2 Stephen's Road Headington Oxfordshire

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Oxford Archaeology

29th May 2003

Client Name: M C Weasel and J & S Developments Ltd

Issue No: 1
OA Job No: 1621
NGR: SP 5455 0715

Client Name:	M C Weasel and J & S Developments Ltd
Client Ref No:	
Document Title:	2 Stephen's Road Headington
Document Type:	Watching Brief
Issue Number:	1
National Grid Reference:	SP 5425 0715
Planning Reference:	
OA Job Number:	1621
Site Code:	OXHSRO 02
Invoice Code:	OXHSROWB
Museum Accession No:	

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Document File Location	Annsofie\oau\final applau.doc
Graphics File Location	oau all drawings - x:\
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2 Stephens Road, Headington, Oxford

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

In December 2002 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at 2 Stephens Road, Headington, Oxford (NGR SP 5425 0715). The work was commissioned by G Dighton and Sons on behalf of J & S Developments and M C Weasel who have title to the land during the construction of new flats.The burial of an Anglo-Saxon female accompanied by a range of grave goods was discovered unexpectedly during construction. She was accompanied by two copper alloy brooches, a copper alloy pin, a necklace of amber beads, an iron knife and a second unidentified iron object. The burial is likely to be 6th-century in date and would almost certainly have been part of a larger cemetery which has been destroyed by post-medieval construction.

The burial is so far unique within the parish of Headington.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In December 2002 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at 2 Stephens Road, Headington, Oxford (NRG SP 5425 0715) (Figure 1). The work was commissioned by G Dighton and Sons on behalf of J & S Developments and M C Weasel after the unexpected discovery of an Anglo-Saxon burial during construction of new flats.

1.1.2 OA agreed a programme of work with Brian Durham, Oxford City Archaeologist.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The geology of the site is first gravel terrace overlaid by alluvium (British Geological Sheet 237).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The name Headington is derived from a Saxon personal name 'Hedena' and it has been suggested that the village as the nucleus of a great royal manor may perhaps have been more important in Saxon and Norman times than at any later period (VCH Oxon V 1957, 157). The most compelling evidence for this royal connection comes from a charter of AD 1004 by Ethelred which states that *'in villa regia quae vocatur Hedindona'* (in the royal residence which is called Headington). However, the only surviving trace of this period is the reference on the Ordnance Survey map to the foundations of an ancient building known as Ethelred's Palace, in Court Close, adjoining Manor Farm although there is no archaeological evidence to indicate that this is the Saxon palace.

1.3.2 Loom weights were found in 1876 on the site of the reservoir at the top of the hill leading to Headington and an unaccompanied burial was exposed close to the Fox Inn at Barton, a quarter of a mile east of Headington Village during the construction

of the Oxford northern by-pass in 1931. It appeared to be lying in the remains of a house-bottom from which Saxon sherds were recovered (VHC Oxon I, 1939, 356).

1.4 Acknowledgements

1.4.1 Oxford Archaeology would like to thank Brian Durham, Oxford City Archaeologist. The reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon female's costume which appears on the cover was produced by Roz Smith.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.

2.1.2 To excavate and remove any articulated human remains surviving above impact level.

2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The grave was planned at a scale of 1:10 and was photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures detailed in the OA Fieldwork Manual (ed D Wilkinson 1992).

2.2.2 In the first instance the discovery of human bones within the construction trench was reported to the Thames Valley Police. They subsequently contacted Chris Gosden and anthropologist at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. He removed the lower legs which were protruding from the section (for this reason the lower legs are not present in Plate 1). After this OA were asked to complete recording and excavation. The human skeletal remains were excavated by hand and taken to the premises of Oxford Archaeology where they were recorded in detail.

3 RESULTS

3.1.1 The natural subsoil was a firm light yellowish brown sand with patches of reddish brown sand (5).

3.2 The grave *(Plates 1-2)*

3.2.1 The grave (1) was cut into natural and was filled by the skeleton (2) and grave fill (3). It was a sub-rectangular cut with near vertical sides and a flat base. It measured 2.0 m in length, 0.80 m in width and 0.18 m in depth. The skeleton (2) was an adult female lying supine extended with the right arm by the side and the left hand resting on the pelvis. The head was turned towards the west. Orientation was north-south. The skeleton was accompanied by a number of objects. A copper alloy brooch (sf 1) was located at the forehead; a large copper alloy needle (sf 2) was resting on the right side of the chest; a necklace of amber beads (sf 3) was lying on the right upper body

adjacent to the right arm; an iron knife (sf 4) was located at the right side of the pelvis; an iron object of uncertain function was located beneath the third lumbar vertebra (sf 5); a copper alloy disc brooch was located on the right shoulder. The grave fill (3) was a friable dark reddish silty sand with charcoal flecks, patches of light yellowish sand and sandstone fragments. The grave was overlaid by topsoil (4) which was a dark greyish brown silty sand loam with gravel, charcoal and brick inclusions. It measured 0.40 m in thickness.

3.3 Associated artefacts *(Plate 3)*

Swastika-type brooch (Plate 3a)

3.3.1 A single copper alloy swastika or cognate brooch (sf 1) was found at the forehead. The term swastika is used in a loose sense since the brooch is not a true swastika. The open work design consists of four anvil shaped openings, a type recognised by Leeds (1945, 2).

3.3.2 The true swastika is usually regarded as a symbol for the sky god or the sun (Meaney 1981, 27). Apart from the brief discussion by Leeds (1945), swastika brooches have received little attention. The distribution was then identified as being concentrated in the Nene Valley and headwaters of the rivers Welland and Witham in the 6th century. More recent finds have served to emphasize the distribution, the type apparently being absent from site like Sewerby (Humbs.) to the north, and Spong Hill, Bergh Apton and Morning Thorpe in East Anglia. Comparable examples to that from Stephens Road have been found at Empingham II, Rutland (Timby 1996, 37), Market Overton, Leicestershire (Crowther Benyon 1902), and Nasington, Northamptonshire (Leeds and Atkinson 1944, pl. XXIV a) suggesting that this may indeed be a local interpretation of the true swastika brooch, the origins of which are also obscure. The graves at Empingham which contained swastika brooches were broadly dated possibly from the late 5th to the early 7th century.

Disc brooch (Plate 3b)

3.3.3 A copper alloy disc brooch was located on the right shoulder. Disc brooches are the most common brooch form in the Upper Thames region. The type is virtually exclusive to England and concentrated in areas south of the river Thames, in Cambridgeshire, and in the Upper Thames valley (Evison 1988, 11). Dickinson concludes that the main period in which disc brooches occurred as grave goods was between AD 450 and 550 (1979, 42), while Evison has recently argued for an early 5th-century date for some examples (1988, 11).

Amber beads

3.3.4 Amber beads are by far the most common type at many sites across the country and can be divided into three main types: barrels, wedges and discs (Boyle *et al* 1995, 91). Amber is known in small quantities from contexts in the early 6th century, where it tends to occur as single beads, for example at Holywell Row, Cambridgeshire (Lethbridge 1931, 75) and Abingdon I (Leeds and Harden 1936) and also in some Final Phase cemeteries. Its greatest period of use seems to be in the mid

to later 6th century when large necklaces are found in graves (Meaney 1981, 67; Huggett 1988, 64). For the Thames valley Dickinson (1976, 202-206) demonstrated that amber had a *floruit* in the early 6th century with a limited late 5th and early 7th-century presence. Fairford I (Wylie 1852, 12-13) and Butler's Field grave 123 (Boyle *et al* forthcoming) date from the late and mid to late 5th century respectively.

3.3.5 It has been suggested (Meaney 1981, 67-79) that amber may have been thought to have amuletic and curative properties, described in classical sources (most famously in Pliny's *Natural History*) as opposed to a merely decorative purpose, though it was undoubtedly attractive in appearance. It is known that the use of amber for amuletic purposes was condemned by churchmen on the Continent (Meaney 1981, 70), for instance in early 6th-century Gaul by Caesarius of Arles. Although copies of his condemnations appear in English material, like Egbert's Penitential, Meaney does not believe they can be accepted as a secure indicator of conditions in England. Evison (1987, 67) has argued that amber does appear in a number of the earliest Christian graves, and therefore if a ban was in operation the corresponding decline was slow. It has also been suggested (Meaney 1981, 70; Evison 1987, 67) that the decline in the popularity of amber can be explained by a decrease in trade with northern Europe, and a corresponding increase in trade with the Mediterranean as a result of the spread of Christianity.

Bronze needle *(Plate 3c)*

3.3.6 Sewing needles are rare in Anglo-Saxon graves although a small number of examples are known. One was found at the hip of a woman buried in grave 138 at Buckland, Dover (Evison 1987, 112). Other examples are known from grave 222 at Kingston, Kent (Faussett 1856, 92-3 with figs) and another is recorded from Caistor-by-Norwich (Myres and Green 1973, fig. 20, N36, D). They would appear to have a wide date range from the late 5th-7th century.

Knife *(Plate 3e)*

3.3.7 Iron knives occur throughout the pagan Saxon period and beyond with men, women and children. The knife from Stephens Road would require cleaning and conservation in order to determine what type it is (cf Bohner 1958).

3.4 The human skeletal remains

Preservation and completeness

3.4.1 The preservation of a skeleton is dependent upon the often complex relationship between the pH value of the soil, precipitation, location of the skeleton, depth of the burial, age of the individual, pathological conditions present on the skeleton and type of burial container. For example, acidic sandy soil have an adverse effect and may degrade the bones to the extent that only soil shadows are present. Deep burials are often better preserved than shallow graves since increased aeration due to worm action accelerates diagenesis. Pathological conditions such as osteoporosis, often associated with elderly females, make bones light and porous and in adverse soil conditions preservation would be extremely poor. Bones of immature individuals are

thinner and often more porous than adult remains which again could account for differential preservation within the same assemblage.

3.4.2 Preservation was recorded by the observation of the cortical integrity of the bones. The condition of the bones were scored on a sliding scale from excellent to poor depending on the degree of surface erosion, root impressions, bubbling and flaking of the outer surface of the bones.

3.4.3 The completeness of a skeleton is partially dependent upon preservation. In soil conditions where degradation is high, bones with a high proportion of a trabecular inner structure and a thin outer cortex such as vertebrae, and small bones such as phalanges would degrade quicker and the skeleton would therefore receive a low completeness score. Alternatively, in high intensity burial grounds where space is in great command, intercutting of burials would not only lead to the loss of parts of the skeleton but the increased aeration may also contribute to the general loss of skeletal elements. Later use such as ploughing of fields may also have carried away large portions of skeleton if the grave was shallow.

3.4.4 Completeness was scored using four categories, namely poor (0 - 25%), fair (26-50%), good (51-75%) and excellent (76-100%).

3.4.5 The preservation of the skeleton was poor with clear evidence of the adverse effect of the soil conditions. The cranium was warped due to the soil pressure and all bones had substantial cortical erosions caused by root damage. The impressions of the roots were deep and clearly visible. The bones were also fragile and had clearly been demineralised.

3.4.6 Most skeletal elements were present though the joints, consisting primarily of spongy bone, were generally missing or partially degraded. The right hand was also poorly preserved with only a few fingers present. The vertebrae were also fragmented though all vertebral segments were present to some degree. Five post-mortem breaks were present on the long bones of the arms and legs.

Inventory

3.4.7 The inventory of the skeleton was recorded by shading in the present skeletal elements on a pictorial representation. In addition, the skeletal components of the individual were recorded in tabular form as present or absent.

3.4.8 Dental inventory was recorded following the Zsigmondy system. Dental notations were recorded by using the universally accepted recording standards and terminology (after Brothwell 1981).

Age and sex

3.4.9 The sexually morphologically differences between males and females emerges after the onset of puberty. Sex can therefore only be determined with any degree of accuracy in individuals aged over 17 years. Cranial and pelvic morphology and post-cranial metrical measurements are used for the determination of sex. The differences between the sexes are most pronounced in the pelvis since the female pelvis is

adapted to childbirth. The female pelvis is therefore lower and broader. The male cranium tends to be more robust, with pronounced brow ridges and larger muscle attachment sites. Post-cranial measurements rely on the generalisation that males tend to be larger than females. The measurements of the diameters of certain joints can therefore be used to determine sex. However, in modern populations, which was also the case in the past, there are tall females and short males. This overlap between the sexes provides therefore a substantial zone of intermediate values which cannot be sexed using this method alone.

3.4.10 Six cranial features and four pelvic features were used for sexing. On the cranium, the features used were chosen from Standards (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994) and Workshop (1980). On the pelvis the features available were the sciatic notch, preauricular sulcus, acetabulum and the auricular surface (Workshop 1980). The measurements taken for the assignment of sex was the diameter of the femoral head (Chamberlain 1994)

3.4.11 The skeleton was sexed using a combination of cranial, pelvic and metrical data. Each feature on the pelvis and cranium was scored on a five point scale (probable female, female, probable male, male and unknown). The overall score from the observed features and to a lesser degree, the metrical results, provided the basis for the assigned sex.

3.4.12 The cranial and pelvic morphology indicated that this was a female. This included small supra-orbital ridges and a weak occipital protuberance on the skull. The pelvis displayed female traits such as an obtuse sciatic notch and a preauricular sulcus. The sexually diagnostic post-cranial measurement available was clearly within the female range.

3.4.13 The assessment of age provides the biological age of the skeleton and not the chronological age of the individual. This is because factors such as nutrition and lifestyle have an impact on skeletal growth and subsequent degeneration. Ageing of subadults provides more narrow age ranges since the growth and maturation sequence of children is fairly predictable and uniform. The development and eruption of both deciduous and permanent dentition are also believed to be less affected by environmental influences (Roberts 1997, 111). The ageing of adults over the age of 25 years relies on the degeneration of various sites of the skeleton and to a lesser degree, the fusion pattern of the ectocranial sutures.

3.4.14 A combination of the following methods was used for the assessment of age: degenerative changes of the auricular surface (Lovejoy *et al.* 1985) dental attrition (Miles 1962) and suture closure (Meindl and Lovejoy 1985).

3.4.15 The age of this individual was estimated to be between 40 and 50 years old. This was achieved through using a multi-factorial approach with a great emphasis on the dental attrition method since the auricular surface was only partially complete and the cranial suture closure provided a very broad age range.

Estimation of stature

3.4.16 Stature was estimated by using the measurements of a long bone. The regression formula developed by Trotter (1970) was then used for the calculation of height. The bone available for the calculation was the right femur.

3.4.17 The complete femur provided a stature estimate of 161.54 ± 3.72 cm (5 feet 3 inches ± 1.5 inches).

Pathology

3.4.18 The remains were examined for abnormalities of shape and surface texture. When observed, pathological conditions were fully described and recorded following the standards listed in osteological textbooks. All pathological lesions are fully discussed.

3.4.19 Two of the total of 30 permanent teeth had been lost ante-mortem, six had been lost post-mortem. The teeth had supra-gingival calculus deposits present ranging from small to heavy (Brothwell 1981). The largest deposits were present on the left maxillary and mandibular molars. Calculus is mineralised plaque which accumulates on the base of living plaque deposits (Hillson 1996, 225). Calculus is a common pathological condition and is generally related to poor oral hygiene. The deposits are generally seen on the teeth nearest the saliva glands which would correspond with the location of the deposits seen on the teeth of this individual.

3.4.20 Thirteen carious lesions were present on twelve teeth. All lesions were small and were either interproximal or buccal. Dental caries are cavities formed on the enamel surface of the tooth. It is caused by the fermentation of food sugars by bacteria which naturally occur on the teeth (Roberts and Manchester 1995, 46). All of the dental diseases mentioned are inter-linked. Though genetic predisposition and environmental factors plays a part the strongest link between these diseases is poor oral hygiene.

3.4.21 Periodontal disease was present on both jaws. Periodontal disease involves the horizontal reduction of the jaw bone, which causes the teeth to loosen in their dental pockets causing them to fall out. The disease was slight on the maxilla and medium on the mandible.

3.4.22 Localised considerable periodontal disease was also present on the left mandibular first premolar. This was caused by a localised infection causing a periodontal pocket which would have allowed the accumulation of pus in the socket which had loosened the tooth from the jaw bone.

3.4.23 Due to the poor survival of the cortical surface of the bones, few pathological lesions were visible. The lesions present were degenerative changes to the medial ends of the clavicles. These changes consisted of slight pitting and are caused by the natural progression of the degeneration of the skeleton with advancing age. The changes observed would not have caused any major pain or discomfort to the individual since they were slight.

3.4.24 Degenerative changes were also observed on the superior and inferior articular processes of the lower thoracic vertebral elements. The articular surfaces had moderate pitting and slight lipping. The bodies of the second and third cervical vertebrae also appeared to have been fused. The normal joint morphology of the vertebral surfaces was considerably altered with severe pitting. Pitting of the joint surfaces is associated with the ageing process (Roberts and Manchester 1995, 107). The condition would have caused intermittent back ache and a stiff neck.

Table 1 summary of the skeleton

Skeleton number 2
Completeness: Good
Preservation: Poor
Age: 40-50 years
Sex: Female
Stature: 161.542 ± 3.72 cm
Dental inventory:

C	C												C	C		
Ca	Ca			Ca	Ca					Ca	Ca	Ca	Ca	Ca		
8	7	X	5	4	3	2	/	/	2	3	4	5	6	7	-	
8	7	X	5	/	/	2	/	/	2	3	4	5	6	7	N P	
Ca	Ca		Ca			Ca				Ca	Ca	Ca	Ca	Ca		
C	C		C			C			C		C	C	C			

Dental Pathology: Moderate periodontal disease on the mandible, slight on the maxilla. Small carious lesions. Medium and heavy calculus deposits.
Pathology: Spinal degenerative joint disease. Slight degenerative joint disease on the medial ends of the clavicles or collar bones.

3.5 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.5.1 No environmental samples were taken.

4 Discussion And Conclusions

4.1.1 The burial of this middle aged Anglo-Saxon woman is so far unique in the parish of Headington. The associated grave goods suggest that she is likely to date from the 6th century AD. It is highly unlikely that she would have been buried in isolation and therefore she was almost certainly part of a larger cemetery which has been completely destroyed by later activity.

4.1.2 The manner in which her brooches appear to have been worn is worthy of comment. During the 6th-century in this region the traditional pattern was of two brooches, one on each shoulder, with a necklace of beads strung between them. In contrast, the female from Stephens Road had a single brooch at her forehead. While no parallels are known in this country, a broadly contemporary mosaic in Ravenna, Italy, depicts a female who is wearing some form of scarf around her head with a brooch attached at the centre of her forehead (Owen-Crocker forthcoming)

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	*Type*	*Depth*	*Width*	*Length*	*Height*	*Comments*	*Finds*
1	cut	0.18 m	0.80 m	2.00 m		sub-rectangular cut with near vertical sides and a flat base	
2	skeleton					skeleton supine extended with left hand on pelvis and right arm by side	yes
3	fill	0.18	0.80 m	2.00 m		friable dark reddish silty sand with charcoal flecks, patches of light yellowish sand and sandstone fragments	
4	topsoil	0.40 m				friable dark greyish brown silty sand loam with gravel, charcoal and brick inclusions	
5	natural					firm light yellowish brown sand with patches of reddish brown sand	

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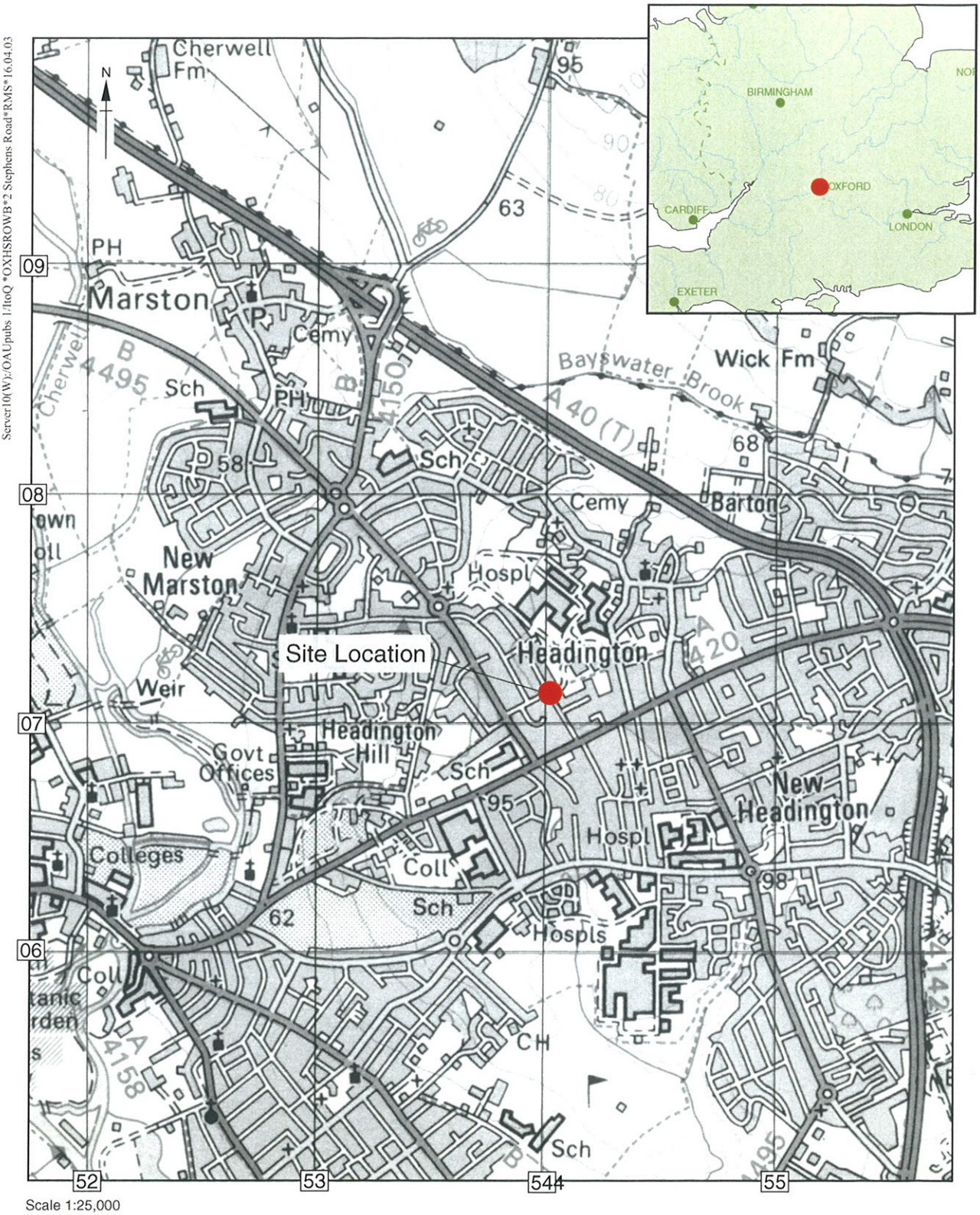
APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: 2 Stephens Road, Headington, Oxford
Site code: OXHSR02
Grid reference: NGR SP 5425 0715
Type of watching brief: Recording and excavation of Anglo-Saxon burial discovered unexpectedly in construction trench.
Date and duration of project: 11th December 2002
Summary of results: The burial of an adult female of probable 6th-century date. She was accompanied by two copper alloy brooches, a necklace of amber beads, a copper alloy needle, an iron knife and an iron object of uncertain function.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number:



Scale 1:25,000

Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: From Mosaic, Ravenna- 'Dress in Anglo-Saxon England', *Gale Owen-Crocker* (forthcoming)

Plate 1: Skeleton in grave

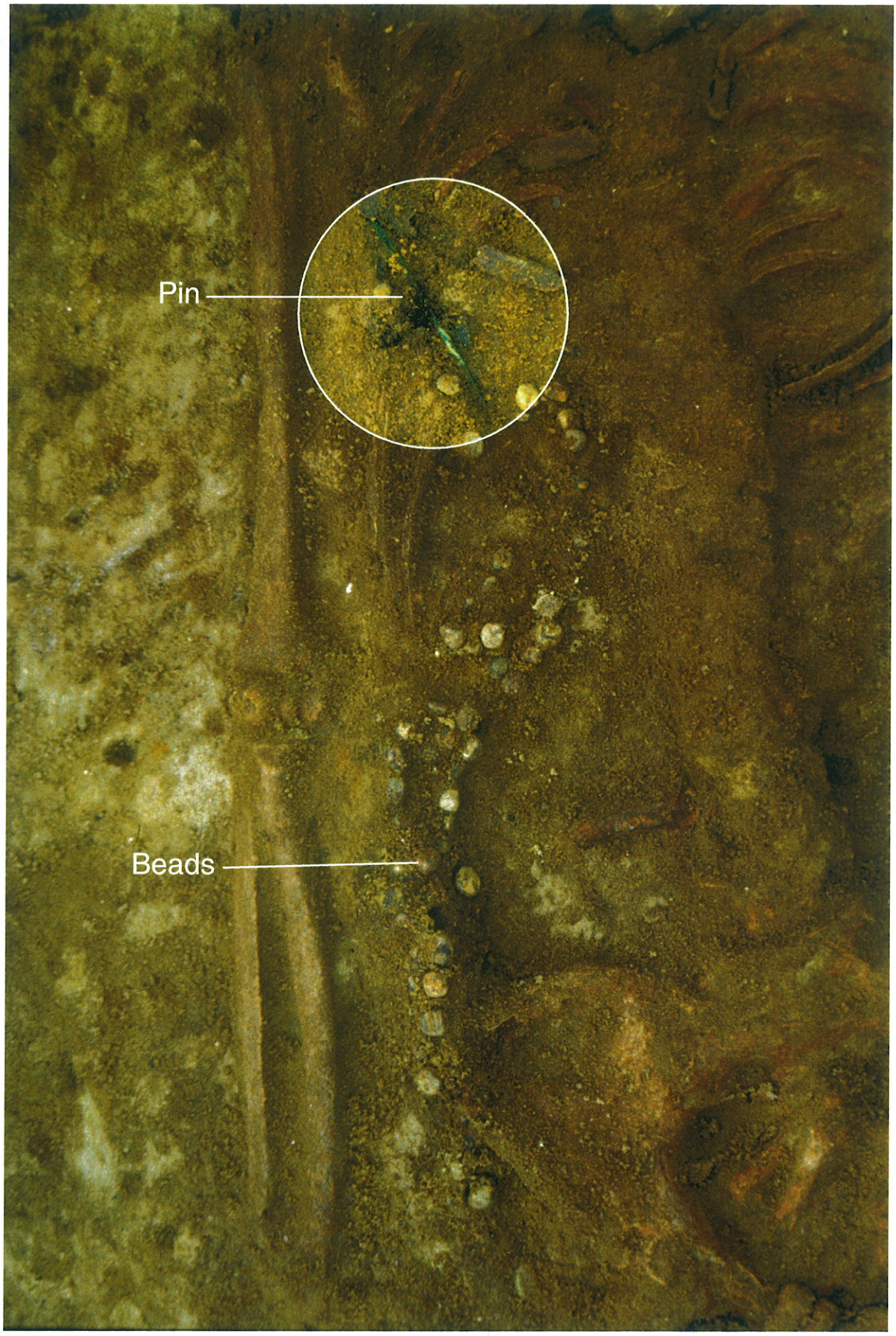


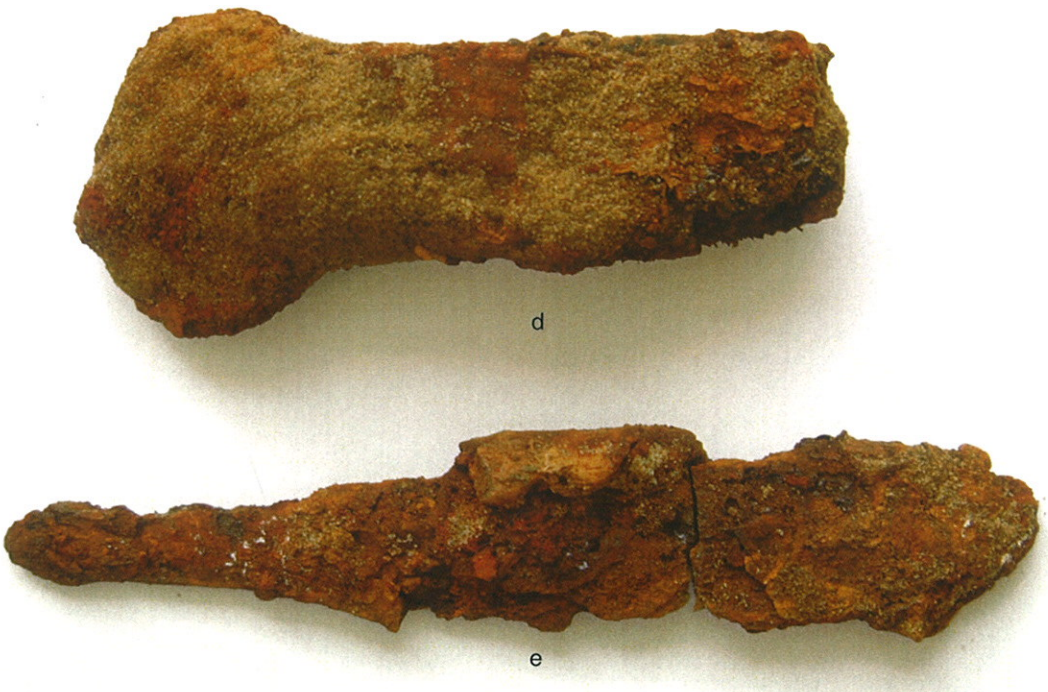
Plate 2: Detail showing pin and amber beads

a b

Brooches

c

Pin



d

e

Iron objects

0 50 mm

1:1

Plate 3: Brooches, pin and iron objects

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