

ANGLO-SAXON BURIALS AT LOWER WINCHENDON

J. F. Head, F.S.A. and T. A. Hume, F.S.A.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our warm thanks are due to Dr. Spencer-Bernard, the owner of the site, not only for kindly permitting us to excavate, but also for his personal assistance and interest in our work. We are also grateful to the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society and Mr. C. Gowing, Curator of the County Museum, for permission to illustrate the urn. We are indebted furthermore to Mr. Gowing for providing us with Dr. Cornwall's report, and for kindly facilitating our work in many ways. To Dr. Myres and Dr. Cornwall we are especially indebted for their authoritative reports—in addition we desire to thank Dr. Myres most warmly for providing us with all the illustrations of the pots.

The restored Anglo-Saxon urn illustrated in Fig. 1 was brought to the County Museum in 1957 by Mr. R. S. Clark, the tenant of Winchendon Hill Farm. Mr. Clark explained that it had been found while digging a posthole for a wire fence at the east end of a cutting then being excavated by mechanical means, from west to east, for the reception of silage. The urn was found to contain the remains of a cremation.

The site—O.S. 1 in., *Sheet* 159, grid reference 734129—is just below the 400 ft. contour at the west end of the high ground which comprises much of Upper Winchendon, but lies in fact within the boundaries of Lower Winchendon parish. It is situated approximately a half-mile north of Lower Winchendon village, and the east end of the cutting adjoins the north end of a belt of brushwood and small trees which occupy a narrow spine of rising ground running north and south up the hillside.

An examination of the cutting itself disclosed in its north wall the remains of an extended inhumation, Plate V, lying due north and south, with feet to the north. Unfortunately, the skull had projected into the cutting, and had been damaged by the mechanical digger, and then removed by the farm-workers concerned. We were told that the face had been turned towards the west.

The burial had been made in a roughly-hewn grave at a depth of 2 ft. 9 in. No attempt had been made to level the irregular limestone rock floor. The occupant lay on his back, resting unevenly over a protuberant rock. The right arm was folded across the chest and above the elbow of the left arm, which extended with clenched hand over another projection of rock. A rabbit burrow in the north-west corner of the grave extended into the central area, and had



PLATE V. Anglo-Saxon inhumation, Lower Winchendon

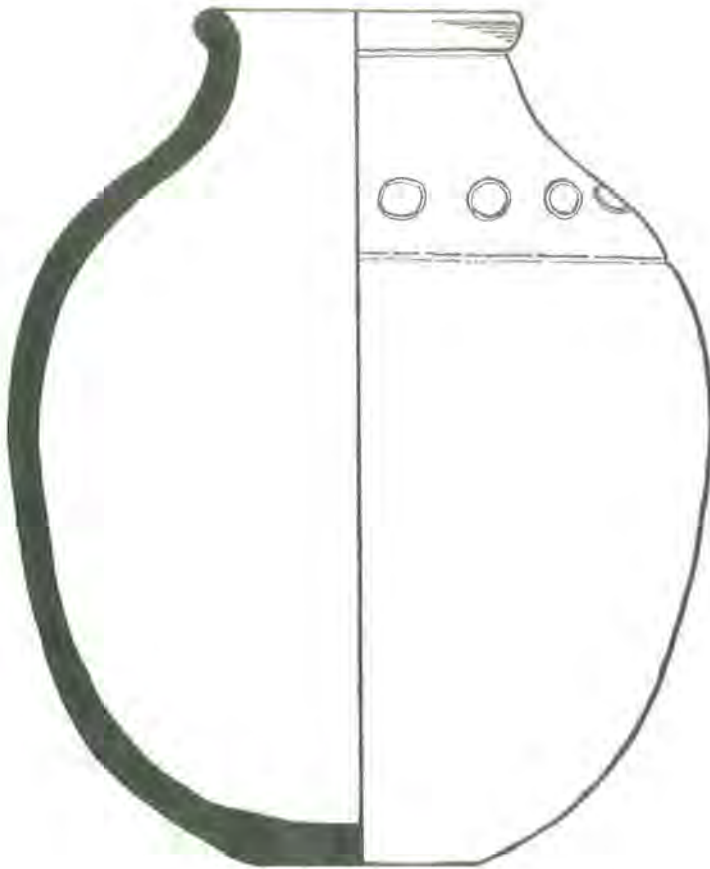


Fig. 1. Scale $\frac{1}{2}$ actual size

displaced various small bones, including a metacarpal which had become wedged under the left side of the vertebrae. A small indeterminate fragment of pottery was found in the upper filling of the grave.

The grave had been dug insufficiently long with the result that the left foot was turned inwards with the toes pressed against the northern wall. We were left with the general impression that the burial had been made with little care, and, in short, that the body had been bundled unceremoniously into the grave. No associated objects of any kind were found.

The skeletal remains have been examined by Dr. Ian Cornwall, and it will be seen from his subjoined report that the occupant of the grave was a male aged between 25 and 30, of short stature, and possessed of unusually long upper arms but strikingly short forearms.

In connexion with Dr. Cornwall's remarks about evidence for the habitual adoption of a squatting posture and the wearing down of the teeth by a gritty

diet (due probably to the presence of powdered stone in food ground down in a stone quern), it is of interest to recall that similar features were observed in pagan Saxon burials at Bledlow,¹ a few miles distant from our site.

The contents of the cremation urn were also examined by Dr. Cornwall who observes that while fractions of a whole skeleton were represented, they were too fragmentary and incomplete for any useful conclusions to be made. Two small shapeless nodules of metal included in the deposit probably represent small bronze ornaments melted down in the fire.

With regard to the cremation urn itself, we append a report by Dr. Myres, from which it will be seen he assigns the pot to the late sixth-century, and perhaps even later. The late date assigned by Dr. Myres to the urn accords with much other material from neighbouring Anglo-Saxon sites. It has been suggested² that these sites, grouped around the headwaters of the Thame, constitute a reflex movement from the early Anglo-Saxon colonies established long before in the region of the upper Thames, and are, in effect, secondary and "overspill" settlements emanating from that source. The Icknield Way, the Angle Way and the river Thame itself all offered ready means of access—the Kentish contacts, as evidenced, for example, by the Bishopstone and Lyminge saucer brooches,³ can hardly have reached the Aylesbury neighbourhood by any other route. A late-sixth-century or early-seventh-century saucer brooch, also from Bishopstone, was cast from the same mould as a pair found at Abingdon, Berks. And in this connexion we cannot altogether disregard the implications of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry, recording, under the date A.D. 571, the capture of Aylesbury by the West Saxons from the Britons. These early annals, derived from old oral traditions, are admittedly unreliable—certainly for precise dating—but it may well be that this particular entry does enshrine a memory of the general situation prevailing in South Buckinghamshire in the second half of the sixth century.

A hundred years later the British prince Caedwalla and his band were sheltering in the "wastes of Chiltern": no doubt the hills formed a useful refuge for other natives unwilling to submit to Saxon domination. Those who did, we may think, settled down with the newcomers to form part of the tribe known to the Mercians as the *Ciltensætan* occupying some 4,000 hides in the vale, below the hills.

It is interesting to find that we have at Winchendon another Buckinghamshire example of cremation and inhumation burials made in the same cemetery, and as Dr. Myres observes, evidence of the persistence of the crematory rite to so late a date. Similar conditions prevailed at Bledlow,⁴ some eight miles to the south-west of Winchendon, and probably also at Kingsey, four miles to the south, where, in 1859, weapons and two cremation urns were found. Concerning these Kingsey urns Dr. Myres wrote⁵ "if one is justified in arguing from the late stage in development of these urns to lateness of date I should say they belonged to a fairly advanced time in the sixth century."

Unfortunately, most of these Buckinghamshire pagan Anglo-Saxon burial sites⁶ were explored and recorded in the mid-nineteenth century in a way which inspires little confidence. There is, for example, some reason to think that much of the important Cursley Hill (Bishopstone) cemetery escaped attention, and it

is not improbable that more systematic methods of excavation and recording would have furnished other examples of mixed cremation and inhumation burials.

Finally, it may be mentioned that in the County Museum there are three Anglo-Saxon shield-bosses recorded as having been given to the Museum in 1899 by Mr. S. G. Payne, of Aylesbury. They are noted in the Accession Book as "probably from Winchendon". There are also two spearheads recorded as "from Upper Winchendon", given by Mr. Payne at the same time. The Revd. Oscar Moreton in his *History of Waddesdon and Over Winchendon* (1929), p. 33, states that portions of "Saxon Shields, also preserved at the Aylesbury Museum, were dug up in a field at the top of Cat Lane, and it is possible that this may mark the site of a Saxon burying place." Cat Lane leads to Coney Hill, at the north end of the high ground which comprises much of Upper Winchendon parish, and, *prima facie*, these weapons cannot be associated with our site.

¹ G. Parsons, *Records of Bucks.*, XIII, pp. 342-3.

² J. F. Head, *Records of Bucks.*, XVI, pp. 291-4.

³ *Op. cit.*

⁴ J. F. Head, *Records of Bucks.*, XIII, pp. 313-27.

⁵ *Records of Bucks.*, XIV, pp. 319-20.

⁶ They are listed by Miss Joan Kirk in her paper *Anglo-Saxon Cremation and Inhumation in the Upper Thames Valley*, *Dark Age Britain*, p. 129, and by J. F. Head, *Records of Bucks.*, XIV, pp. 311-16.

* Reproduced, by permission, in Cornwall, 1956 (*Bones for the Archaeologist*).

REPORT ON AN ANGLO-SAXON CREMATION URN FROM LOWER WINCHENDON

by

J. N. L. Myres, M.A., LL.D.

Your urn from Winchendon. I think it is quite late: it seems to me to be derived from the type of decoration which I term "biconical" because it is appropriate to pots of biconical shape; the decorated zone being bounded above and below by horizontal lines of which the upper is usually close under the rim and the lower one the carination of a biconical pot. In the earlier examples the zone so formed is often divided with chevron lines which later on become filled with stamps: later still, as in the Winchendon pot, the form ceases to be biconical, the chevron lines disappear and there is nothing left but the top and bottom lines, and a line of stamps, or sometimes no lines at all but a random scatter of stamps. Thus one has a typological sequence:

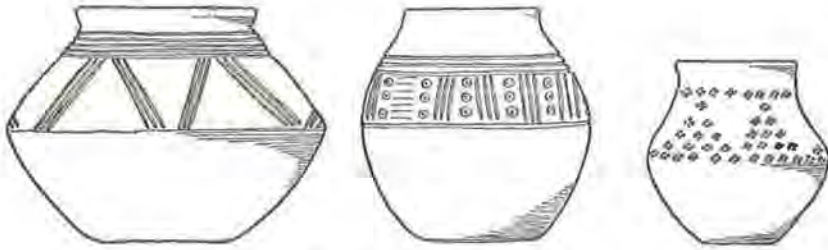


Fig. 2. (No scale.)

Some of the later stages in this development can be seen in my paper on the Anglo-Saxon Pottery of Lincolnshire (*Arch. Journ.* CVIII) Fig. 9 (p. 87). For the form of your pot the Laceby (Lincs) pot (*ibid.*, Fig. 10.1) is a parallel: it was found with a large late sixth-century square-headed brooch.

I would guess that your pot is late sixth-century perhaps even later. It is interesting to find cremation surviving so late in that part of Bucks.

REPORT ON THE BONES (HUMAN) FROM LOWER WINCHENDON

by

I. W. Cornwall, D.Sc.

The *skull* was in part reconstructed. It is undoubtedly of male sex, as may be concluded from the thickness of the bones of the vault, the well-developed supraorbital ridges, large mastoid processes and strong nuchal musculature-impressions.

As reconstructed (with some unavoidable errors owing to post-mortem deformation) the overall dimensions are:

Length: 171 mm., breadth: 135 mm. giving a cranial index of 79.5 (mesocephalic, bordering on brachycephalic).

The vault-sutures are mainly still open externally, though closure is beginning, even here, in the coronal region. A probable age between 25 and 30 years may be inferred from this, though individuals vary widely and this criterion is of small value without other support (but see below).

Wormian bones are present on both sides of the lambdoid suture. This is a not uncommon individual anomaly, which appears to be hereditary.

The teeth and palate are large and there is, in consequence, a slight degree of sub-nasal prognathism.

Teeth. Upper jaw: all teeth were present at death save the left first molar, which was lost in life and shows a cleanly-healed alveolus. The left third molar and right first incisor have been lost *post mortem*. There are distal carious

cavities both in the left second premolar and the left second molar, the teeth immediately adjacent to that lost in life. Lower jaw: complete intact set present.

All teeth are much worn, even the third molars, and this points to a rough and gritty diet, but there is no sign of decay in any, save in those indicated above. There is a thick deposit of tartar on all of them above gum-level.

The state of wear (third stage) even of the third molars, which first come into use only at about age 20, supports the age-estimate arrived at from the vault-sutures. The wear of the molars is more pronounced on the right side, and this is probably due to habitual avoidance of the left owing to the pain caused in chewing during the loss, probably through caries and possibly abscess-formation, of the left upper first molar, which, judging from the present state of its opposite number, was worn almost down to the gum. This tooth is first in use at about age 6-7 and is often thus lost through excessive wear and exposure of the pulp-cavity at a comparatively early age in primitive peoples.

The *pelvis* is certainly that of a male, because of its general shape and proportions and the absence of a pre-auricular sulcus.

The main *long bones* were all present. They are of light build. The shaft of the right femur was broken post mortem, but the bone was nevertheless measurable. The head of the right humerus was badly eroded so that no reliable overall length-measurement could be obtained. The rest were in reasonably good condition and all were measured. The measurements were as follows:

| <i>Bone</i> | <i>Right</i> | <i>Left</i> |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Femur | 38.6 cms. | 39.1 cms. |
| Tibia | 30.4 | 30.6 |
| Humerus | — | 28.5 |
| Radius | 18.5 | 17.8 |

From these measurements the stature-in-life was calculated by the regression-formulae of Dupertuis & Haddon*, which were derived from a study of bones of modern white Europeans. Seven different formulae were used for the right-hand bones and ten for the complete left-hand set:

| | <i>Right</i> | | <i>Left</i> | |
|-------------------|--|---------------------|--|-------------|
| Formula (a) | 154.48 cms. | | 156.59 cms. | |
| (b) | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 155.40 \\ \text{—} \\ 147.94 \end{array} \right\}$ | 7.46 diff. Extremes | 154.88 | |
| (c) Extremes | | | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 158.21 \\ 145.38 \end{array} \right\}$ | 12.83 diff. |
| (d) | | | | |
| (e) | 153.82 | | 154.66 | |
| (f) | — | | 151.43 | |
| (g) | 153.81 | | 154.64 | |
| (h) | — | | 150.16 | |
| (i) | 155.04 | | 156.08 | |
| (k) | 150.88 | | 152.12 | |
| Arithmetic means: | 153.05 cms. | | 153.40 cms. | |
| | = 60.2 ins. | | = 60.4 ins. | |

The minimum calculated statures were obtained from Formula (d), which involves the radius-measurements only; the maxima from the tibia (b) and humerus (c), respectively. From this it is evident that the radii (forearms) were extraordinarily short, the humeri (upper arms) unusually long. The tibiae (shins), on the contrary, were in about the usual proportion to the femora (thighs).

The subject thus stood a trifle over 5 feet in height and had strikingly short forearms. This feature, which does not seem to be in any way pathological, accounts for the very large maximum differences between extreme results of the calculations. They do not usually exceed 5 cms.

The tibiae were markedly platycnemic (flattened transversely). At the mid-point of the overall length, the transverse measurement (1.7 cm.) was only 60.5% of the antero-posterior (2.7 cm.). This is a feature common to many primitive peoples all over the world and has been said to be due to the habitual assumption of a squatting posture. It is normally absent among chair-using peoples.

No pathological signs were observed in any of the bones.