

THE COP ROUND BARROW AT BLEDLOW, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE: PREHISTORIC OR SAXON?

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The Cop barrow at Bledlow, prominently sited on the scarp overlooking the village, occupies a particular place in the affections of those interested in the prehistory of the county. It is the only Buckinghamshire round barrow to have been excavated, and the work reported upon, in an acceptable modern manner. The excavator, Jack Head, published his work in *Records of Bucks* 13, part 5 (1938), 313-351. The accompanying plan is reproduced here (Fig. 1). A number of distinguished archaeologists gave direct advice or assistance at the time of the excavation. Apart from the barrow itself, the finds recovered during the excavation have over the years occasioned some interest (for example, Britnell 1976).

The barrow was investigated as a research project, the particular aim of which was to draw attention to the significance of the Princes Risborough-Wycombe valley which at that time was 'a blank on the prehistoric distribution maps'. The excavation, however, turned out not to be as straightforward as anticipated and a re-reading of the report shows that the excavator's interpretation of the results may have been unduly influenced by his initial expectations. In summary, he believed that he had excavated a) an early Bronze Age bowl barrow that had once contained a primary crouched inhumation, that subsequently b) cremations of similar but slightly later date were placed there, and finally c) Saxon inhumations and Saxon urned cremations were deposited. The only part of this interpretation which is incontrovertible is the last.

To present an in depth re-analysis of the report would take more space than the tentative conclusions presented here warrant, and the reader is referred to the original report for details. Much hinges on the inferred crouched Bronze Age inhumation supposed

to have been deposited in a pit in the centre of the barrow. There certainly was a pit, but in its fill were sherds of Romano-British pottery and clay pipe stems. The excavator attributed the presence of these items to a total emptying of the original burial pit in the seventeenth century. A more prosaic explanation would be that the pit was dug, not emptied, in the seventeenth century or later, and was part of the same barrow-digging episode which the excavator himself deduced from the dish-shaped surface of the mound. This interpretation would account satisfactorily for the fact that the same pit had cut away a SW-NE inhumation leaving only its legs and feet *in situ* on the north side. There is no firm dating evidence for this inhumation although the excavator and the palaeopathologist who reported on the bone suggested it might be Saxon. It may be noted, however, that this inhumation lay roughly central to the barrow and if a 'primary' central burial is to be sought, then this may well have been it.

Once the unsatisfactory nature of the key hypothesis (the presumed total removal of a crouched inhumation from the pit) becomes apparent, the dating evidence for other aspects of the interpretation seems less secure. There is no doubt about the date of a second complete inhumation, that of a Saxon male accompanied by a spearhead, knife, tweezers, etc., which lay on the northern margins of the barrow; however, further uncertainties then arise.

Apart from the barrow mound itself, all the reported features were cut directly into the chalk and had no recorded relationship to the mound. The mound could have overlain them or they may have been cut down through it. Their dating really stands or falls therefore on the contents of each feature. Two of the pits (A and C) contained Saxon cremation urns.

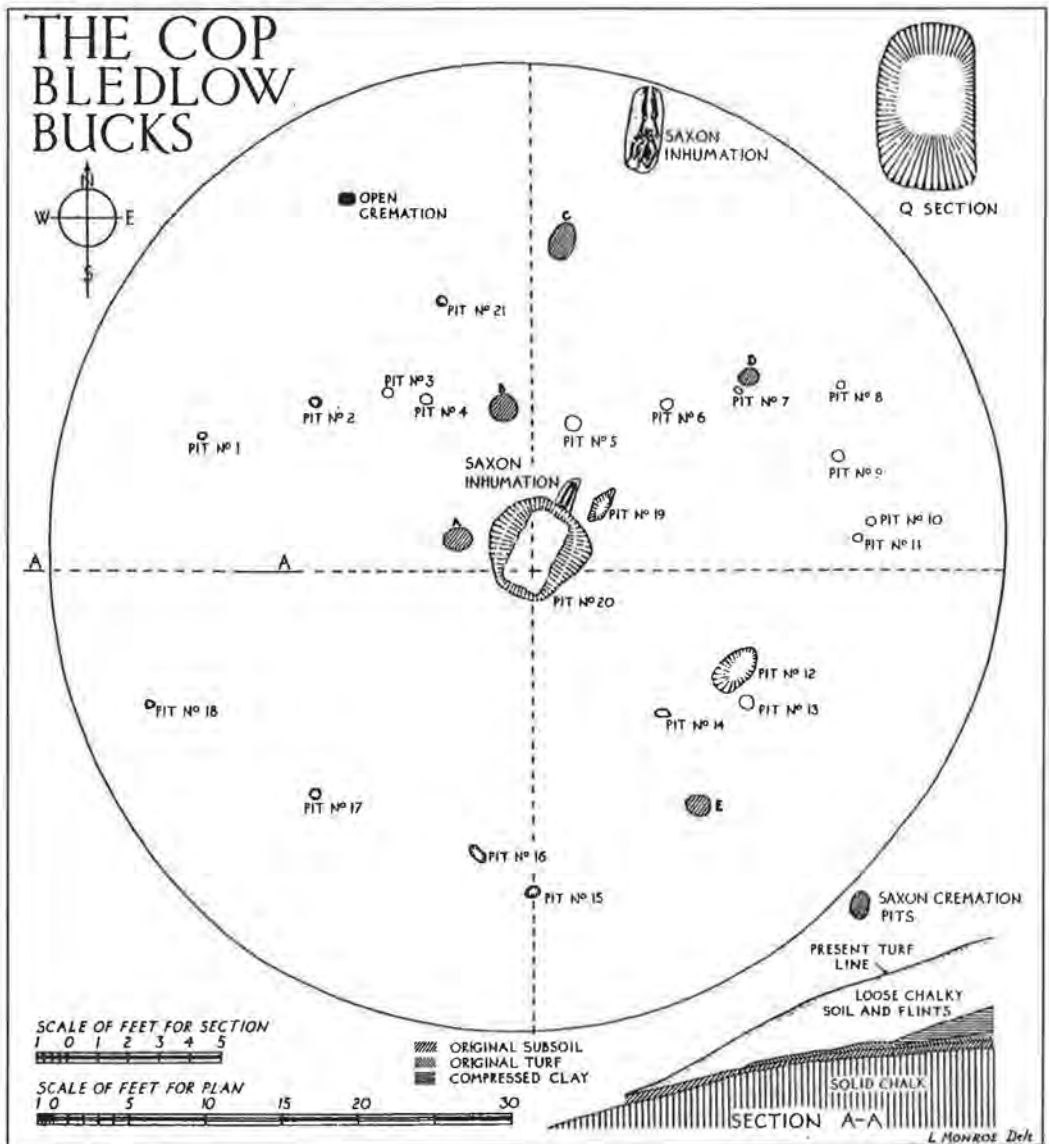


Fig. 1. The Cop, Bedlow: figure accompanying its first publication in *Records* 13, pt5, 1938.

Head believed that three other pits were also cremation pits of Saxon date. One of these (pit D) contained a Saxon bone comb; one (pit E) had only a soil fill, and nothing is recorded of the other (pit B), save that fragments of Saxon urn, a comb and burnt bone lay a short distance from it. Nineteen other small pits were noted and these the excavator interpreted as Bronze Age cremation pits. Although there is no detailed listing they are in general said to have contained fragments of animal bone, usually burnt, and frequently one or more small burnt flint flakes. Four contained sherds datable to the mid-late Bronze Age. One pit of particular importance (pit 19) contained three ox bones and an antler cheek piece datable to the later Bronze Age. An unnumbered 'hollow' contained cremated bone, six struck flakes and a copper alloy hook. To describe these pits as cremation pits in the absence of any quantity of cremated human remains seems unsatisfactory. Finally, a further hollow, area Q, outside the limits of the barrow, produced from its lower fill Beaker sherds and 5 flint scrapers.

Amongst other finds recovered during the excavation were a Palaeolithic handaxe, a polished Neolithic axe, a tanged MBA-LBA knife, spindle whorls and various copper alloy objects as well as large numbers of pottery sherds of which those illustrated in the report are MBA-LBA in date, some 240 struck flakes, etc. Clearly there can be no simple explanation for such a varied group of finds, the great majority of which came from the body of the mound itself. Since there was no barrow ditch the material used to create the barrow (loose chalky soil and flints) and a substantial proportion of the finds in the make-up of the mound must have been brought in from elsewhere, albeit no great distance. The ceramic finds, the flints, the copper alloy objects and spindle whorls, would not be out of place on a mid-late Bronze Age occupation site. The body of the barrow, perhaps in part of turf, would have incorporated all this material from earlier occupation which, as Head remarked, was 'scattered promiscuously throughout the mound'. Clearly some of this material might have been further spread during the barrow-digging episode. It is quite possible that

some of the pits beneath the mound, for example the one containing the antler cheek piece, may belong to structures of this date. In theory the mound could therefore have been constructed at about this time, but a barrow with a central inhumation burial of this late date would be unusual. It could as reasonably be argued that the mound was constructed in the early Saxon period incorporating the earlier material (including apparently some Romano-British sherds), perhaps partly on top of an occupation site of mid-late Bronze Age date. Roughly at its centre would have been deposited the extended inhumation, which may initially have been accompanied by grave goods. A further burial of slightly later date, also with grave goods, was subsequently interred on the periphery of the mound and in the seventeenth century the 'primary' burial was largely destroyed by treasure hunters.

It is not surprising that such a prominent piece of landscape as the Cop received continuing attention over a long period of time, particularly on occasions when it was open grassland. As the excavator realised, however, it is not a simple monument and he would undoubtedly have been faced with a deposit seriously affected by burrowing animal activity and by the barrow-digging episode. It would be perverse to state categorically that no barrow stood here in the prehistoric period, but the volume of later prehistoric finds apparently incorporated within the barrow mound, some domestic in character, would seem to argue against this.

Finally, Jack Head drew attention to the place name 'Bledlow' above which village the barrow is sited. It contains of course, like Taplow, the *hlaw* element signifying a barrow. Whilst this observation does not affect the case one way or the other, if the barrow was thrown up in the Saxon period rather than being a prehistoric barrow subsequently utilised for a secondary Saxon burial, it might explain its particular significance for the local Saxon community.

Britnell, W. J. 1976, 'Antler cheekpieces of the British Late Bronze Age', *Antiq. Journ.* 56, 24-34