

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGY

A CREMATION BURIAL AT ALPINGTON

by J.J. Wymer

On Christmas day, 1988, Mr. J.J. Lester took a walk along the edge of a ploughed field on the farm of Mr. Andrew Carver, at Alington, by whom he was employed. He spotted a small hole at the base of a furrow and examination showed him that it was the cavity within an inverted earthenware vessel, the base of which had been broken by the plough. Mr. Carver informed the Norfolk Archaeological Unit and on 30th December K. Penn and J.J. Wymer went to the site and conducted a rescue excavation. The plough soil was removed by spades from around the vessel and a pit was revealed 0.80 m diameter. It extended to a depth of 0.40 m below the base of the plough soil, cut into the natural sand. The fill of the pit was a dark sand and on the northern rim of the pit an inverted, biconical urn was exposed, resting on a layer of flint cobbles. On the east side of the urn, actually in contact with it and also on the base of the pit, was a much smaller vessel of very coarse ware, similarly inverted.

No grave goods or any other finds even charcoal were found in the fill of the pit, but when the contents of the large, biconical urn were later emptied at the Norwich Castle Museum, a well-preserved human cremation was extracted. The bones had been scrupulously recovered from the pyre for no charcoal or other burnt material accompanied them. A few minute fragments of very thin, corroded bronze were mixed with the bones. This cremation has been examined by Jackie McKinley and identified as those of a female between 18-30 years. The small, accessory vessel that had been placed beside the urn with its cremation contained nothing but sandy soil. Her report on the cremation follows:

Method

The cremated bone was passed through a series of three sieves, 10 mm, 5 mm and 2 mm mesh sizes, to obtain fragmentation as percentage by weight within these size groups. The maximum fragment size for skull and long bone was also taken. Identifiable bone was separated out; details are in the archive report.

Age was assessed from the stage of epiphyseal fusion (McMinn and Hutchings 1985, Webb and Suchey 1985) and tooth development (van Beek 1983).

Sex was assessed from the sexually dimorphic traits of the skeleton (Bass 1987).

Results

Total Weight = 2012.8 gm.

Percentage of bone in each sieve: 10 mm = 56.6%, 5 mm = 25.9%, 2 mm = 11.9%, dust = 5.7%.

Maximum fragment size: skull = 56 mm, long bone = 85 mm.

Weight identifiable bone = 786.4 gm (39.1%).

Skeletal areas identified as percentage of total identified bone: skull = 28.0%, axial = 26.4%, upper limb = 20.6%, lower limb = 25.0%.

AGE: Young/younger mature adult (18-30 yrs.)

SEX: female.

PATHOLOGY: 1) Twelfth thoracic, body has a Schmorl's node in the superior surface, dorsal portion. Central, shallow lozenge-shaped depression — 4 × 6 mm — with large lesion at left end — 4 mm diameter, 4.5 mm deep. The lesion in this case is likely to be the result of a back injury, rupturing the intervertebral disc leading to the formation of the node.

2) Small wormian bone, 13 × 4 mm — morphological variation.

COMMENT: Bronze staining on the inner side of the left mandibular body and a rib shaft. Pock-marks on the proximal right femur, of a type usually caused by the removal when cool of melted metal globules.

Strange black spotting was noted on the mandible and a lumbar vertebra — cause uncertain.

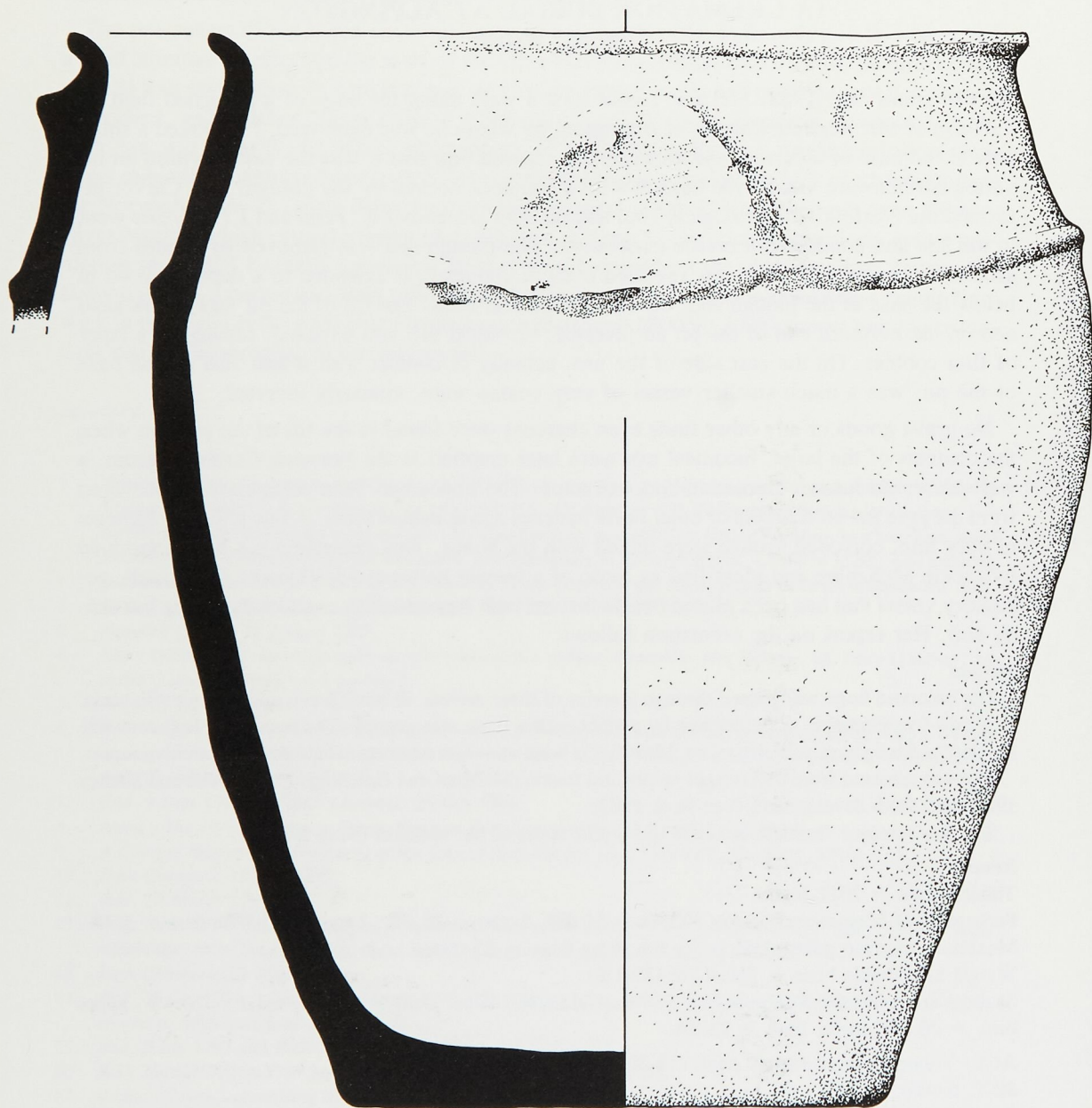


Fig.1

Alpington. Bronze Age biconical urn with horseshoe handles and shoulder cordon containing cremated bones of a female. Scale 1:2



Fig.2

Alpington. Accessory vessel. Scale 1:2

Discussion

This is an unusually large collection. The individual was a small female, so *c.*80% of the cremated bone must have been collected from the pyre for deposition in the urn. To have such a large proportion of the bone remaining is unusual, but where it has been observed previously is in central Bronze Age burials of this type e.g. Field Farm (McKinley 1988). There must have been scrupulous recovery of bone from the pyre. There are almost exactly equal proportions of the four skeletal areas, again a most unusual occurrence. 5.7% of the remains were present as bone dust only and it is likely that a certain percentage of the cremated bone on the pyre also remained as dust only and was therefore not collected.

The bone is not particularly well fragmented, over half the fragments being in excess of 10 mm — usually well in excess. This does not suggest any deliberate fragmentation after cremation; this degree of breakage could have taken place on the pyre and during collection (McKinley, 1989).

There were many fragments of spongy bone, particularly the axial skeleton, and some of this bone was grey inside illustrating incomplete combustion of the organic component of the bone. The reduction of the bone was however fairly efficient, mostly buff-coloured rather than white.

Bronze staining on the mandible and ribs suggests some bronze object around the neck, while pockmarks on the right proximal femur points to some metal object around the waist.

The large urn (Fig.1) is a classic example of a Bronze Age biconical urn as might be expected to occur under or in a burial mound. With its horseshoe handles and shoulder cordon it is very similar to one found at Bircham in 1842 containing some gold beads, which places it some time towards the end of the Early Bronze Age. The Bircham urn had flint cobbles packed around it as opposed to being placed on a bed of flints like the Alpington one, but it is a somewhat similar mode. However, this need not imply a similar date as the form of this type of urn persisted for many centuries (Tomalin 1986). There is another parallel from Soldiers Hill, Garboldisham, which also appears to have had flints packed around it. Both the Alpington biconical urn and the accessory vessel (Fig.2) had been fired fairly hard, with grog and some sand as temper.

Three metres to the south of the cremation burial, also just beneath the base of the ploughsoil, a spread of charcoal was seen and samples collected. It is impossible to know whether this was connected, but it may have been the actual pyre. The site is near Hillington Corner at TG

30540213. It is recorded as Site 10318 in the Sites and Monuments Records of the Norfolk Archaeological Unit for, perhaps not coincidentally, a barbed and tanged flint arrowhead was found at the same spot in 1971 by the same Mr. Lester.

Finds: Norwich Castle Museum

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A LATER BRONZE AGE CREMATION CEMETERY AND BEAKER PITS AT EAST CARLETON

by J.J. Wymer

In order to produce gravel for the construction of the new section of the A11 road between Cringleford and Wymondham, a borrow pit was opened in May 1986 at East Carleton. The pit was situated in the northern part of the parish, to the east of the Hethersett Road (centred at TG 17700270), with access from the road along a scraped track (Fig.1). Hitherto, the land was arable, with a shallow valley to the north along the parish boundary, in which an unnamed small stream flowed eastwards to the Yare at Keswick. The gravels form part of the outwash on the Till Plain at 30-45 m O.D.

The scraped track had been machined to a depth of up to a metre, exposing clean, sandy gravel, ideally suited for the passage of heavy lorries. In the course of searching the area, Mr. D.G. Woollestone observed some dark patches on the scraped surface; the bottoms of truncated pit-fills, containing coarse sherds, charcoal, burnt flints and fragmentary calcined bone. The Archaeological Unit was informed and the writer visited the site. The first pit, discovered by D.G. Woollestone, was found to contain the lower half of a thick, coarse bucket urn with remains of a cremation inside it. This was rescued and, with the co-operation of the manager of the gravel company, Mr. D. Minns, and his drivers, arrangements were made to make regular visits and conduct salvage excavations along the line of the trackway. A brief rescue excavation was also conducted on the north side of the trackway with the assistance of members of NARG in order to examine some linear features. The site was entered in the Sites and Monuments Records of the Archaeological Unit as No.22811.

Further discoveries of pits in the actual quarry (Fig.2) (SMR No.22652) resulted in the recovery of much Beaker pottery and flintwork and a few stray Roman and Saxon sherds. The Beaker material, in the quarry, and also in some pits close to the Later Bronze Age cemetery, is included in the record below.