



NEWS

May 1994

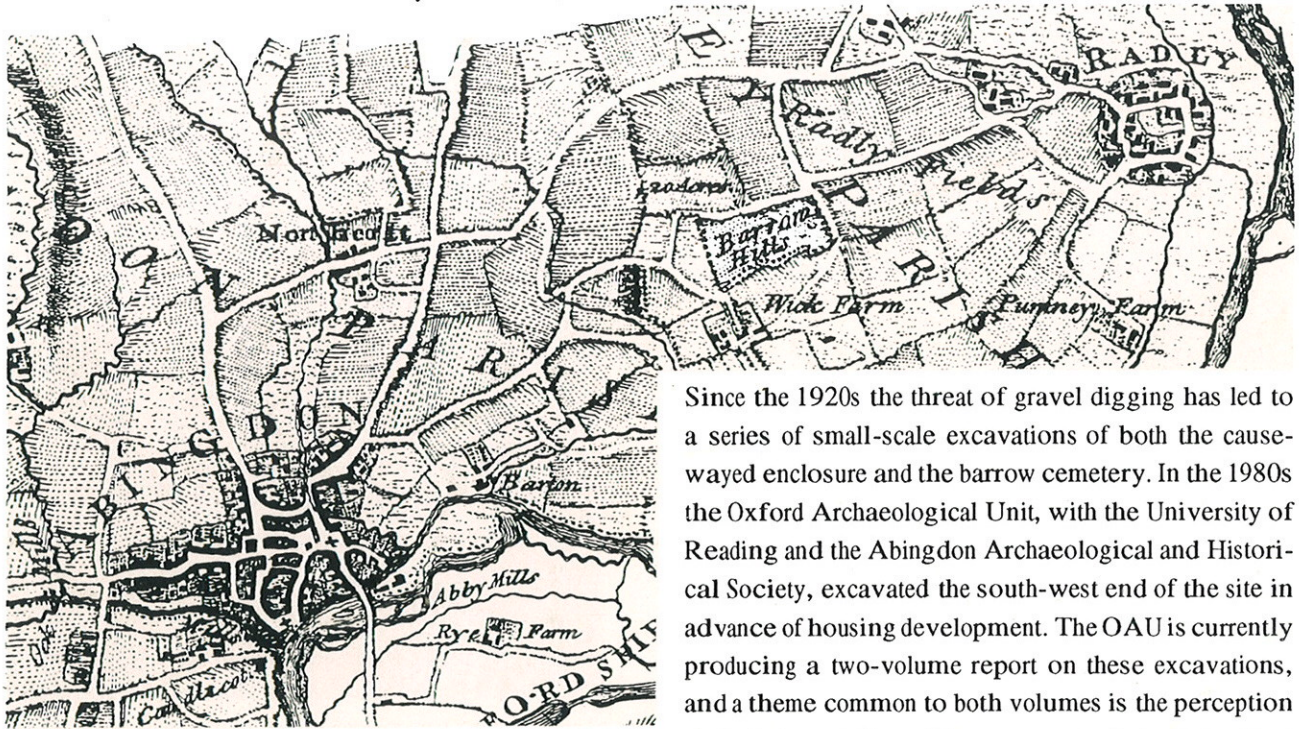
'BARROW HILLES': A PLACE FOR THE DEAD

In 1761 John Roque's map of Berkshire recorded the field name 'Barrow Hills', thus identifying the site of a barrow cemetery at Radley, on the outskirts of Abingdon. The name itself is first recorded in the Land Revenues of 1547, and shows that, although the mounds were already flattened by the plough in Roque's time, they had survived into the post-Roman period. Both 'barrow' and 'hill' are Anglo-Saxon words, so that the name would not have been given to the cemetery until Anglo-Saxon speakers had settled the area.

Since the 1920s aerial survey and excavation have revealed an important monument complex. The complex, which consists of a Neolithic causewayed enclosure, two

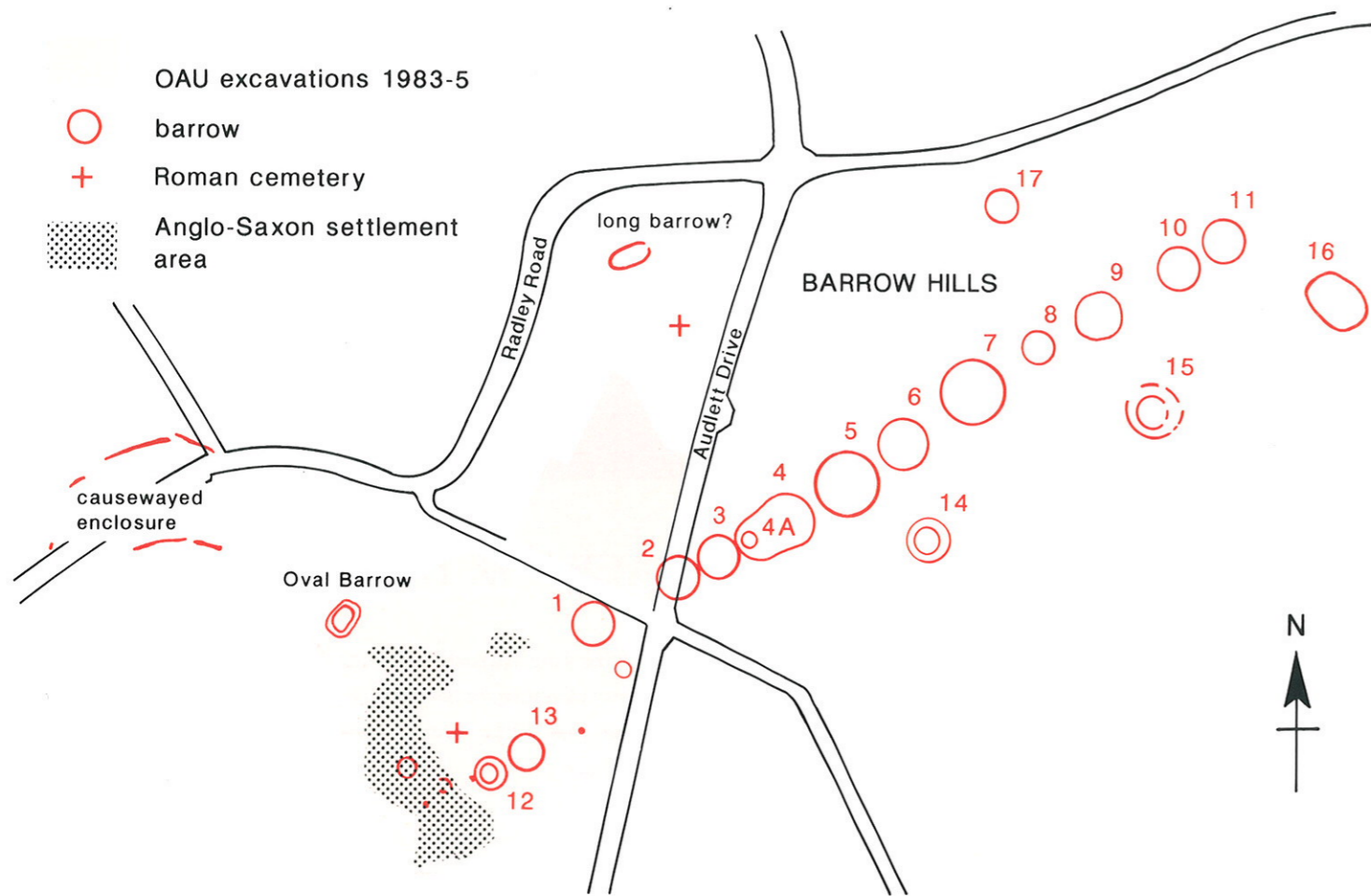
Neolithic long barrows and over 20 Bronze Age round barrows extending in two lines along a terrace of the river Thames, has a long history stretching back over almost 6000 years.

The causewayed enclosure was discovered in gravel workings in the 1920s; the Bronze Age barrow cemetery was also located in the 1920s, first by O G S Crawford's pioneering work in aerial photography and later by Major Allen, who in the 1930s produced more detailed photographs. Finally aerial photography in the 1950s revealed a Saxon settlement and a Roman cemetery at the south-west end of the barrows.



Detail from Roque's Map of Berkshire, 1761

Since the 1920s the threat of gravel digging has led to a series of small-scale excavations of both the causewayed enclosure and the barrow cemetery. In the 1980s the Oxford Archaeological Unit, with the University of Reading and the Abingdon Archaeological and Historical Society, excavated the south-west end of the site in advance of housing development. The OAU is currently producing a two-volume report on these excavations, and a theme common to both volumes is the perception and reinterpretation of these monuments by successive generations.



Plan of the monument complex

The earliest monument was the causewayed enclosure, which was constructed by early farming communities around 3500 BC. It was probably used on a seasonal or episodic basis for ceremonial activities, including both communal feasting and the disposal of the dead. Some of the corpses may have been 'stored' or exposed before burial, and stray human bones found in the ditches of the enclosure and the Neolithic oval barrow may have been circulated as relics amongst the living. An early phase of the oval barrow or the interior of the causewayed enclosure could have been used for the exposure of the dead.

Excavations north of Barrow 2 uncovered a Neolithic grave which contained the skeletal remains of three individuals. Only one body was articulated; the other two were represented by heaps of bones, perhaps the remains of exposed corpses. In the same area a small Neolithic cemetery contained the skeletons of a man, woman and child. Professor Richard Bradley's excavation of the oval barrow revealed an unusual burial of a man and a woman. Placed with the burials were a polished flint knife, a jet belt fastener and a leaf-shaped arrowhead. Both the artefacts and burial tradition can be related to

those of barrow sites in Yorkshire. This burial coincided with the abandonment of the causewayed enclosure at around 3000 BC.

Around 2500 BC a small circular monument consisting of a lowered central area surrounded by a ditch was used for special ceremonies, and formed the focus for a series of complex deposits placed in pits. One pit contained a disarticulated human skeleton and others produced highly decorated Grooved Ware pottery, broken stone axes, flint and bone tools, and a considerable quantity of pig bones. One pit included sherds with very unusual lattice and spiral motifs and an awl made from the bone of a white-tailed eagle. The rare combination of lozenge and spiral motifs links this area with distant places including the Boyne Valley in Ireland where the art of the great stone-built tombs of Knowth and Newgrange incorporates the same motifs. These deposits may have been placed with some formality, involving the deliberate burial of exotic objects and the residues from feasts and the debris from everyday life. Similarly, the ditch of the monument itself contained animal limbs, a stone axe fragment and a perhaps deliberately smashed Grooved Ware bowl.

After 2500 BC a series of rich burials was placed outside the causewayed enclosure. These graves mark the introduction to Britain of a new style of pottery, known as Beaker, and of metalwork. Some of these burials were marked by small gravel-capped mounds, which formed the first Bronze Age barrow cemetery. Many of these graves contained highly decorated Beaker pots and tools of bone and flint, and some contained exotic trinkets such as personal ornaments of copper and gold. One grave contained a number of children and other graves contained the bodies of male 'warriors', with their finely-flaked flint arrowheads. At least one of these male warriors had met a violent death; a flint arrowhead was lodged in his spine.

A child's grave contained three unusual rings made from almost pure copper, which represent some of the earliest metal objects found in Britain. An equally rare pair of earrings from Barrow 4A, manufactured from Irish gold, represents the earliest use of this metal in England. Analysis of the metals by Dr Peter Northover of the University of Oxford has confirmed that they came from distant sources.

Barrow 4A was the earliest monument in a linear group of eleven early Bronze Age barrows. These barrows formed part of a great 'avenue' of monuments which stretched for over 800 m, probably aligned on the Neolithic causewayed enclosure. Excavation has demonstrated that many of these mounds covered rich burials of both men and women. Barrows 2 and 16 covered the cremated remains of two women, one buried with a large gold-covered button and the other with a necklace of polished stone (jet and amber) and glass (faience) beads, together with a bronze knife. Barrow 3 covered the corpse of a man who was buried clutching a bronze dagger.

Some of the cremated bone was picked clean of ash and charcoal and deliberately crushed before burial. Some cremations which had undoubtedly undergone this process were brought to the site in large decorated pots known as Collared Urns. We may imagine the funeral processions passing along the avenue of barrows which marked the graves of great ancestors.



Flat grave containing the skeleton of a man. Objects placed in the grave include a Beaker pot (opposite), a copper knife, flint arrowheads and a bone tool.



The last barrows were probably constructed before 1500 BC, at the end of the early Bronze Age. However, in the later Bronze age a number of secondary cremation deposits were added to the existing mounds. Around 1000 BC human remains and a calf were inserted into two earlier monuments.

For the next 1000 years there is little evidence for human activity in the immediate vicinity, suggesting either that the area was deliberately avoided or that the land was of little agricultural value.

There is extensive Roman settlement in areas around the barrow cemetery at Abingdon, Barton Court Farm and Goose Acre Farm. Evidence from excavation indicates that the barrows would still have been prominent landmarks to the occupants of the villa at Barton Court Farm. The area of the prehistoric earthworks was used for Roman burial, and two late Roman cemeteries have been excavated. One cemetery was probably laid out along a north-south path which ran up from the lower terrace to the south between the barrow mounds. Among

the graves from the cemetery excavated by the OAU in 1983-5, which probably served Barton Court Farm and a smaller farmstead to the south, were four decapitated individuals. Decapitated burials are a common feature of rural Roman cemeteries, and it seems that the severing of the head after death may have been part of an otherwise ordinary funerary rite. It may have been carried out on individuals who died in special circumstances, perhaps to stop their spirits walking.

Not long after the Roman cemeteries went out of use, perhaps only 20 or 30 years later in around AD 450, the area at the south-west end of the barrow alignment was chosen by early Anglo-Saxon settlers as the site of their farmstead. The mounds of the Romano-British graves must have been visible to the Anglo-Saxons, because the first house of the settlement seems to have been deliberately sited at the north end of the cemetery, perhaps beside the existing trackway, and subsequent buildings avoided any disturbance of the graves.

Alistair Barclay

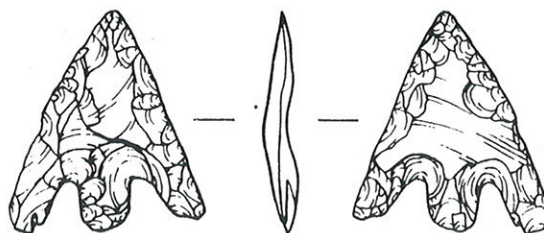
**OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
21ST ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATIONS**

Saturday 25 June 1994

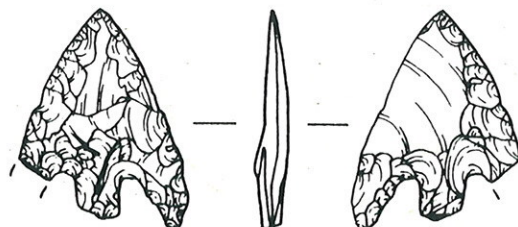
Making sense of the Past: Archaeology in the Oxford Region 1973-2000, a day school to be held at The St Cross Building Lecture Theatre, Oxford

Speakers will include: Tom Hassall, Martin Jones, Richard Bradley, George Lambrick, Gill Hey, Martin Biddle, John Blair, Richard Morris and David Miles.

Details from the Archaeology Course Secretary, OUDCE, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JA



Flint arrowheads from the burial illustrated on the previous page



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