primary north British/Dutch group of beakers (N1/D) though falls at the lower end of their height range. It conforms to his shape 17 and style 3 with archaic motif combinations but with a distinct tendency towards multiple-lined margins to the zones. Of particular note are the typically Dutch fringe-motifs and the emphatic use of ermine in the motif combinations. The footed base, however, is more typical of the north British/middle Rhine beaker-group (N/MR) than of the normal N1/D flat base.

Although the Midlands was not one of the focal areas considered by Lanting and van der Waals (1972) in their proposed sequence of British Beaker development, the present vessel can be seen to fall between their developmental steps 3-4, when the sequences for Wessex and East Anglia are compromised. Such a non-committal assignation is due to the still-primitive motifs of step 3

that are present, combined with the everted neck and lack of belly-carination which are diagnostic of step 4-. There is, however, no neck accentuation, which begins in step 4.

Parallels for the Beaker are difficult to find but the shape is certainly best paralleled in the north British series where the tendency is towards squat vessels with belly diameters equalling those of the rim. Among a group of particularly similar vessels from Scotland (eg Clarke 1970, figs 460, 485, 490 and 496), one from Skene, Aberdeenshire (ibid, fig 545) is almost identical in shape and also includes a pronounced foot. It too is also a step 3-4 vessel but attributable to Clarke's developed north British group (N2) on account of its decoration. From further south, a step 4 Beaker from Avebury, Wilts (also N2: ibid fig 516) has similar proportions although it is rather bottom-heavy in comparison to the Ashton example, and its decoration is totally alien.

Individual components of the present decoration find easy parallels in early Beaker-groups and especially in Clarke's N1/D, N/NR and N/MR groups, although the combination of herringbone and ermine motifs is unparalleled and the two are rarely found even in close proximity. An exception to this is a second vessel from Skene (ibid, fig 462) together with a beaker from Ede in the Netherlands (ibid, fig 234).

The lack of close parallels in Britain and the importance of the ermine- and fringe-motifs on Dutch Beakers clearly show the intrusive elements in the Ashton vessel.

THE ADJACENT PIT

The only nearby feature was a smaller pit that lay to the immediate west of the grave. It measured some 1.4m long by 1.2m across its shorter east-west axis, and had been cut to a depth of *c* 0.47m into the natural gravel. Whilst no dateable finds were recovered from its filling, the soils which it contained were of identical colour and composition to those found in the upper levels of the burial-pit, possibly suggesting that they were contemporary.

BURIAL 2

Burial 2 was located *c* 60m to the north-west of Burial 1, within the north-western part of the late Roman cemetery. The grave was shallow and sub-rectangular, measuring 1.64m east-west and 1.24m across its shorter axis, and had steep sides and a flat bottom, cut to a depth of 0.22m into the surrounding natural gravel and sand. The burial occupied a roughly central position and appeared to have been laid on its left side with its feet towards the west. The legs had been sharply drawn up so that the knees lay at approximately the same level as the chest.

Two of the later graves had impinged upon this earlier interment, destroying the upper part of the body and disturbing the accompanying Beaker vessel. The grave had been backfilled with a dark yellowish-brown mixture of loam and sand, probably representing the loose material from its original excavation.

The surviving skeleton was that of a young man, who had died between the ages of 17 and 25 years; it comprised the articulated remains of several lumbar vertebrae, the pelvis, and lower limbs, with fragments from other parts of the body scattered in the soil which filled one of the Roman graves.

Bones were submitted for radiocarbon dating and these provided a date closely similar to that from the Warmington burial. Unfortunately, at the time of writing the full statement of the results had not been located in the site archive.

THE BEAKER
by Alex Gibson

The Beaker has a bulbous body and an everted neck, with its larger rim diameter adding to the impression of squatness (Fig 18). It has an average height of 152mm with a diameter at the rim of 150mm and at the belly 128mm, closing to 75mm at the base. The fabric is rather soft and crumbly and has been filled with crushed shell: the surfaces of the vessel are reddish-brown around a black core. The Beaker is not complete and only about one-third of the circumference survives at the neck, with approximately half of its form preserved at the waist and about a quarter at the belly, enabling the complete profile to be reconstructed.

The rim is simple and flattened on top. The decoration is comb-impressed apart from a single row of fingernail impressions at the base. The denticulation of the comb is clear and well defined, showing that the tool had 12 or 13 teeth. The decoration is arranged as follows:

1st zone:
This zone occupies the entire neck and is bordered at either side by pairs of encircling combed lines. Within, filled running chevrons are arranged vertically rather than in the more usual horizontal fashion. The design has been executed rather haphazardly and is correspondingly irregular. The diagonal impressions which fill the running chevrons have been executed using two implements; the comb used on the rest of the pot applied obliquely, and a tool with an elongated oval point.

2nd zone:
This largely undecorated zone occupies the waist and upper belly of the pot and consists of an undecorated band *c* 10mm deep above three irregularly executed encircling lines of comb impressions. It is here that the individual lengths of the comb are best seen. A further undecorated band, averaging 17mm deep, follows at the top of the belly.

3rd zone:
Within a border of single comb-impressed encircling lines, the belly of the pot is decorated with comb-impressed cross hatching.

4th zone:
An undecorated band, *c* 12mm deep, separates the final zone of the combed and cross-hatched decoration, which is bordered at the top by a single encircling line of comb-impressions and at the bottom by a crows-foot motif formed by a single row of paired fingernail impressions.
The Beaker can perhaps be placed in Clarke's primary British group (S1) on account of its slightly elongated neck and the completely decorated neck and zoned body. Although these traits are also present in the long

necked beakers of his north British series (from N2-N4), the multiple filled running chevrons of the present example are a south British motif, albeit rare (Clarke 1970, motif group 4, no 32iii : no 833 from Staffordshire), and are unparalleled on north British beakers. The appearance of crowfoot fingernail-impressions at the base of the pot is also a south British motif (ibid, no 860 (Suffolk), no 1322 (Yorkshire)). Overall, the accentuation of the neck, contraction of the individual zones, and vertical decoration place the vessel at step 5 in the scheme of British beakers proposed by Lanting and van der Waals (1972).

DISCUSSION

by Andy Chapman

The Beaker burials from Warmington and Ashton are part of a known, if relatively small, group of flat graves or pit graves; burials not surrounded by an encircling ditch and perhaps, therefore, potentially not sealed beneath substantial mounds (Ashbee 1960, 30 & 73). It is even possible that such burials were in a majority in the Early Bronze Age, but are under represented in the archaeological record due to the obvious difficulty of locating them when there is no surviving mound to form an earthwork or an encircling ditch to register on aerial photographs or geophysical surveys. Whether there is any significance in finding two examples in close proximity at Ashton and another only 3.5km away at Warmington, when these are the only examples known from the county, is a matter for speculation. However, recent work in the Northampton area has produced Middle Neolithic cremation burials found at Milton Ham during the excavation of a Roman settlement (Carlyle and Chapman this volume) and a watching brief on a road line at Upton produced a lone cremation burial in a Collared Urn (Foard-Colby 2008). So perhaps it is just a matter of fortuitous coincidence, and there are many more examples of unmarked Neolithic and Bronze Age inhumation and cremation burials awaiting discovery.

The Warmington Beaker burial was accompanied by a package of grave goods: Beaker, V-perforated jet buttons, broken flint dagger, barbed-and-tanged arrowhead and a fabricator, which are broadly comparable to Beaker burials at Irthlingborough and West Cotton, excavated as part of the Raunds Area Project in the mid-1980s (Harding and Healy 2007, and Dix 1987, 4-11, plate1). These three male burials in their grave pits at Warmington and Ashton can be seen as sharing a common cultural heritage and a common burial rite, as mature males of high social standing in their communities.

However, while the grave pits and the material goods accompanying these three individuals are comparable, when we look beyond the grave pit there is a difference between them that appears to be substantial. The Irthlingborough and West Cotton burials both lay at the centre of triple-ditched round barrows 35-40m in diameter, with substantial mounds that were enlarged and refurbished over time, becoming the focus for a succession of further burials. In contrast, the Warmington and Ashton burials were not encircled by ditches, and potentially might have been marked by nothing more than the excess loose soil derived from the graves themselves. Small mounds that would seem destined to be rapidly forgotten and neglected. If this were true there would be a need to explain how graves so similarly furnished were either given prominent or insignificant status in the landscape through the presence or absence of a burial mound.

There is, however, a further possibility as the creation of an encircling ditch is not the sole means of creating a prominent monument. If the turf was stripped from an area around the grave for an area up to 30m or more in diameter, this would provide sufficient material for a substantial and prominent mound perhaps 10-15m in diameter, a monument of comparable visibility to the original mounds at Irthlingborough and West Cotton, but leaving no below ground evidence. The presence of a shallow pit containing Middle Bronze pottery lying some 30m from the Beaker grave may have been a mere coincidence of location, but perhaps we could speculated that it may have been deliberately sited adjacent to what was then still a visible monumental mound.

It may be that the apparent difference between the round barrow burials and what we call flat graves, was a difference of style rather than substance, but unfortunately we have no way of demonstrating this, short of finding examples of flat graves with no encircling ditch, but where the mound has survived as an earthwork.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashbee, P, 1960 *The Bronze Age round barrow in Britain*, Phoenix, London

Bennike, P, 1985 *Palaeopathology of Danish skeletons: a comparative study of demography, disease and Injury*, Akademisk Forlag, Denmark

Carlyle, S, and Chapman, A, 2012 Neolithic cremation burials at Milton Ham, Northampton, *Northamptonshire Archaeol*, **37**

Chapman, A, 1997 The excavation of Neolithic and Medieval Mounds at Tansor Crossroads, Northamptonshire, 1995, *Northamptonshire Archaeol*, **27**, 3-50

Chapman, A, 2007 A Bronze Age barrow cemetery and later boundaries, pit alignments and enclosures at Gayhurst Quarry, Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, *Records of Buckinghamshire*, **47.2**, 81-211

Clarke, D L, 1970 *The Beaker Pottery of Great Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge University Press

Cook, A M, and Dacre, M W, 1985 *Excavations at Portway, Andover 1973-75*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monog, **4**

Dix, B, (ed) 1987 The Raunds Area Project: second interim report, *Northamptonshire Archaeol*, **21**

Foard-Colby, A, 2008 A Collared Urn burial from Upton, Northampton, *Northamptonshire Archaeol*, **35**, 15-26

Green, H S, 1980 *The Flint Arrowheads of the British Isles*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, **75**

Harding, J, and Healy F, 2007 *The Raunds Area Project: A Neolithic and Bronze Age landscape in Northamptonshire*, English Heritage

Jackson, D, 1976 The excavation of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites at Aldwincle, Northants, 1967-71, *Northamptonshire Archaeol*, **11**, 12-70

Kinnes, I A, Gibson, A M, Ambers, J, Bowman, S, Leese, M, and Boast, R, 1991 Radiocarbon Dating and British Beakers: The British Museum Programme, *Scottish Archaeological Review*, **8**, 35-68

Lanting, J N, and van der Waals, J D, 1972 British Beakers as seen from the Continent. A review article, *Helinium*, **12**, 20-46

Longworth, I H, 1984 *The Collared Urns of the Bronze Age in Great Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge University Press

Pryor, F, 1980 *Excavation at Fengate, Peterborough England: The Third Report,* Monog **6** and **1**, Royal Ontario Museum and Northamptonshire Archaeological Society

Rogerson, A, 1977 *Excavations at Scole*, 1973, East Anglian Archaeology, **5**, Norfolk, Gressenhall, 97-224

Shaw, M, 1993 A605 *Warmington bypass and Tansor Improvements: Archaeological Evaluation 1991-1993*, Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit report

Smith, I F and Simpson, D D A, 1966 Excavation of a round barrow on Overton Hill, North Wiltshire, England, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, **32**, 122-155