

Appleford Sidings (ARC Sutton Courtenay Pit), Oxfordshire, 1997-1998, Archaeological Watching Brief: Short Interim Report

Summary

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a further season of archaeological fieldwork, consisting of monitoring and recording topsoil stripping in the eastern part of the ARC Sutton Courtenay Pit, from early August to mid October 1998. The work revealed further evidence of Bronze Age and Roman field systems and associated features in this important archaeological landscape.

Background

Expansion of the eastern part of ARC's Sutton Courtenay Pit (work centred at c NGR SU 522 925) has been under archaeological consideration since 1992. In 1993, in response to a brief from County Archaeological Services, the OAU carried out an evaluation, consisting of fieldwalking, geophysical survey and trial trenching, of an 11 ha area scheduled for gravel extraction (OAU 1993), covering Blocks 5, 8, 9 and part of Block 3 of the present gravel extraction programme. In the northern part of this area a ditched enclosure, identified from aerial photographs, was shown to be of early Roman date, but features in the southern part appeared to be largely undated linear ditches, many of which were thought to be medieval and later. In 1997 an adjoining area to the west and south, consisting of Blocks 2, 10 and the remainder of Block 3, was also subject to evaluation, again revealing for the most part undated linear features, but with cremation burials, probably of Bronze Age date, located in the south-east corner of the area (OAU 1997). Subsequent to this, agreement was reached for a watching brief to be carried out during topsoil stripping of this area, with the exception of the area of the probable Bronze Age cemetery, for which a more formal excavation in advance of extraction was proposed. The watching brief revealed parts of field systems of Bronze Age and Roman date, the former being associated with a number of discrete features, including water holes. In the light of these discoveries additional funding was made available for the recording of these features, which was completed in October 1997. Accordingly, when topsoil stripping of the adjacent area to the east (mostly covered by the 1993 evaluation) commenced in August 1998 it was agreed that these areas would be treated in a similar way, with archaeological monitoring of the topsoil stripping, preparation of a plan of all the exposed features and limited excavation as appropriate. Subsequently the stripping programme was expanded eastwards across the access road to Hill Farm and Hartwright House, to encompass Block 4 and most of Block 6. It had originally been proposed that these areas should be subject to evaluation, but it was agreed that it would be more cost effective, and archaeologically just as satisfactory, to treat them in the same way as the other areas –i.e. that they would be subject to monitoring of topsoil stripping, with subsequent planning and excavation of archaeological features as appropriate. This work was completed by mid October 1998. The present short report summarises the results of the 1998 work in the context of that already carried out on the site.

To date roughly 14 ha of the site has been planned and recorded subsequent to topsoil stripping, making this one of the most extensive archaeological examinations of a gravel quarry site in the region (some 20 ha have been recorded at

Yarnton/Cassington). In the north-east corner of the site Blocks 7 and 8 and the northern part of Block 5 (this last containing the important early Roman enclosure) remain to be examined, as does the area of the Bronze Age cemetery at the southern end of Block 3. This last area will not be extracted for gravel, but it may be required for other purposes within the pit in the future.

Summary of Results

Bronze Age

The most important discoveries to date relate to the Bronze Age, evidence for which was not anticipated before the 1997 evaluation work began. A small amount of pottery indicates activity from the earliest Bronze Age (from c 2250 BC onwards), but the earliest features that can be identified at present are of middle Bronze Age date. The Bronze Age cremation cemetery is discussed in the 1997 evaluation report, but something of the landscape context of the cemetery was only revealed once large scale topsoil stripping began in the summer of 1997. This appears to take the form of a roughly rectilinear system of field boundaries, defined by ditches. A number of water holes appeared to be associated with these features. Dating evidence was generally sparse, which is important for understanding why so few of the linear features encountered in evaluation trenches were datable, but was sufficient to indicate that the field system was of middle Bronze Age date. The associated pottery included a particularly significant group of decorated Globular Urns of this date.

Middle Bronze Age features extended eastwards into the area examined in 1998, though they were more scarce here and the principal focus of Bronze Age activity does appear to lie in the western part of the site. Nevertheless, the great majority of the pottery recovered in 1998 was of Bronze Age date, and included fragments of a further decorated Globular Urn. The volume of Bronze Age pottery from both the 1997 and 1998, while not large, is sufficient to suggest that some, probably domestic, activity took place within or very close to the present limits of the site. Domestic settlement sites of this period are still very poorly known, and the Upper Thames is no exception to this generalisation.

Romano-British

There is no clear evidence for Iron Age activity on the site. The Bronze Age field system is, however, overlain by a not dissimilar system of Roman date. This consists of field boundary ditches on a very similar (roughly north-south and east-west) alignment, with associated trackways, the principal one of which was located in the 1997 work running approximately north-south through the entire area. The alignment of the Roman features suggests a connection with the ditched enclosure in the northern part of the extraction area, examined in the 1993 evaluation. Most of the (very small) assemblage of Roman pottery appears to be of earlier Roman date (i.e. 1st-2nd century AD). At the extreme eastern end of the site adjacent to the railway line a small sub-square ditched enclosure contained a cremation burial in a poorly-preserved shell-tempered ware urn. This was of Roman date. The burnt material included a variety of nails, some from shoes but others rather larger, suggesting that the deceased may have been placed in a wooden coffin before being cremated. The slight concentration of Roman activity at this end of the site suggests, as might be expected, that the cropmark features just to the north, both east and west of the railway line, are probably of this date.

Finds and Environmental data

Aspects of the finds, particularly pottery, have been discussed above. This material represents the most common artefact type from the site, with a total of c 1400 sherds from the 1997 and 1998 watching brief work combined. The majority of this material is of Bronze Age date, and a note on the significance of this material is appended below. About 150 pieces of struck flint have been recovered, with rather larger quantities of burnt flint, a characteristic find type on Bronze Age domestic sites. A complete saddle quern, presumably of Bronze Age date, was recovered during the 1998 work. Other artefact types occur only in very small quantities.

Significant environmental evidence has been recovered, principally from the waterholes examined in 1997. Some of these contained waterlogged deposits which are important for the preservation of environmental data and have also produced some fragments of waterlogged wood. Carbonised plant remains also occur, and are locally well-preserved.

Site Potential and Future Work

The site has already produced evidence for a Middle Bronze Age landscape of regional if not of national importance, with significant assemblages of pottery and important associated environmental data. The evidence for the Romano-British landscape, while less spectacular, is still of considerable significance in broadening the picture of the setting of a known domestic settlement focus, itself of major interest as it may be a high status site. This evidence can also be linked to that recovered further north in the 1970s (Hinchcliffe and Thomas 1981).

Overall, the project demonstrates the value of examining large areas of landscape, allowing settlements to be seen in the context of their associated fields and allowing understanding of the evolving organisation of the landscape in successive periods. It also demonstrates that important evidence of this type can be gathered in a cost effective way.

It is anticipated that outstanding fieldwork at the northern end of the present extraction area may be carried out in 1999. Once this work is complete, it will be necessary to collate and assess all aspects of the archaeological records accumulated since 1993 and put forward proposals for a programme of analysis and reporting. The present account is based on a very summary consideration of the evidence and much basic work needs to be done even to produce an outline scheme of phasing of the site. For the present, however, it is proposed that this should be deferred until the likely timetable for completion of the fieldwork has been established. This will also need to take into account any possible work in the area of the Bronze Age cemetery.

Paul Booth
OAU, November 1998

References

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OAU, 1997 *Land near Appleford Sidings, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire, Archaeological Evaluation Report*, unpublished client report (for ARC Southern)

Appendix 1: Appleford Sidings Watching Brief, Bronze Age pottery: statement of potential by Alistair Barclay

The Bronze Age pottery from APSIDWB has a total date range than spans the period (2250-700 BC), although much of the assemblage can be placed within the middle or Deverel-Rimbury phase (1750-1150 BC). There are both relatively small quantities of Beaker and late Bronze Age (PDR = post-Deverel-Rimbury) pottery. There is a significant element of late (generally post-Beaker) Early Bronze Age pottery, and although little of this material is diagnostic, the fabric is similar to that used for Biconical Urn elsewhere within this region (e.g. at Yarnton). Note there is a strong typological argument for ceramic development from Biconical Urn to Deverel-Rimbury in the early-mid Bronze Age. It is probable that the beginnings of the APSID domestic landscape are associated with this material. This element of the assemblage is important in the understanding of the change from ritual to domestic landscapes in the 2nd millennium BC (cf. Yarnton etc).

The middle Bronze Age or Deverel-Rimbury assemblage is characterised by a relatively high proportion of Globular Urns as well as the regionally more common Bucket Urn (cf. Barrett 1971, 121). The groups of Globular Urns, especially those from context 84, are rare finds from this region and from the Thames Valley in general. Many of these vessels are thin-walled, burnished and highly decorated (cf. Calkin type I) and this is in sharp contrast to the comparative material from this region which is often much coarser and often plain. In general the relatively few Globular Urns known from the Upper Thames tend to be represented by small sherds where as the material from APSID includes a number of reconstructable profiles. The only other comparable fine vessel from this region is from Standlake which is unfortunately incorrectly illustrated (the profile is wrong - I have seen the sherds) as middle Iron Age (Catling 1982, fig 58.26 - note no 24 may also be Globular Urn), while there is the possibility that some of the material illustrated by Harding from the same site could also be of this date (1972, pl. 46-7 - note that this point is also made by Barrett 1973, 121). Globular Urn has also been found at in relatively small quantities at Radley and Yarnton (Cleal forthcoming; Barclay in prep.), while unpublished vessels are recorded in the Ashmolean as coming from Blewbury and Sutton Courtenay (Barrett 1973, 131). In addition there is the largely middle Bronze Age assemblage from Wallingford Road, Didcot amongst which there are a number of thin walled vessels that may be best described as Globular Urn (No ?11, 12, ?21 and 22). Outside the Upper Thames region there is slightly more evidence for Globular Urn from recent unpublished excavations (Note that Barrett's work undertaken in the early 1970s mentions and illustrates relatively few (10-11) of these vessels 1973, 121). OAU excavations at Eton have produced a significant number of Globular Urns, although none of these urns are as fine and well finished as those from APSID.

In conclusion the assemblage of Globular Urn from APSID is without doubt likely to become the type-assemblage for the region with comparative assemblages (certainly in terms of quality) being found beyond the Thames Valley in areas of Wessex.

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