III

AN URNED CREMATION FROM WARDEN LAW, TYNE AND WEAR

William Ford and Roger Miket

IN JUNE 1979 an urned cremation was brought into Sunderland Museum for identification. It had been discovered by Philip Irwing and Kevin Smith in the side of a quarry at Warden Law (NZ 372505). On visiting the site an impression of the vessel remained in the yellow/brown loam, showing that it had stood inverted in a small cist within a mound cut by recent quarrying. Although most of the cist remained in position, its capstone and western sideslab had collapsed to reveal the urn, and these slabs were recovered together with what cremated bone had been tipped onto the ground by the finders. As the remainder of the mound was at risk from slippage and further quarrying activities, it was decided to excavate with the help of students from Durham University kindly arranged through Dr. Anthony Harding.

Geology and Topography

The site lies on the south-eastern slope of the hill called Warden Law, close by the northern boundary of the old township of Warden, which was formerly part of the ancient parish of Houghton-le-Spring. From its eastern side, a slight elevation in the ground surface was visible, across which ran the boundary fence of the quarry and the remnants of a former hedgerow (OS. 1:2500, XIV, 13, 1946). The underlying geology is a middle magnesian limestone, capped by extensive fluvio-glacial gravels and sand out-washes, overlying boulder clay (Smith 1981).

The Excavation

Three trenches were set-out as in fig. 1, and excavation, conducted entirely by hand, continued from the modern turf down to the underlying, natural glacial till.

The Stratigraphy of the site

As excavation progressed, it became clear that the cist burial had been covered by a mound, the construction of which was clearly visible in both the longitudinal and transverse sections (see fig. 1). The stratigraphy is described as follows:

Layer 1: below the modern turf. A fine, pale grey loam, containing limestone nodules, gravel and fragments of coal. This layer was found throughout all three trenches, both outside the barrow area and capping the barrow mound as well.

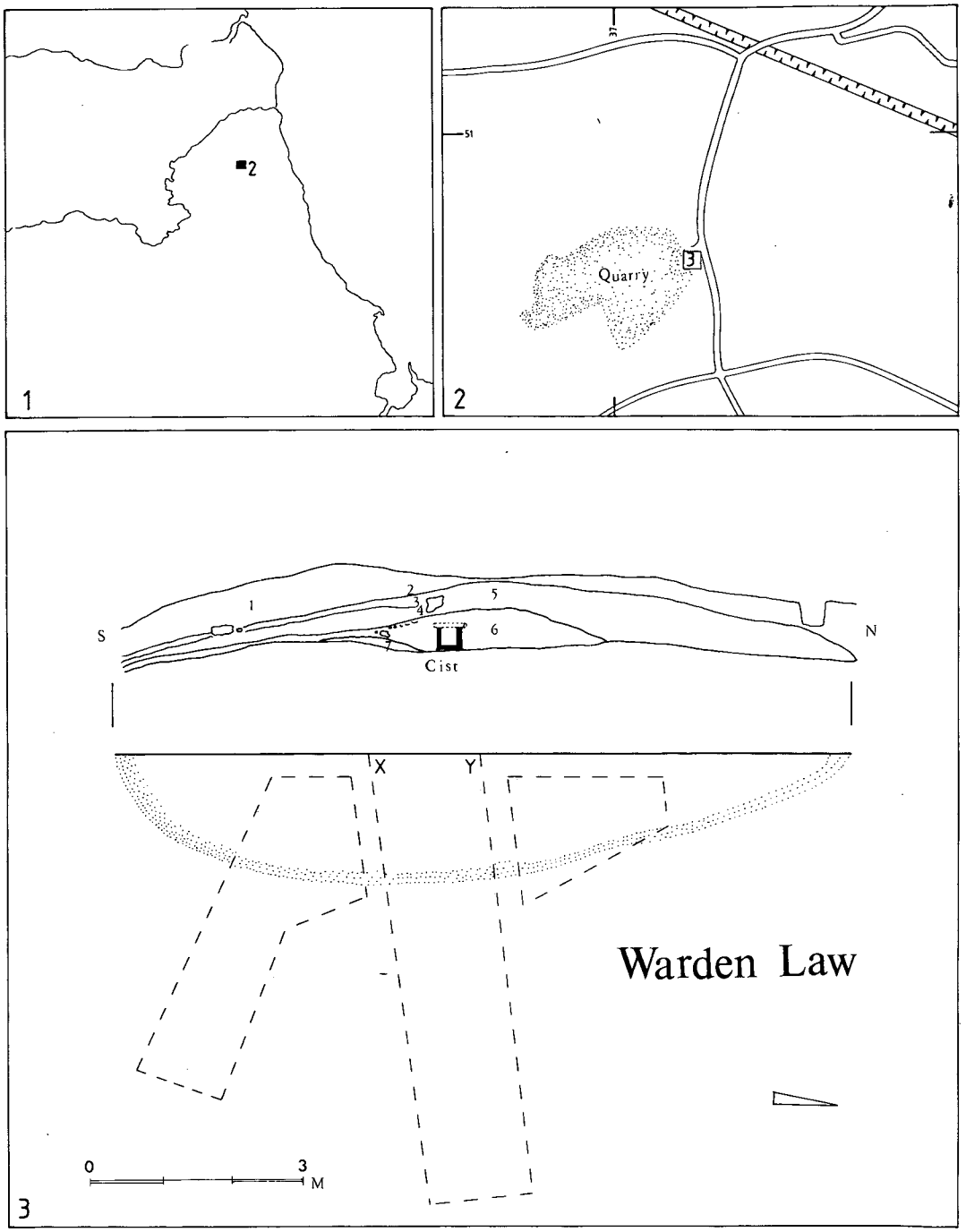

Fig. 1. Warden Law: location, plan and section.

The following layers formed the make-up of the barrow mound:

Layer 2: buried turf-line, appearing as a black band 60 mm deep.
Layer 3: yellowish-brown, clay loam 60 mm deep.
Layer 4: buried-turf line appearing as a black band 70 mm deep.
Layer 5: compacted mid yellow-brown loam with distinct pebbly line at base, max. depth. 800 mm.
Layer 6: dark yellow-brown sandy loam, slightly plastic; some pebble and limestone inclusions, max. depth. 500 mm.
Layer 7: dark-brown, plastic soil with extensive gravel inclusions max. depth. 160 mm.
Layer 8: buried soil profile, comprising a moist dark-brown sandy loam with gravel inclusions, max. depth. 90 mm.

The cist and primary mound deposit
The cist, F1, was formed by six split-sandstone slabs, placed at right angles to each other, making a small, stone box, 300 mm square. The base of the box rested directly on the glacial till and no buried soil or turf-line was observable in the area surrounding it. The cist was completely sealed by a mound of earth, (layer 6), to a height of 600 mm, thus indicating that the cist was not introduced into a pre-existing mound. It seems unlikely that the sides and cover of the cist could have stood unsupported by surrounding earth, so it is probable that the construction of the cist and raising of the earliest section of the mound were simultaneous. Although the cist can be shown to be a primary element, the destruction of at least half the mound by quarrying may have removed other primary burials, therefore it cannot be concluded that the barrow was for the sole purpose of a child burial. The cist lay upon the natural sub-soil, and, as there was no evidence of an adjacent buried soil or turf-line, some site clearance may have preceded the construction of the mound. The consistent appearance of buried soil (layer 8) under the skirt of the barrow (layer 5), demonstrates that the old ground surface could survive, a factor which lends weight to the possibility that previous clearance took place, possibly contributing material for the first stage of the mound.

Other features beneath the mound
Sealed beneath layer 6 was an elongated hollow (F.2), with an uneven base, sunk into the natural sub-soil. A homogeneous fill of sandy-brown plastic clay soil, with pebble inclusions, was capped by a spread of small stones and pebbles. The irregularity of its shape suggests that this may have been a natural feature.

A small elliptical feature (F.3) was partly dug into the fill of F.2, and partly into the sub-soil. Its lower fill was a moist, orange-tinted, tactile clay, flecked with charcoal, while the upper fill was a moist, grey clay containing small fragments of clinker, and flecks of charcoal. The feature was capped by two undisturbed stones and entirely sealed by the primary mound deposit (layer 6). The presence of the cap-stones *in-situ*, suggests that the feature was dug after site clearance; it would otherwise be difficult to see how the stones could have remained undisturbed. This would indicate that

the construction of the cist, which as already proposed, was coupled with the initial phase of mound construction, took place after F.3 was dug. Any differences in time, however, may have been a matter of days or even hours, and it is possible that F.3 may have been associated with the ritual of the cremation burial, although its precise function remains unclear.

The secondary mound deposits
Layer 5 appeared as a distinctly separate deposit capping layer 6, the chief observable difference being the absence of clay, and, a lighter coloured and textured soil. This layer appeared to be an addition to the barrow construction, using materials from a different source from that of layer 6. That source however, was unlikely to have been from an associated barrow ditch, as trench 2, which was extended eastwards for 7 metres, beyond the edge of the barrow, failed to produce any such evidence. The possibility that layer 5 might represent enlargement of a pre-existing barrow for the purpose of additional interments, cannot be ruled out. Despite the absence of any additional burials, it must be borne in mind that quarrying had destroyed 50% of the barrow.

Shape and Dimensions of the Mound
Although layer 5 formed part of the original construction of the barrow, it cannot be assumed that layer 2 and layer 4 (the old turf-lines which cap it), represent the original height and extent of the mound. The dimensions of the barrow have altered, possibly by erosion, but also by more radically destructive agencies. The mound was partly truncated on its southernmost edge by earthworks associated with the construction of a cobbled surface, probably an old roadway leading to Warden. These were further modified by the planting of a hedgerow.

Within these limitations, it is still possible to make some observations on orientation, dimensions and shape. The crest of the mound was visible at X (fig. 1.3) but at Y the slope of the mound continued to rise as far as the quarry face section indicating that the crest at this point had been destroyed by the gravel workings. This suggests that the longitudinal axis of the barrow was at an angle to the quarry face and lay approximately north south, thus implying more of an elliptical shape. The length of the mound was a minimum of 11 m, with a height not less than 1·10 m.

The peak of the mound coincided with the summit of a natural hillock which sloped gently northward and more steeply to the south. This would have had the effect of accentuating the size and height of the barrow to the observer, making it a much more impressive monument.

The Urn Height 215 mm, rim diameter 231 mm. (fig. 2)
Urn in red-brown gritted fabric. The body is fractured but complete, and presents a high surface sheen from the use of P.V.A. to strengthen an otherwise friable fabric.

The internal bevel is decorated with unevenly executed oblique incisions, with a second application lightly done at right-angles in an attempt to produce a cross-hatch effect. This second application is either done too lightly to stand out well, or in

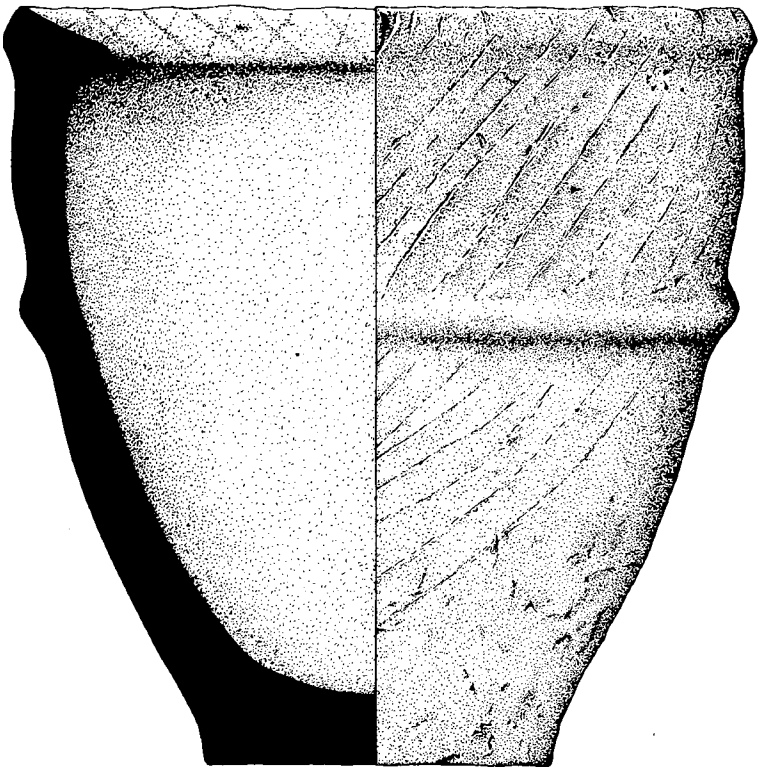

Fig. 2. Cordoned urn from Warden Law ($\frac{1}{2}$).

places omitted altogether. The external rim bevel is also decorated with short oblique slashes, below which are longer incisions descending virtually to the base of the vessel, and discontinued only at the applied shoulder cordon.

This vessel cannot be easily classified. The rim, with its pronounced internal bevel is firmly within the Food Vessel tradition, however the rather bulbous neck contrasts markedly with the straight-sided or concave necks characteristic of the Food Vessel group. That the effect was intentional rather than the result of subsidence in a still plastic heavy vessel is indicated by the even rise of the interior. As such, and taken in combination with the applied cordon around the shoulder, the profile is one most conveniently accommodated within a cinerary, and more specifically, cordoned urn tradition. Until recently the only known example of a cordoned urn from north-east England was that from Moralee Farm, Northumberland (Gibson, 1978, 97. no. 141), however recent excavation at Middle Gunnar Peak, Barrasford, Northumberland has produced two cordoned vessels from within a cairn, each containing the cremated remains of a young child and one accompanied by a small bone blade (Jobey, I. 1980. 54, fig. 9, 1 & 2).

Within a funerary context comparable vessels need to be sought amongst the northern cremation cemeteries at Balbirnie, Balevillin, and Loanhead of Daviot as noted by Jobey (Jobey, G. 1978, p. 20). In addition to these specifically funerary contexts, recent excavation of unenclosed platform settlements in Northumberland and the Borders has produced a plain cordoned vessel amongst the barrel and bucket shaped domestic forms at Green Knowe, Peeblesshire (Jobey, G. 1978, 19, no. 4., and Jobey, G. 1980, 87, fig. 7 no. 8).

Further south such forms fall within Burgess' Bedd Branwyn phase, (Burgess, 1980, 97) giving way about 1200 B.C. to the Deverel-Rimbury urns. However the persistence of cremation burial in the north, in combination with the calibrated radiocarbon dates of 1208–1285 B.C. (±112) obtained for the Green Knowe urn strongly hints at a northern continuation of the cordoned tradition into the Knighton heath period, as well as opening the possibility of future discoveries of comparable vessels from domestic as well as funerary contexts in north-east England.

The Cremation by Dr. Joan Weyman

As the contents of the vessel were largely tipped out upon discovery the remains examined represent only a portion of the vessels original contents. These remains weighed 400 gms, after cleaning and drying. They were thoroughly cremated and few fragments were as much as 20 mm and not many over 10 mm. They did however provide some recognizable features, and these included parts of long-bones, ribs, vertebrae, pelvis, phalanges, and skull. The fragments were all juvenile, having a thin cortex and small size. This was most obvious in the pieces of skull-vault and vertebrae, and cranial suture margins were immature. Eight tiny fragments of teeth were present, one of them a deciduous canine and another the slender root of a deciduous mandibular molar. As the apices of these were complete but not yet resorbed, the age of the individual would probably be in the range of 3–6 years.

The Soil Samples

Eleven samples of soil were taken from the mound but provided no relevant palaeobotanical evidence.

DISCUSSION

Sporadic references to earlier discoveries at Warden Law combine to provide a rich and varied background to the present discovery. Earliest in date are the microliths picked from the ploughsoil by Trechmann and Copeland, and a tantalizing reference to flint flakes and microliths, "found in a circle" on the east side of Warden Law by Woolacott (for full references to these and the following see Miket, 1982. 35SE, 1–6). Greenwell is the first to refer to mounds on the hillslope, one of which was excavated by Trechmann in 1911. Within the large mound the disarticulated remains of two individuals were found, a child aged no more than 6 years, and a youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years. Neither of these burials appears to represent a primary deposit and there was no real evidence that a cist may have lain near the centre. It is however the group of flints comprising two small leaf-shaped arrow-

heads, a knife or spearhead and a small blade and flake which may indicate an early context for the mound. Indeed the presence of the blade of a polished greenstone axehead from the mound makeup and an undistinguished small plain sherd argues against placing the discovery too readily within traditional 'Bronze age' chronology. An earlier, third millennium context has already been proposed for the primary burial within the nearby mound at Copt Hill, and at Hasting Hill, on the basis of third millennium pottery from within the barrow, a similar situation may also prevail. The possible cursus and interrupted ditched enclosure at this latter site hint at a considerable degree of Neolithic activity within the locality, with some of its funerary monuments utilized by its successors.

In addition to the mound excavated by Trechmann, Greenwell also refers to two small conical mounds of gravel upon Warden Law, one of which he trenched to reveal a cist burial. The recent excavations showed no indication of earlier intrusions within the surviving part of the mound, and if this was the sole survivor of the mounds he refers to, then it is from its vanished counterpart that Greenwells' discovery was likely to have been made.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The urn, cist, and site records are housed at Sunderland Central Museum. The excavation was carried out under the auspices of Tyne and Wear Museum Service, who also kindly provided financial assistance towards the cost of publication.

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