

## II

### THE COPT HILL, HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING, ROUND CAIRN: A REASSESSMENT

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THE ROUND cairn on Copt Hill, near Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear, known locally as The Seven Sisters, was excavated on 20th September 1877 by Canon William Greenwell and Mr. T. W. U. Robinson. The full report on these excavations, which took place when Greenwell's *British Barrows* was in the final stages of publication, was not published until 1914 when C. T. Trechmann included an account in his review of his own excavation work on barrows entitled 'Prehistoric Burials in County Durham' (Trechmann, 1914, 123–132).

Since that time the site has figured variously in a number of archaeological guides and handlists (e.g. Windle, 1904; Grinsell, 1953; Thomas, 1960; Young, 1980) and in 1970, Ashbee suggested that the site might show evidence for a Neolithic 'mortuary structure' as its primary feature (1970, 179). This point has been accepted by various workers (Burgess, 1980, 35; Vyner, 1983, 7) but no full analysis of the site in structural terms has ever been published. The present contribution is an attempt to remedy this situation and to discuss, in addition, the siting and composition of the mound, to see if these can be used to provide information about contemporary environmental conditions and land use and also to provide a full account of the extant artefact finds, several of which were never published in the original account.

Today the cairn measures some 24 metres in diameter and stands to a height of at least 3 metres. Seven trees, providing the basis for the site's local name, grow on top of the mound and a low platform of magnesian limestone fragments, heavily grassed over, and presumably the remains of spoil from the 1877 excavations, is visible at the north west corner. The mound is situated in a false crest location on the scarp slope of the East Durham Plateau and commands excellent views to the south, east and west. The possible importance of this siting will be discussed below.

When the site was excavated it was found to comprise chiefly of magnesian limestone intermixed with pieces of sandstone. Some soil, presumably the remains of turf, also occurred together with pieces of burnt limestone. "The stone on the surface was small for a depth of about one and a half feet and then became much larger without much admixture of earth. Some large limestone flags about two feet long and one and a half feet wide, together with large sandstone boulders also occurred" (Trechmann, 1914, 124). Fig. 2b shows the only recorded section through the mound and is taken from Greenwell's manuscript notes now in the

British Museum (Greenwell, MSS No. 3). The table below shows the number and type of burials recorded along with associated grave goods and Fig. 1 shows Trechmann's published plan (Trechmann, 1914, 123, fig. 3). (Numbers in the table refer to the numbered burials on Trechmann's plan.)

<i>Nature of Burial</i>	<i>Associated Finds</i>	<i>Present Location</i>
Primary burial—"mesial deposit" —disarticulated skeletons in a collapsed and burnt mortuary structure (see below)	No associations recorded	
(1) Burnt bone scattered over area 2½ feet in diameter	Calcined flint	? Now lost
(2) Small cist	No associated finds	—
(3) Inhumation without cist	Flint scraper	British Museum
(4) Inhumation without cist	No associated finds	—
(5) Inhumation without cist	Food vessel	? Now lost
(6) Cremation	—	—
(7) Cremation	—	—
(8) Cremation covered by urn	Food Vessel Urn	British Museum
(9) Inhumation in long cist on summit of barrow	—	—
	A plano-convex flint knife, scraper and nine waste flakes in addition to a fragmentary shale artefact and two pieces of bone are also preserved from the barrow (see below)	British Museum

It is the "primary interment" "situated five feet (1.52 m) south of the centre of the mound" (Trechmann, 1914, 126) which has attracted most attention. The eastern side of the cairn consisted of burnt limestone beneath which, on the old land surface, was a deposit of charcoal 6 feet (1.82 m) wide and 34 feet (10.46 m) long, orientated in an east west direction. Within this charcoal was mixed the "primary interment" of several cremated, disarticulated bodies, their condition suggesting that they had been stored elsewhere before burial (Trechmann, 1914, 126). "Behind the combustible material there occurred, surrounding and supporting it, an incombustible structure in the form of whinstone and sandstone boulders", these were affected by burning on their inner edges only (Trechmann, 1914, 125). "Flues" were found, "rising from the charcoal", through the limestone, "having formerly connected with the surface of the mound to create a draught so that all the bones were burnt" (Trechmann, 1914, 126-7).

These two holes were both "oblong" and rectangular in section. The eastern one, which measured 3 feet 3 inches (1 m)×1 foot 5 inches (0.43 m)×1 foot 6 inches (0.45 m) deep was "lined out" with stones, with much charcoal at the bottom and filled with "burnt earth". The western hole measured 3 feet (0.91 m)×1 foot 8 inches (0.53 m)×1 foot 10 inches (0.58 m) deep and was filled with charcoal and covered with limestone (Trechmann, 1914, 127).

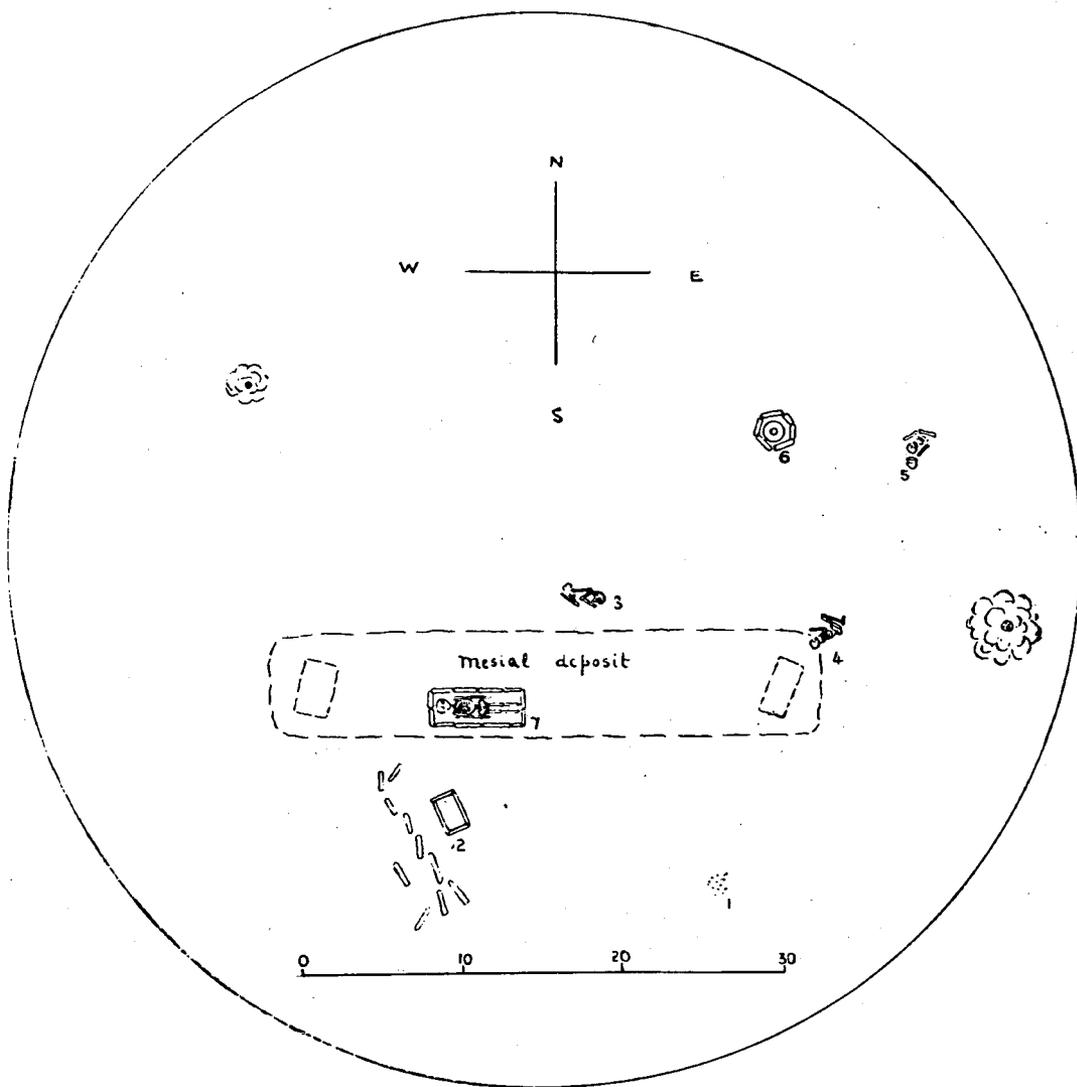


Fig. 1. Plan of the Copt Hill cairn and burials (after Trechmann, 1914, 123, Fig. 3).

Trechmann believed that this deposit was a Neolithic “flue” cremation and cited the Willerby Wold and Rudstone long barrows in Yorkshire and the Crosby Garrett long barrow in Cumbria, as parallels (Trechmann, 1914, 126). Indeed, he expressed the possibility (with which the writer disagrees) that the Copt Hill barrow may have been a long barrow whose shape had been altered by later interments (Trechmann, 1914, 124).

Grinsell also held that the site was a “flue cremation” (1953, 249) and Manby

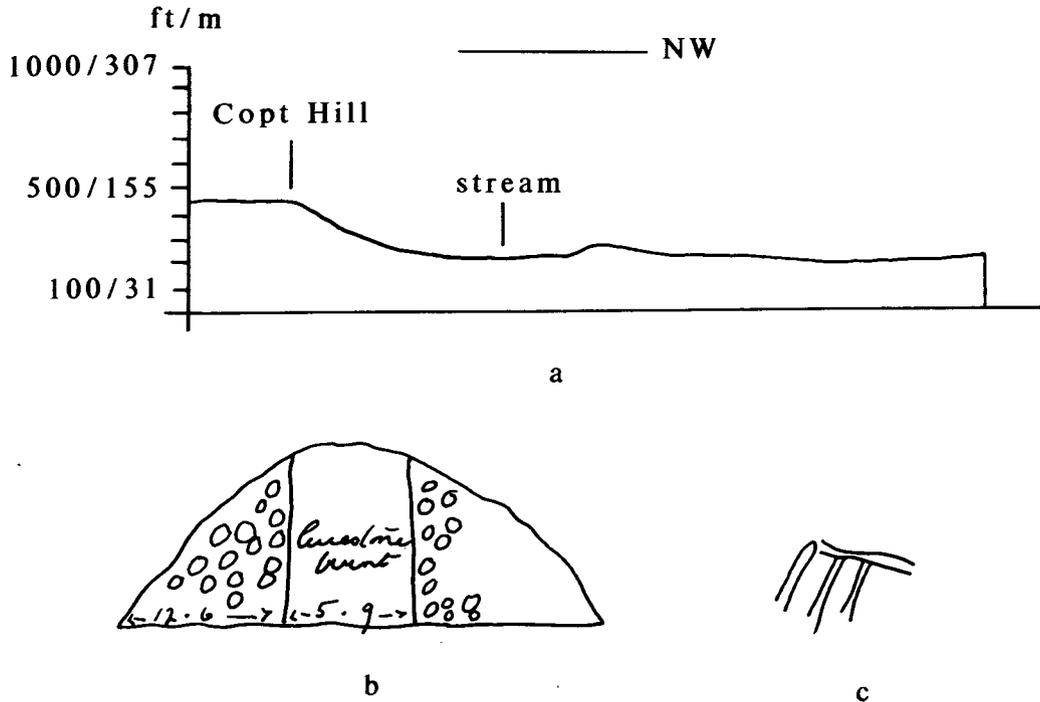


Fig. 2. a) The siting of the Copt Hill cairn; b) Section through the cairn (after Greenwell MSS); c) Detail of structure within the cairn (after Greenwell MSS).

(1970, 15) too believed this. However, the writer is of the opinion that the feature may have been the burnt and collapsed remains of an axial mortuary structure, resembling a low ridge tent. Argument about these phenomena has raged in the past (Simpson, 1968a; Ashbee, 1969) and Manby has proposed that the burning of a wooden mortuary house, such as the one postulated at Waylands Smithy (Atkinson, 1965, 130), would not have produced the temperatures which seem to have been achieved at Willerby Wold (1970, 20). However, the filling of the two holes at Copt Hill, especially the eastern one where the stone lining may have been packing, suggests that they may have been large post holes which could have supported a morticed ridge pole. Their similarity in size adds some weight to this. The roof of the structure may have consisted of close set timbers, resting with their lower, outer, ends on the ground. The limestone and boulders which surrounded the "mesial" deposit may have supported the bottoms of the pitched timbers or more likely delimited the area which they covered (Fig. 3).

It may be that the smaller stones behind the larger surrounding boulders represent some of the covering of the pitched timbers which fell when the timbers themselves were burned. Fig. 2b shows a sketch section through the mound, drawn at the time of the excavation (Greenwell, MS notes in the British Museum) and the central area of burnt limestone may represent the burnt remains of this covering.

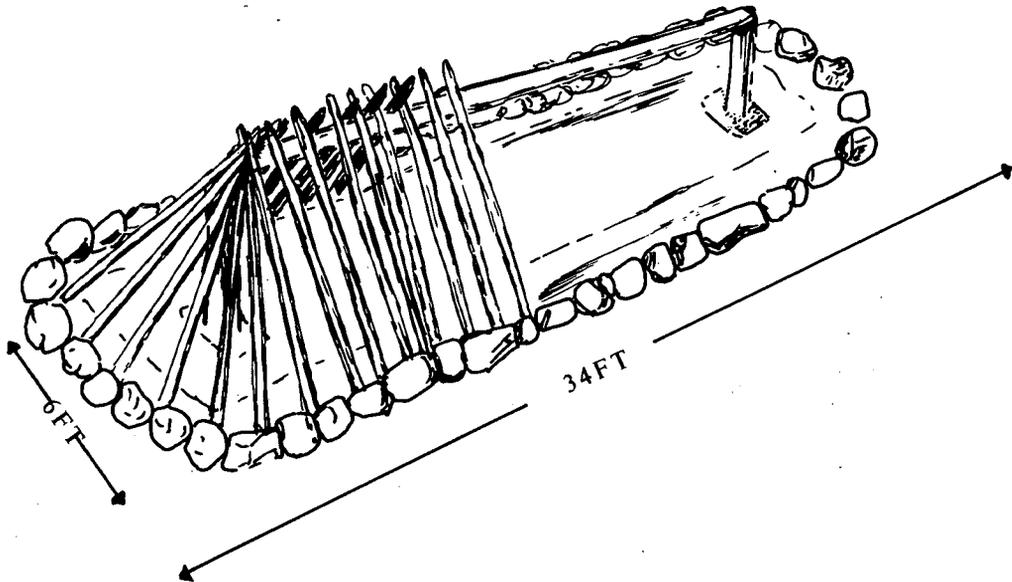


Fig. 3. Tentative reconstruction of the mortuary structure beneath the Copt Hill cairn.

Similar structures are recorded in detail from many long barrow sites, e.g. Fussell's Lodge (Ashbee, 1970, 51–52, Fig. 34) and Wayland's Smithy (phase 1) (Atkinson, 1965, 130), where a similar setting of boulders surrounding the burials was found. Other round barrow sites which have similar "Neolithic" structural affinities are Pitnacree (Coles and Simpson, 1965, 39, Fig. 3); Cowlam, Willie Howe Plantation (Mortimer, 1905, 340, No. 277); Garton Slack (Mortimer, 1905, 246, No. C34), Garton Slack (Mortimer, 1905, 235 and 238, Nos. 80 and 81); Helperthorpe (Greenwell, 1877, 205–208, No. XLIX); Heselton (Greenwell, 1877, 142–145, No. VI) and Huggate Wold (Mortimer, 1905, 300 and 320, Nos. 224 and 254). Thus the Copt Hill cairn would clearly seem to belong to the growing number of round barrows and cairns which can be shown to have had Neolithic origins and a long period of use.

Other anomalous features within the cairn's structure, visible in the drawings accompanying the Greenwell manuscript may also tend to confirm the initial Neolithic date for the monument's construction (Fig. 2c). There is no scale in this drawing and it is uncertain whether it represents a plan or a section through the mound, but if it is the former then the setting may be similar to the compartmentalisation visible at sites like the chambered tombs of Ascott-under-Wychwood (Selkirk, 1971, 7–10) and the earthen long barrow at Skendleby Site I (Phillips, 1936) and Site II (D. D. A. Simpson, pers. comm.) and South Street and Beckhampton Road (Ashbee, Smith and Evans, 1979, 207–300).

Given that the site may well be Neolithic in origin its location and siting may be

of importance as an indication of the state of the tree cover at the northern end of the East Durham Plateau during the period.

The vegetational history of Co. Durham before and after the Elm Decline has been mapped out by workers such as Donaldson and Turner (1977, 25–33) and Bartley *et al.* (1976, 436–468) using indicator species such as *Plantago lanceolata* and *Rumex acetosella* to illustrate pasture farming activity and *Plantago media major* and *Cerealia* for arable. The picture put forward for lowland Durham, based largely on pollen diagrams from the south of the East Durham Plateau is one of small scale temporary clearances which see an increase in grass, weed and shrub pollen and which in the absence of cereal pollen have been assigned almost automatically to pastoral land use. The potential for pollen analysis at the northern end of the Plateau is limited, though other, archaeological, evidence from this area may well suggest that larger areas than are indicated in the pollen diagrams from the south of the region, were being cleared.

At Hasting Hill to the north of Copt Hill, overlooking the Wear Valley, the available air photographs show a ? cursus monument and an interrupted ditched enclosure in close proximity (Newman, 1976, 183–184), and large scale forest clearance as opposed to the small temporary clearances of the diagrams would probably have been carried out before these monuments were constructed (see Fleming, 1972, 179–191). Indeed, selective excavation of these sites might well produce further environmental data in the form of land snail assemblages which would fill out our picture of clearance and land use in the lower Wear area. A further source of information about the extent of clearances and the nature of ensuing land use may be the actual location and siting of sites such as barrows and cairns.

Both Graham and Fleming (1956–57, 7–23; 1977, 1–24) in discussing the nature of upland “cairnfield” sites have suggested the cairns may fulfil at least two functions:

- (a) as burial sites
- (b) as a convenient means of disposing of unwanted stones gathered in the course of land clearance.

Fleming has further argued (1971, 7) that in a forested environment sufficient stone for cairn building can only be obtained once the trees have been cleared and the original forest soil has been broken down by agriculture and erosion. He thus equates the occurrence of cairns with clearance of the land before or during arable agriculture.

I would suggest that these points may equally well be applicable to cairns in lowland locations and the Copt Hill mound is a case in point. Applying the arguments set out above to what we know about the cairn’s composition and the fact that no quarry ditch was found from which the raw material for cairn building could be taken, it may be suggested that the mound was built on cleared land on which arable cultivation had been or was in the process of being practised. The cairn may thus have been the produce of land clearance as has been suggested at other lowland Neolithic monuments such as Wayland’s Smithy (Atkinson, 1965,

126–133). The presence of turf in the mound may also indicate the proximity of open grassland in the area.

The siting of the cairn may give some indication of the extent of the clearance. As stated above, the site is in a false crest location, set just below the top of the scarp slope of the Plateau overlooking a small stream at the foot of the escarpment (Fig. 2a). When viewed from the lower land it stands out against the sky and appears to be on the scarp crest. This type of siting is common for Bronze Age barrows and cairns and Fox and Evans (1932, 54–55; 1975, 135) and others have suggested that this is an intentional siting and that the mounds were meant to be seen from a distance. Evans has argued that the regular occurrence of this phenomenon in the Bronze Age may indicate a larger and more permanent opening up of the landscape than in the Neolithic (1975, 135).

At Copt Hill, then, in a Neolithic context, the cairn's siting might indicate that the scarp slope and surrounding lowlands were devoid of trees and its composition may also indicate that some ground was being cleared for agriculture. This would seem to be in contradiction to the prevailing conditions as reconstructed from the available pollen data in lowland Durham and again, small scale re-excavation of this and other sites on the limestone, with a view to recovering fossil land snail assemblages may well be a useful contribution to our understanding of pre-barrow and cairn land use in the area.

So much for constructional and locational points about the cairn. The following is an attempt to record in detail the extant finds from the site, all now in the British Museum.

#### *Lithic Material* (Fig. 4)

Thirteen pieces survive, nine of which have never been published in detail.

- (1) A calcined unifacial, plano-convex flint knife, exhibiting patches of orange staining and some white cortex-like material on the dorsal face. Finely pressure flaked. 60 mm×20 mm×10 mm.
- (2) Oval, side and end scraper exhibiting total white patination/cortication and retouched on both left edge and distal end. 60 mm×43 mm×11 mm.
- (3) A mottled grey-white flint "thumb scraper", steeply retouched around its circumference and exhibiting a marked bulb of percussion. 20 mm×20 mm×5 mm.
- (4) Grey flint flake exhibiting buff-grey cortex on dorsal face. 30 mm×20 mm×5 mm.
- (5) A grey flint flake with grey cortex on dorsal face. 30 mm×23 mm×7 mm.
- (6) A grey flint flake. 26 mm×13 mm×5 mm.
- (7) Dark brown flint flake with some white patination/cortication and cortex on the dorsal face. 13 mm×9 mm×5 mm.
- (8) Totally cream patinated flake. Much cortex on dorsal face and some possible retouch/evidence for utilisation on both edges. 28 mm×21 mm×10 mm.
- (9) Fawn, translucent flint blade. Some buff cortex on dorsal face. 35 mm×14 mm×3 mm.

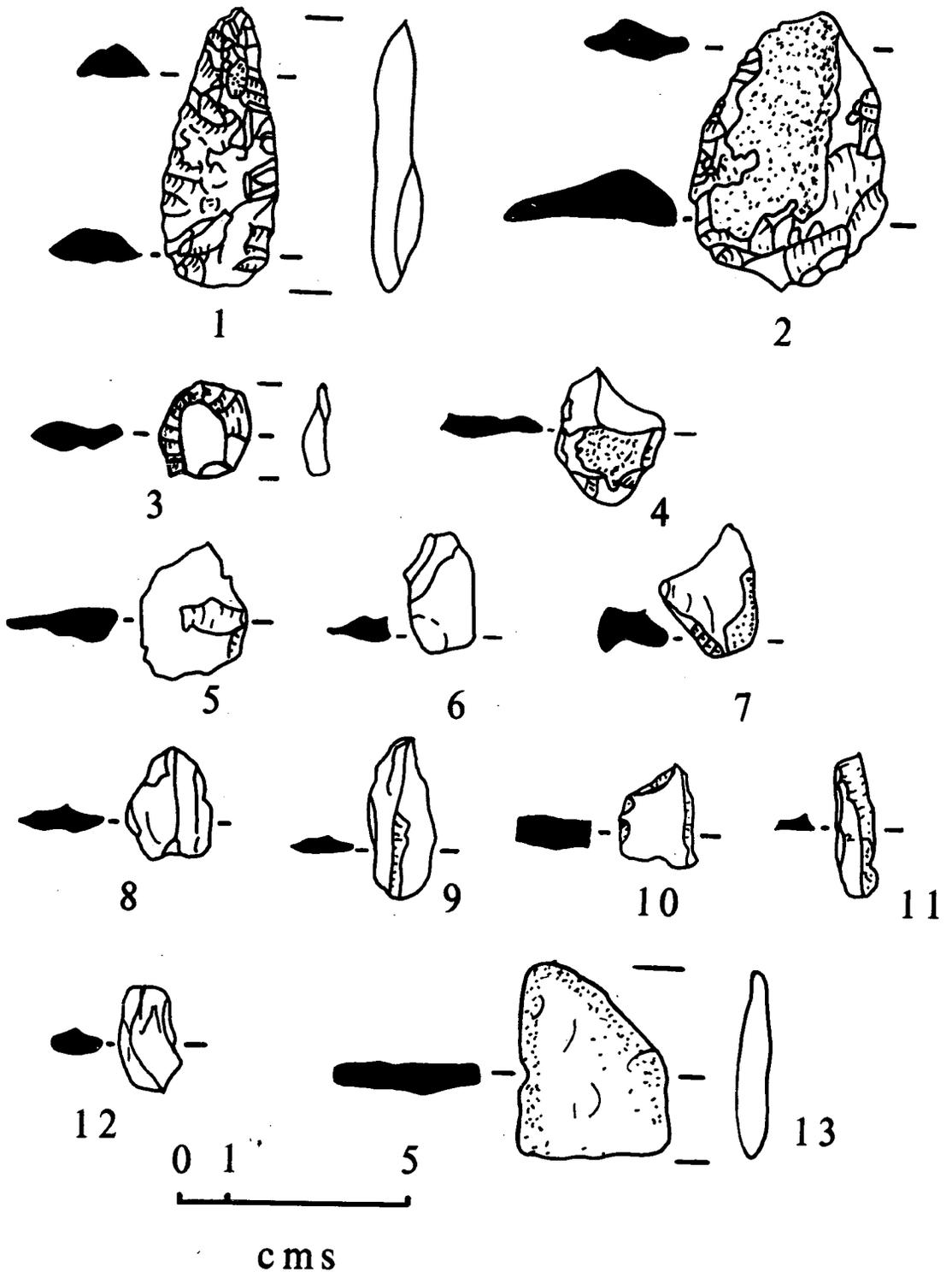


Fig. 4. Unpublished lithic material from Copt Hill.

- (10) Heavily white patinated/corticated flint flake with much cortex visible. 22 mm×17 mm×6 mm.
- (11) Ochrous brown translucent flint fragment with some cortex. 32 mm×8 mm×3 mm.
- (12) White flint flake with some iron staining visible. 22 mm×13 mm×5 mm.
- (13) A fragment from a possible shale plaque exhibiting evidence for a perforation at one end. Fractured across the perforation. 42 mm×34 mm×6 mm.

The presence of the plano-convex flint knife and the two scrapers would not be out of place in any Bronze Age assemblage from the north of England. Indeed, Simpson has shown that the commonest association with food vessels is the plano-convex knife (1968, 197–211). One of the scrapers may well be that recorded with burial number 3 listed above. However, no further information is available on the context of the above material.

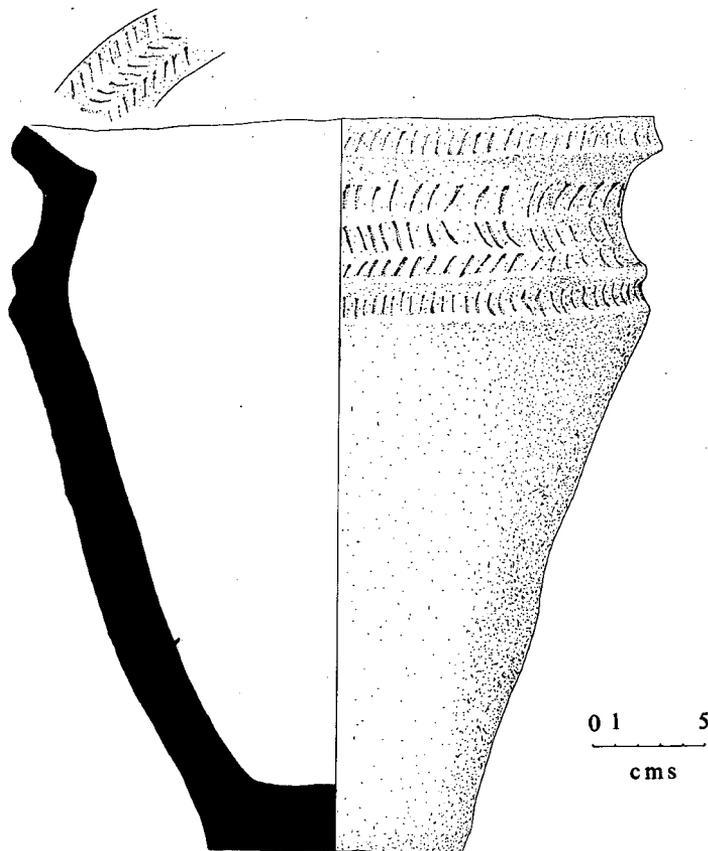


Fig. 5. Food vessel urn from Copt Hill.

*Pottery* (Fig. 5)

Only one vessel, found covering a cremation, survives from the site (see burial 8 above). This is a Food Vessel Urn, standing 335 mm high and having a rim diameter of 280 mm and a base diameter of 115 mm. The vessel is now heavily restored, but the fabric is orange-buff on the outside with a dark brown inner face. Crushed stone fragments some 4–5 mm long and erupting from the fabric in places, have been used in tempering the vessel. The rim is sharply everted with broad external and concave internal bevels and the neck of the vessel is markedly concave with two raised mouldings defining a narrow groove below this.

Decoration is confined to the rim, neck and shoulder and consists of fine, incised lines, arranged obliquely on the external rim bevel with three rows of incisions arranged herringbone fashion in the neck and further sloping lines on the rim moulding and shoulder groove. The internal rim bevel is also decorated with one and a half lines of herringbone.

No direct parallels for the vessel could be found in the north of England though the form fits comfortably into the range of Food Vessel Urn shapes illustrated by both Cowie and Gibson (Cowie, 1978, 82–83, 141, Fig. 4; Gibson, 1978, 56, 83, 123, No. 92). Similarly the decorative motifs and method of execution are common within the Food Vessel Urn tradition. The pot is now in the British Museum (Accession No. 90.11–11–1; the other material has accession numbers 1890, 11–11, 2–17).

In conversation with Trechmann, Greenwell remarked that the Copt Hill site “turned out to be one of the most interesting mounds he had ever had an opportunity of examining” (Trechmann, 1914, 124) and the published account certainly conveys this impression. It is hoped that this note has gone some way further to emphasise Greenwell’s point and to show that far from being a mere repository for the remains of the dead the site may give an important insight into structures associated with Neolithic burial ritual as well as providing information on the land use processes of the living.

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