TWO FRAGMENTS OF HUMAN SKULL FROM LATTON LANDS STAGES 1-5

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Introduction

During sorting of finds from the current phase of work held in Oxford Archaeology's stores, two fragments of skull from stages 1-5, previously thought lost came to light. The skull fragments were recovered from the lower fill (481) of a middle Bronze Age waterhole (421), just above the basal gravels (see Stansbie and Laws 2004, 109). The waterhole contained a quantity of animal bone, worked bone and middle Bronze Age pottery, as well as a rare wooden bowl (radiocarbon dated to 1440-1210 BC and 1440-1130 BC at two sigma).

Osteological analysis

The human bone comprised two fragments of left parietal bone of an adult individual. Cortical bone on the ectocranial surface appeared slightly weathered. Flaking of the cortex indicated that the bone had dried out at some stage, and is consistent with exposure. By contrast, the endocranial surface was fairly well preserved. In cross-section, the diploë appeared reddish-black in colour, possibly due to iron oxide deposition in the waterlogged environment. Margins appeared sharp suggesting little post-depositional abrasion of the fragments.

The sex of the individual could not be determined, as no diagnostic features were available. A broad age estimate was obtained from the stage of fusion of small sections of the sagittal suture. The ectocranial surface was completely unfused, whilst fusion of the endocranial surface was beginning. Ageing from the former indicated an age of 22-42 years (Meindl and Lovejoy 1985). Ageing from endocranial suture closure is less widely accepted, but usually begins before ectocranial fusion in the third to fourth decade of life (Schwartz 1995). The general size and thickness of the fragments tentatively suggests that they were part of the same individual.

Archaeological context

The placement of human remains in non-burial contexts is a rare but not unknown rite in the middle Bronze Age, the predominant burial practice being cremation burial in small cemeteries (Taylor 2004). Human remains in pits and ditches are better known in the late Bronze Age (albeit still not a common practice) and Iron Age (Brűck 1995). The range of finds from waterhole 421 suggested more than a purely functional use of this feature. Its association with water may well have played an important symbolic role in the minds of the people, borne out by the deposition of animal and worked bone, pottery and a wooden bowl in feature. The location of the human bone in a lower fill tentatively suggests a foundation deposit. Votive deposition of artefacts in watery places, such as lakes and rivers, is a well recognised practice of the late

Bronze Age, becoming more conspicuous as burials become less well represented (Bradley 1990). In some cases, offerings were accompanied by complete inhumations or unburnt disarticulated human remains. It is probable that the skull fragments of this prime to mature adult from waterhole 421 is another rare example of this practice.

Bibliography

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