Ring-Ditch Sites in the Great Ouse Valley

Notes relating to the Bronze Age burial sites at Roxton, Radwell and Willington with specific reference to double ring-ditches

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A complete list of Bronze Age ring-ditch (barrow) sites in the Great Ouse Valley, and their definition, was published by Ken Field in 1973 (Field, 1973). Since then many new sites have been discovered with continued air surveillance by Ken Field, and the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography. Although much of this new information is not yet available in a published form the overall distribution described by Field remains much the same. Much discussion has focused on the distribution of the Bronze Age ring-ditches, which can be taken to be the surviving element of barrow structures. This discussion has centred on the excavations at Milton Keynes (Green, 1973), Radwell (Hall and Woodward, 1977), and Roxton (Taylor and Woodward, 1983; Taylor and Woodward, forthcoming; a summary of the Bronze Age barrow structures is published below), and the settlement characteristics depicted by their structural distribution, and the distribution patterns of contemporary material; flint (Woodward, 1978). Discussion relating to the size and structure of ring-ditches, the type of barrow they may represent, and the distribution of cemetery and ring-ditch types has been developed in the report on the Bronze Age barrow cemetery at Roxton (*op. cit.*, forthcoming). In this report the results of the excavations of ring-ditches in the Great Ouse are reviewed, the gazeteer of ring-ditches in the Roxton area updated, and there is also a specific discussion relating to small diameter ring-ditches and double rings. It is this latter discussion (following) which is of relevance to the excavation of the double rings at Radwell and Willington which are published by Pinder in this volume. In the following discussion reference should be made to Field (1974).

In the Great Ouse Valley, where excavation evidence allows, there is a consistently small dimension (up to 23m diameter) for early Bronze Age ring-ditches (barrows), and the ditches themselves are slight. It is probable that at least some of these early barrows acted as foci for ring-ditch barrow cemeteries, and when this occurs the original barrow may have been elaborated with an additional outer ditch and modified mound. There is some evidence for this in the occurrence of double-rings along the Great Ouse valley. The occurrence is not frequent (ten examples in the Upper and Middle Great Ouse, Field 1973). They are usually in separate locations (apart from Biddenham 'm' and 'n'), and associated with groups of single rings. In some cases extensive ring-barrow cemeteries may have gathered around them (Cardington, and Buckden). However at Radwell the double-ring (Pinder, this volume), apparently remains somewhat isolated, and to the north of a ring-barrow group, although two additional rings have been recently located only 200 metres to the east at TL 00595880, and TL 00615883 (Bedfordshire County Council S.M.R. 262), but these are considered as uncertain ring-barrows (Field, *pers. comm.*). Also the outer ring now appears somewhat assymetrical, and may have been an integral part of a later ditch system (Cambridge University, BY294); although this could still be considered as a funerary elaboration of the original burial monument. At Willington the double ring (Pinder, this volume), has a large number of nearby ring-ditches in association, although none are particularly close and none have any specified locational association, which suggest that the double-ring was the central focus of this extended but dispersed cemetery group. In addition double-rings occur with increasing frequency in the Middle Great Ouse, particularly towards its junction with the Ivel. This is where the large extended cemeteries can be found, whilst in the Upper Great Ouse there is a notable lack of cemetery expansion and in particular around the excavated small diameter Early Bronze Age Barrows. In conclusion it is probable that double rings were a result of the enlargement and modification of early barrows, and this occurs more frequently where ring-ditch cemetery groups were developed.

It is perhaps also significant to note here that the

evidence at Roxton shows that the latest barrows in the group were of greatest diameter.

The evidence from the two double rings described in this volume is however inconclusive, since no funerary material was recovered. At Radwell the outer ring may simply act as a ditch to separate the inner ring-ditch (and presumed barrow mound) from surrounding settlement incursion, in which case access to the mound would then be from the direction of the river and floodplain. This may be significant for discussions related to funerary site and farmland; the separation of the dead from the active farming interests of the living.

In the case of Willington the outer ring can perhaps be best justified as an addition and elaboration of the monument, although Pinder suggests contemporaneity. The structural evidence for riverine barrows, which focuses on the excavation results of Roxton *(op. cit.)*, suggests that the mounds are not high, only up to one metre, and that the ditch is the principal element of structural importance. Also the Roxton results suggest a wide variety of barrow forms rather than simple mounds and ditches. At Willington it is perhaps more likely that a small barrow was initially constructed in the Early Bronze Age (*cf.* diameter); that the irregular layout of ditch may be due to the presence of tree stumps, perhaps this early structure was located on arable ground in recently cleared woodland (the earliest ring-ditch at Roxton, C, was also irregular and may have resulted from setting out with a string tied to the bowl of a tree); that this barrow was enhanced in appearance by the cutting of an outer ditch when woodland clearance was complete, when the surrounding land was cultivated or open pasture, and when the monument needed to be redefined; that this outer ditch may have provided an outer bank rather than an enhanced mound, since there is a suggestion that there was recutting of the inner-ditch and some modification of the central structure; that the eventual form of this double ring-ditch monument was a bell/disc barrow.

It is hoped that this short note contributes to the collation and development of the discussion of ring-ditch structures in the Great Ouse Valley. The author also hopes that the note draws attention to the importance of recording individual ring-ditches before destruction, and that an overall understanding of ring-ditch structures will not be achieved until there is a greater body of well excavated evidence.

APPENDIX

A Bronze Age cemetery and associated settlement at Roxton, Bedfordshire – A summary

The excavation of a cropmark complex (TL157535) on the flood plain of the Great Ouse concentrated on the examination of five ring-ditches, and parts of a system of associated rectilinear enclosures and other features.

Although three of the ring-ditches surrounded no surviving burial, all could be shown to be the surviving structures of a Bronze Age barrow cemetery. Carbon dates from the two surviving urned primary cremations gave a construction dated early in the second millenium BC. On certain of the ring-ditch sites stratigraphy was such that the height of the mounds, the sequences of construction, and the equivalent barrow type could be suggested; one ditched bowl, one bell, one saucer and two of the bell/saucer type. However, it is suggested that these funerary monuments could be better defined as ring-barrows. An early burial and associated post structure was also independently sited outside one of the ring-ditches.

It could be demonstrated that this cemetery was located on a site of earlier settlement; post-structures were sealed below the barrow mounds, an earlier flint industry was identified, and knapping foci could be suggested.

The cemetery continued to be used during the Bronze Age. Carbon dates from two secondary cremations gave dates in the late second millenium BC. A comtemporary flint industry was identified in the naturally developed soil profiles in the ditch silts of two barrows.

This cemetery was turned into arable land during the Iron Age, and fields systematically laid out in the late Iron Age and Romano-British period. The associated rectilinear and other cropmarks were of this date or later. The material and structural evidence for this and earlier periods suggests that the occupation episodes were short and seasonal. It is likely that the main focus of settlement was at some distance above the flood plain of the river valley.

Burials of the Romano-British and Saxon period were identified on two ring-ditch sites. This suggests that the barrows were then still visible as earthworks. Careful contour surveying across the ring-ditch sites also indicates that they may have survived as shallow mounds until relatively recent times. The post-Bronze Age settlement has been described in *Bedfordshire Archaeology* **16** (Taylor and Woodward, 1983, 7-28).

It is hoped that this summary of the full report on the Bronze Age cemetery, and associated settlement (Taylor and Woodward, in press for *Archeological Journal* **143,** 1985) will provide some added detail that is useful to the discussion related to the ring-barrows described in this volume.

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