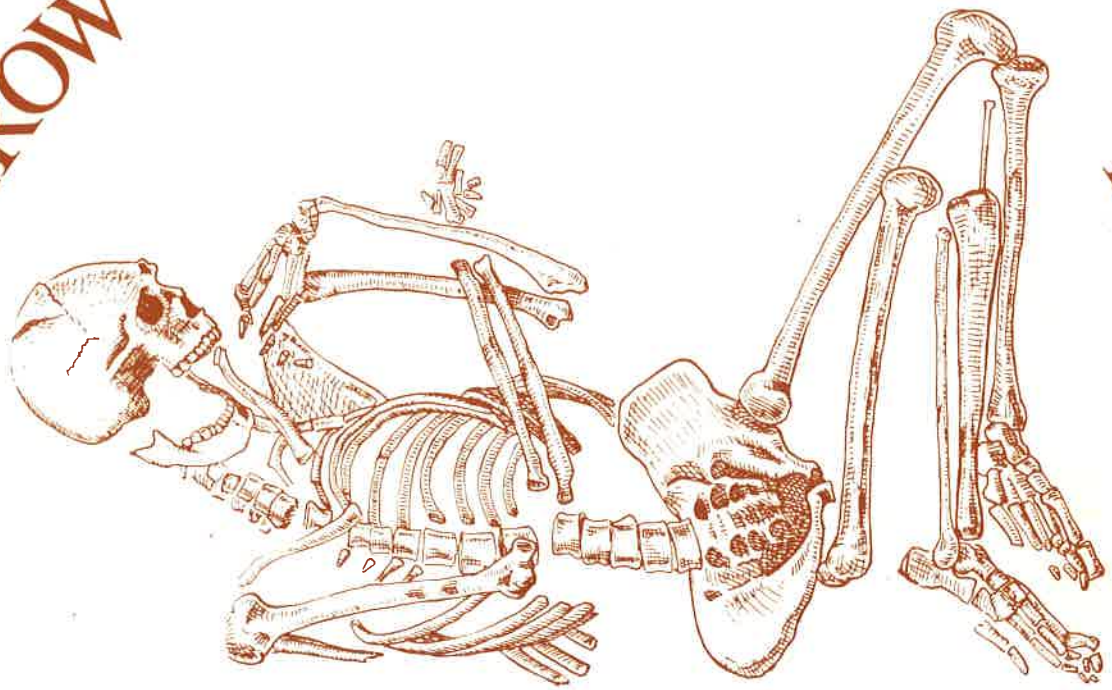
OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

BARROW HILLS, RADLEY

1983-4



Excavations: an Interim Report

R. Bradley,

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Fig. 1 A plan of the cropmarks plotted from aerial photographs. The cropmarks outline the major archaeological features present. The irregular lines represent periglacial (natural) features. For a photograph refer to rear cover.

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EXCAVATIONS AT BARROW HILLS, RADLEY, OXFORDSHIRE 1983-84.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade Abingdon has been steadily expanding with housing estates to the east and industrial estates to the west. Major archaeological excavations have already been undertaken in advance of building work to record the Iron Age settlement at Ashville and the Roman villa at Barton Court Farm. Barrow Hills is the latest of these major rescue excavations. The site is soon to be developed for housing.

The Abingdon area has long been recognised as an important focus for prehistoric activity within the Upper Thames Valley and this is reflected in the monuments found on this site. This excavation has also explored the remains of a Romano-British cemetery and an early Anglo-Saxon settlement. Past archaeological work in the area has provided a background against which the remains of each period can be viewed. Although not yet complete, the excavations at Barrow Hills have already contributed greatly to our understanding of the development of this area over the last 5000 years.

Barrow Hills lies on the second gravel terrace, 1.5km north of the River Thames and 1.3km north-east of Abingdon. The site lies immediately south of the Abingdon Neolithic causewayed enclosure and at the south-east end of a Bronze Age cemetery from which the field name Barrow Hills was derived in antiquity. Four periods are represented on this famous cropmark site with Neolithic monuments, Bronze Age barrows, a Romano-British cemetery and an extensive early Anglo-Saxon settlement.

The excavation is being conducted by the Oxford Archaeological Unit with labour provided by the Manpower Services Commission. In addition to this, the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society working under the direction of Claire Halpin has undertaken the excavation of the Bronze Age monuments. In September 1983 three presumed Neolithic monuments were excavated by students from Reading University Department of Archaeology under the direction of Richard Bradley. Excavation on the present site will continue until February 1985 It is also hoped to begin excavations in a field immediately to the north that has also been allocated for house building.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit would like to thank the owner, Mr. W. P. Docker-Drysdale for permission to excavate and for his help and that of his wife, particularly in providing a camp site and much hospitality. The Unit would also like to thank Mr. B. Ford, the tenant, for his assistance on numerous occasions over the past year, Mr A Fleming of English Heritage and the staff of the Ashmolean Museum. Thanks are also due to Sally Quiney who was responsible for typing this report.

THE NEOLITHIC MONUMENTS - Richard Bradley

Excavation took place on three components of the Barrow Hills cropmark complex during September and October 1983: a small long barrow, a segmented ring ditch and a complex pit circle previously interpreted as a henge monument. Work was carried out under the general direction of the writer on

behalf of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, with additional resources made available by the Department of Archaeology, Reading University. The excavation was undertaken mainly by students from the Reading Department. Work on the long barrow was supervised by Mark Edmunds and Barry Mead, and Martin Cook supervised the excavation of the ring ditch. Barry Mead undertook the excavation of the pit circle. Julian Thomas was in charge of recording the human remains and Helen Robinson organised the processing of the finds. The illustrations in this section of the account have been provided by Maria Fox.

The Long Barrow

This component of the Barrow Hills complex is situated close to the edge of the shallow valley which separates the site from the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, and because of this link it has long been thought that the two monuments might have been in use at the same time. Before excavation the long barrow showed as a rectangular cropmark enclosure, made up of two parallel ditches separated by an interval of about a metre. Towards the centre there were signs of a large pit. This monument was excavated completely (Fig. 2). The majority of the ploughsoil was removed mechanically after surface finds had been collected in field walking by the Abingdon Society. A single baulk running along the main axis of the monument was excavated by hand and proved to cover the burial deposit.

It seems likely that this monument was built in four stages (Fig. 3), although the lack of deep stratigraphy means that the position of the grave in this scheme can be established only approximately. In its first phase this site consisted of a narrow flat-bottomed trench enclosing a rectangular area 16m long and almost 10m wide. Although large parts of this feature had been removed in later phases, there was no sign of an entrance. It is difficult to interpret this feature with complete confidence, but at present it is regarded as a fenced enclosure, the posts of which were later removed. It is not known whether this feature had revetted any mound, although the slight proportions of the trench itself mean that any barrow would most probably have been constructed of turf. It is uncertain whether the one grave belonged to this phase.

In the second phase the original enclosure was replaced by a ditch which cut it away on three sides. This ditch was of rather greater proportions than the original trench and enclosed an area about 17m long and 11m wide, which was left open at the south-west end, where there were two large post holes, one of which may have held a split log or tree trunk. Analogy with sites in other parts of the country suggests that this ditch was most probably the quarry for building a gravel mound. It seems likely that the grave belonged to this phase. Alternatively, the plan of the monument was dictated by the position of an existing group of burials. The grave was situated close to the south-west end of the enclosed area, in between the terminals of the quarry ditch. The two large post holes 8m to the south-west seem to flank the approach to the burial area.

The grave itself was extremely shallow and had been cut by a Saxon grubenhaus - the one internal feature to show from the air. The grave contained two crouched burials laid out along the main axis of the site (Pl. 1). The heads were at opposite ends of the grave, whilst the legs of the two skeletons were laid across one another. It is hard to envisage any interval between the deposition of these two bodies. The end of the grave had been disturbed, but the missing parts of one skull were found in the filling of the grubenhaus. Preliminary examination of the bones by Julian Thomas suggests that both individuals were adult males. One body had been

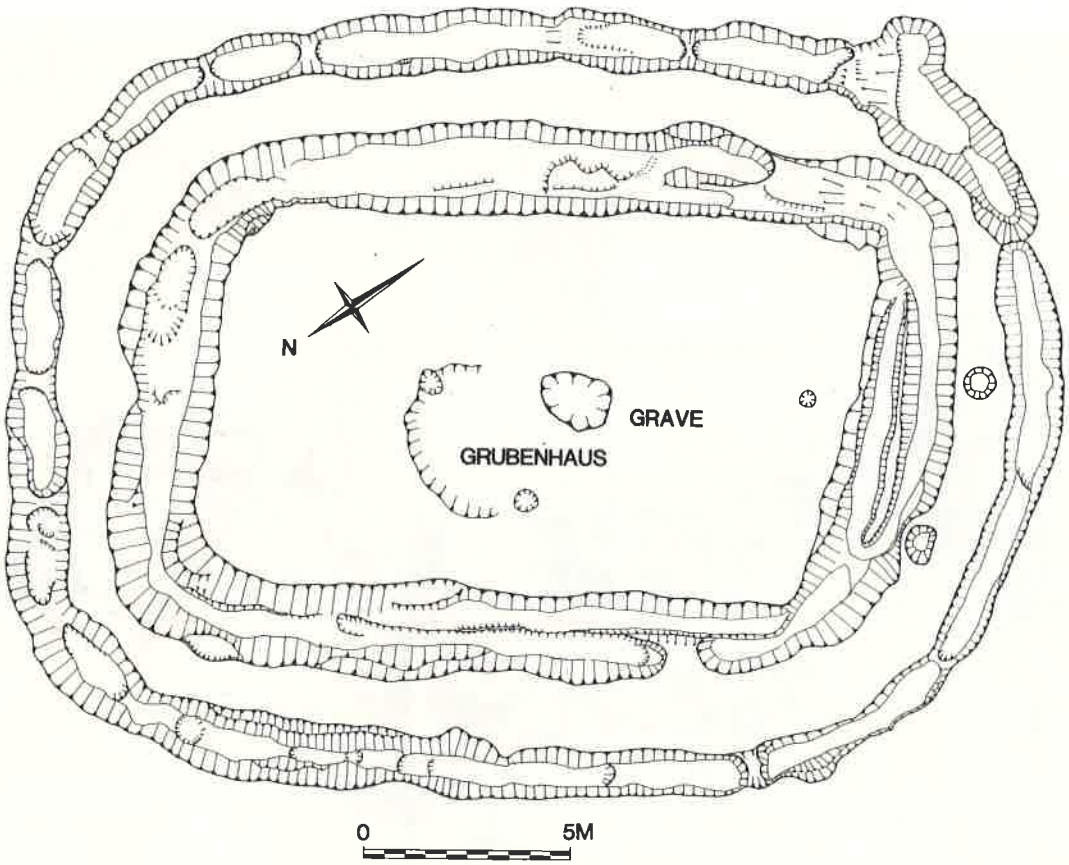


Fig. 2 Plan of the Neolithic long barrow after excavation. The central grave is pictured opposite

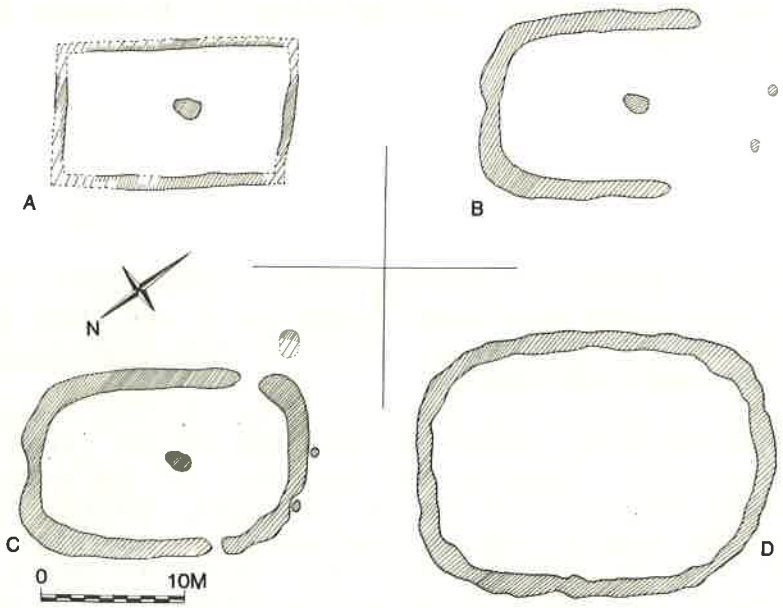


Fig. 3 Four stages in the construction of the Neolithic long barrow.

Pl. 1 Two adults buried in a shallow grave at the centre of the Neolithic long barrow.

accompanied by a bifacially polished flint blade, whilst an unusually small jet or shale belt slider was found at the hip of the other skeleton. Part of a large leaf shaped arrowhead, found in the grubenhaus, had probably accompanied the same individual.

In its third phase, the open end of the monument was closed off by a further length of ditch, which skirted one of the large posts mentioned earlier. This ditch respected the terminals of the existing quarry ditch and the builders had left two narrow causeways, towards the corners of the enclosed area and roughly opposite the burials. Otherwise this extension of the monument seems to have closed off all access to the mound, although the irregular line of the quarry ditch at its north-east end might suggest that another causeway had once existed there. It is possible that a large oval pit was dug just outside the surviving causeway at the southern corner of the mound. The barrow ditch filled up fairly rapidly with runs of gravel from the interior.

The final phase of construction seems to be represented by the outer ditch, which was probably intended as a replacement for the inner quarry ditch, now silted up. The outer ditch cut through the filling of the pit mentioned earlier and took no account of the positions of the two causeways in the inner ditch. It had been dug in a series of segments between 2m and 5m long and enclosed an oval area measuring 25m by 15.5m. This ditch had filled up naturally, but like the inner ditch it did contain a number of deliberate deposits.

These deposits were found in both ditches, where they had sharply confined distributions focussed on the position of one of the two causeways. Deposits of pottery and flint scrapers were concentrated towards the causeway at the southern end of the mound but hardly overlapped one another. Pottery also occurred in the pit cut by the outer ditch, whilst there was a flint implement in the filling of each of the large post holes at the south-east end of the monument. The opposite causeway was the focus for four deliberate deposits of antler, three unused and the fourth an antler pick. At either end of these deposits there were fragments of human skull. The distribution of flint debitage shows less structure, whilst the animal bones from the ditches are probably a mixture of Neolithic material and intrusive Saxon finds. The stratification of these deposits is of some interest. The four groups of antler occurred at different levels in either ditch, suggesting that they were deposited at intervals throughout the use of the site, even though they were confined to one small area. The finds of pottery and flint scrapers were nearly all in the upper filling of the two ditches, where they sometimes occurred together with Saxon pottery. This suggests that these items were originally placed in the 'forecourt' of the long barrow and entered the ditch only later, perhaps as residual material.

In the Saxon period the area around the long barrow was reused. The central area was cut by a grubenhaus and the surviving hollow left by the Neolithic outer ditch was used as a midden, particularly towards the northern end of the monument. A few post holes in this area may also belong to the Saxon period.

Three features of the Neolithic monument are worth emphasising in this preliminary account. First, there can be little doubt that this had been a mound in most, if not all of its phases of building. There is no reason to describe the site as a 'mortuary enclosure'. Sieving of the ploughsoil across the long axis of the monument revealed a steady increase in the density of gravel towards the interior of the site, interrupted only over the position of the grubenhaus. This may suggest that the ploughsoil retained the soil mark of a low mound, or preserved traces of a protected surface where the mound had been. This question needs further investigation, but work in Wessex has already shown the remarkable persistence of soil marks on sites where subsoil features have disappeared entirely. This interpretation is strengthened when the grubenhaus is considered. Unlike the other examples excavated at Barrow Hills, this was a remarkably insubstantial feature and preliminary analysis indicates that it was 40 or 50cm shallower than other examples of the same floor area. This may give an idea of the height of the barrow in the Saxon period. A very similar barrow at Maxey in the Welland Valley had been built out of turf, and part of the mound had been preserved in situ beneath a medieval headland.

Secondly, there can be little doubt that this monument had been in use at the same time as the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, which has radiocarbon dates spanning the first half of the third millennium bc. Apart from one sherd of Mortlake Ware from a high level in the barrow ditch, all the identifiable prehistoric pottery consists of Abingdon Ware. Like the leaf

shaped arrowhead, this might suggest a date earlier than about 2500 bc. At the same time the polished blade and the belt slider are types better known in northern England where a date of 2500 bc or later might be expected. Economy of hypothesis therefore favours a date for the Barrow Hills mound around the middle of the third millenium bc. This would correspond to the later use of the causewayed enclosure. The same impression is given by the burial rite which has a transitional aspect. Despite the fairly traditional form of the mound, the burial of articulate males with grave goods marks a new departure which continues into the later third millennium bc. Such burials so far seem to postdate c. 2750 bc.

Lastly, the identification of this rather unusual cropmark enclosure as a late long barrow may have implications for our understanding of the Neolithic burial rite in other parts of the country. There are two aspects to this question. First, the Barrow Hills sequence closely resembles that at Wor Barrow in Cranborne Chase, just as the U ditched mound with its two large post holes is very similar to the Thickthorn long barrow in the same area. This evidence emphasises that the distinctive 'Cranborne Chase' type of long barrow may not be limited to that area. Secondly, the recognition that oval crop mark enclosures may sometimes have been late long barrows may help to fill a gap in the distribution of Neolithic burial monuments on the river gravels and in other lowland areas. There is similar evidence coming to light in other regions.

The Ring Ditch

This crop mark showed as four segments of a circular enclosure 9m in internal diameter, impinging on another feature interpreted as a frost crack. Analogy with similar crop marks at Dorchester-on-Thames suggested the possibility of a Late Neolithic date, thus allowing us to follow the sequence of burial monuments from the long barrow into the following period.

Again the site was excavated completely, a north-south baulk from the ditch to the centre being removed by hand, whilst the remaining ploughsoil was cleared mechanically. During the latter process a chisel ended transverse arrowhead was found inside the enclosure. Subsequently, the ditch was completely excavated.

The four ditch segments varied considerably in their proportions and filling. The two shallowest lengths were to the west of the site, towards the position of the frost crack. The latter feature was filled with conglomerate and the builders of the ring ditch had abandoned their efforts when the south-west length of the earthwork encountered this material. By contrast, the two eastern lengths of ditch - those farthest removed from the position of the frost crack - were appreciably deeper and these were the only parts of the monument where there was evidence for the collapse of an internal bank or mound. The ring ditch had a wide causeway on the south-east - a feature known on other Neolithic and later sites - whilst the wide gap to the west was perhaps left because the builders were so reluctant to dig into the harder filling of the frost wedge.

Three additional features were found on this site. Just inside the ring ditch was a shallow pit, containing no archaeological material. The extremely shallow terminal of the southern ditch contained a few infant bones against the south-east entrance, but these were not well stratified, whilst a small pit just outside the same entrance contained an unaccompanied cremation. The longest ditch segment revealed a discontinuous layer of charcoal overlying its primary filling. This should provide material for radio-carbon dating. The same segment produced a number of flint scrapers and a sherd of late Beaker pottery in its highest levels, and these provide a

terminus ante quem for the construction of this monument.

Analogy with other sites still favours a later Neolithic date for this monument, but little more can be said until the radiocarbon samples have been analysed. On the other hand, this excavation already sheds light on the form of some monuments of this type. Normally, they are interpreted as embanked enclosures, ancestral to henge monuments and possibly used as cremation cemeteries. Barrow Hills provides some evidence for a different reconstruction. First, sieving of the ploughsoil over this monument showed a steady increase in the proportion of gravel to topsoil from the exterior of the ring ditch to its centre. However this is explained, it seems to be consistent with the presence of a round barrow rather than an embanked enclosure. The same is suggested by the unusual layout of this site. Clearly the builders avoided digging into the conglomerate and preferred to compensate by digging a deeper ditch on the opposite side of the monument. This hardly suggests that they intended to achieve a uniform distribution of spoil around the edge of the site. Rather, the evidence for collapsed gravel in the two deeper segments of the ditch implies that the centre of gravity of the excavated material was offset in order to facilitate construction. Again this implies the existence of an internal mound, rather than a continuous enclosure. Analogy with the few undamaged Neolithic round barrows in southern England suggests that any central burial might have been at ground level. If so, it would have been removed by the plough, and only those secondary burials set in pits or dug into the ditch filling could be expected to survive. This may be what happened on some of the excavated sites at Dorchester-on-Thames.

The Pit Circle

This feature showed as a ring of pits about 15m in diameter enclosing an array of similar features with a less obvious ground plan. This site was stripped mechanically, apart from an east west baulk crossing the diameter of the pit circle, which was excavated by hand. The site has normally been interpreted on the basis of air photographs as either a pit circle comparable to the early henges at Dorchester-on-Thames or as a multiple post circle rather like Woodhenge.

Despite the presence of later Neolithic flintwork in the ploughsoil and even on the surface of these features, only one pit is certainly of prehistoric date. This contained a flint scraper, an unpolished flint axe, flint debitage, animal bones, a large fragment of antler and sherds of Abingdon Ware. It had been cut by a Saxon grubenhaus. Several other pits in this area contained much smaller quantities of prehistoric material, but could be of later date.

The pit circle itself dates from the late 19th century and was dug through the filling of the grubenhaus. The pits were shallow and flat bottomed and contained a rather ashy filling distinct from the overlying ploughsoil. This is interpreted as plant bedding and contained pieces of brick, tile, slate and wire, as well as pottery dating from the 1880's or 1890's. It is known that a large number of trees were planted near to Wick Hall in about 1890 and several circular plantations still exist in the surrounding area today. The simplest interpretation is that these features were also the result of late Victorian landscaping and that either the trees failed to take or this particular plantation was abandoned at an early stage. Whilst this excavation does not advance our understanding of the Neolithic sequence in the Thames valley, it may still have wider implications for our interpretation of air photographs.

OTHER NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE FEATURES - Claire Halpin

Neolithic Features

Under the direction of the writer the excavation of the remaining early prehistoric features was carried out by members of the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society, members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society, local volunteers, and people employed on the Manpower Services Scheme. I am most grateful to Godfrey Jones, Chairman of the Abingdon Society, and to Jeffrey Wallis, who acted as Site Assistant. I especially wish to thank the following people who saw the project through from the beginning to the end: John Carter, Paul Laycock, Alan Pink, Jackie Smith, Barry Topham and Neville Trippett. Eleanor Beard, Wendy Page and Kate Steane drew the finds and the Ashmolean Museum was responsible for their conservation.

Working mainly at weekends the digging seasons ran from March-December in 1983 and from February-August in 1984. The following paragraphs represent a preliminary assessment of the archaeological material.

The Second Ring Ditch

The ring ditch (Feature 801, Fig 4) lies to the north of the segmented ring ditch. The ditch was apparently formed by the cutting of seven or more interlinking pits; it is this manner of ditch-digging which suggests that the monument dates from the Neolithic period. On excavation the pits did not appear to represent post sockets. The maximum depth of the ditch is less than 1m. and it is 12m. in diameter. It did not appear to have silted naturally and may have been deliberately backfilled at a later date. Finds from the fill include animal bone, waste flint flakes and a late Neolithic transverse arrowhead. The central burial pit contained cremated bone.

The Third Ring Ditch

Feature 611 lies to the east of the segmented ring ditch and was cut by the outer ditch of Barrow 12. Though truncated it was possible to see that the ditch had been continuous. The form of the ditch is remarkable, though less than 9m in diameter it is c. 1.8m deep, comparable in depth to the large ring ditch of Barrow 12 which is 25m in diameter. Originally the ditch was steep-sided and flat-bottomed; the sides are now eroded.

Ranged around the floor of the ditch were five large deer antlers and two groups of articulated animal bone. The latter consisted of shoulder blades with upper and lower leg bones and are probably those of an immature cow. These antler and bone finds were deliberate deposits comparable to those found within the henge at Dorchester, Oxon. It is anticipated that selected items will be sent for radiocarbon dating. The antlers were large; similar items were used to cut the prehistoric ditches.

A relatively prolific number of finds were recovered from the fill of the ditch and include animal bones, waste flint flakes, large plain pot sherds and charcoal deposits.

The function of the ditch is uncertain, but it may have served as a focus for burial.

Contemporary with the cutting of the ditch, the old topsoil and natural gravel within the ring ditch were reduced by c. 1m. Over the centre of this cone of undisturbed natural gravel, in a layer post-dating the natural silting of the ditch, a Bronze Age ?biconical urn and cremation were found. These finds represent an interesting reuse of a Neolithic feature in the Bronze Age.

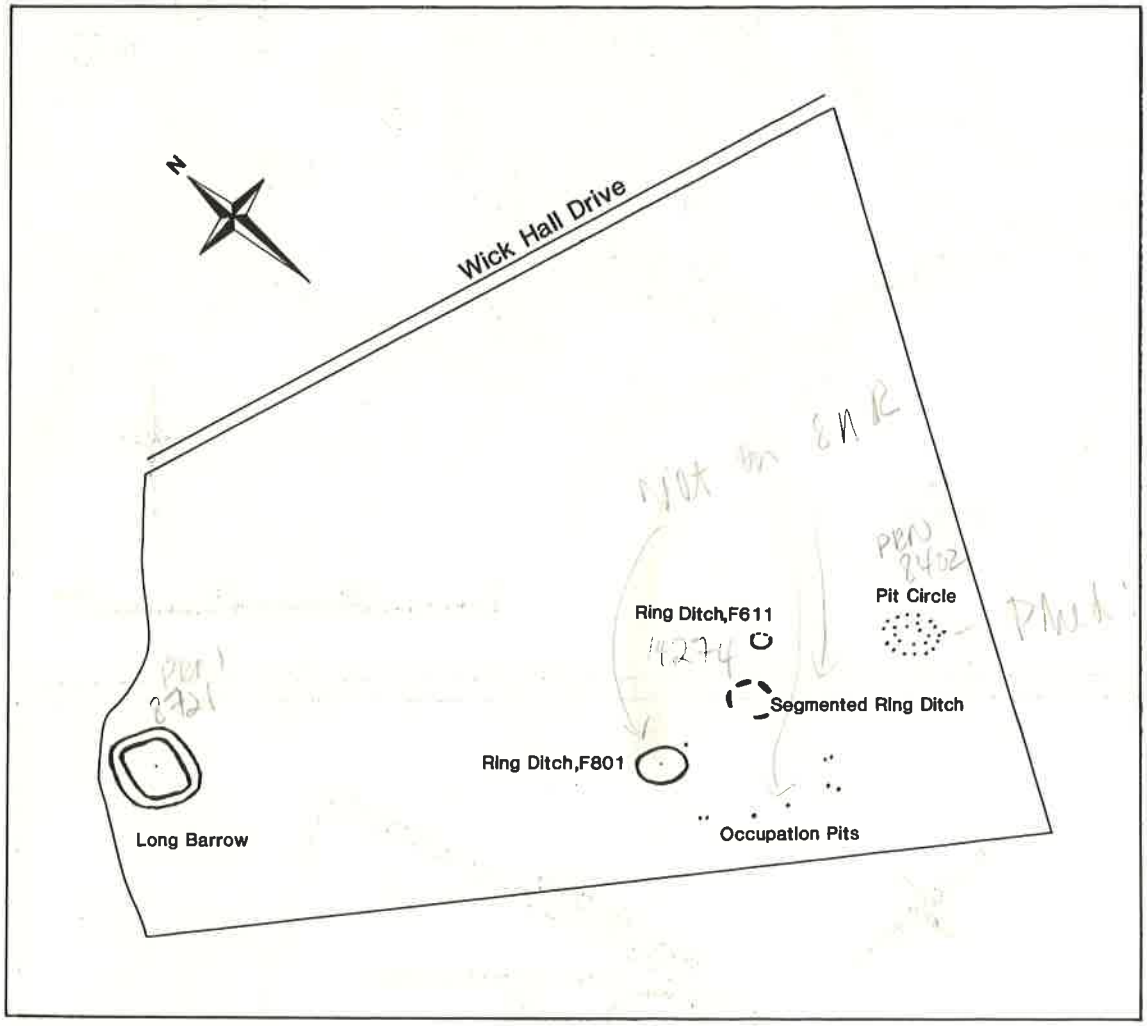


Fig. 4 A sketch plan, based on an aerial photograph, showing the Neolithic features.

The Occupation Pits

In the south-west corner of the field c. 10 pits containing rich deposits of late Neolithic occupation material were found. These finds consisted of fresh flint knapping debris and flint scrapers, grooved ware pottery, animal bone and charcoal. They are most interesting as for example, the flintwork, being derived from sealed contexts, will provide a useful comparison for the material collected during fieldwalking by members of the Abingdon Archaeological Society.

The Bronze Age Barrows

Introduction

Three Bronze Age barrows (Nos. 1, 12 and 13), an adjacent small ring ditch and outlying burials were excavated. A second possible small ring ditch and burials will be examined in late 1984/early 1985. These burials

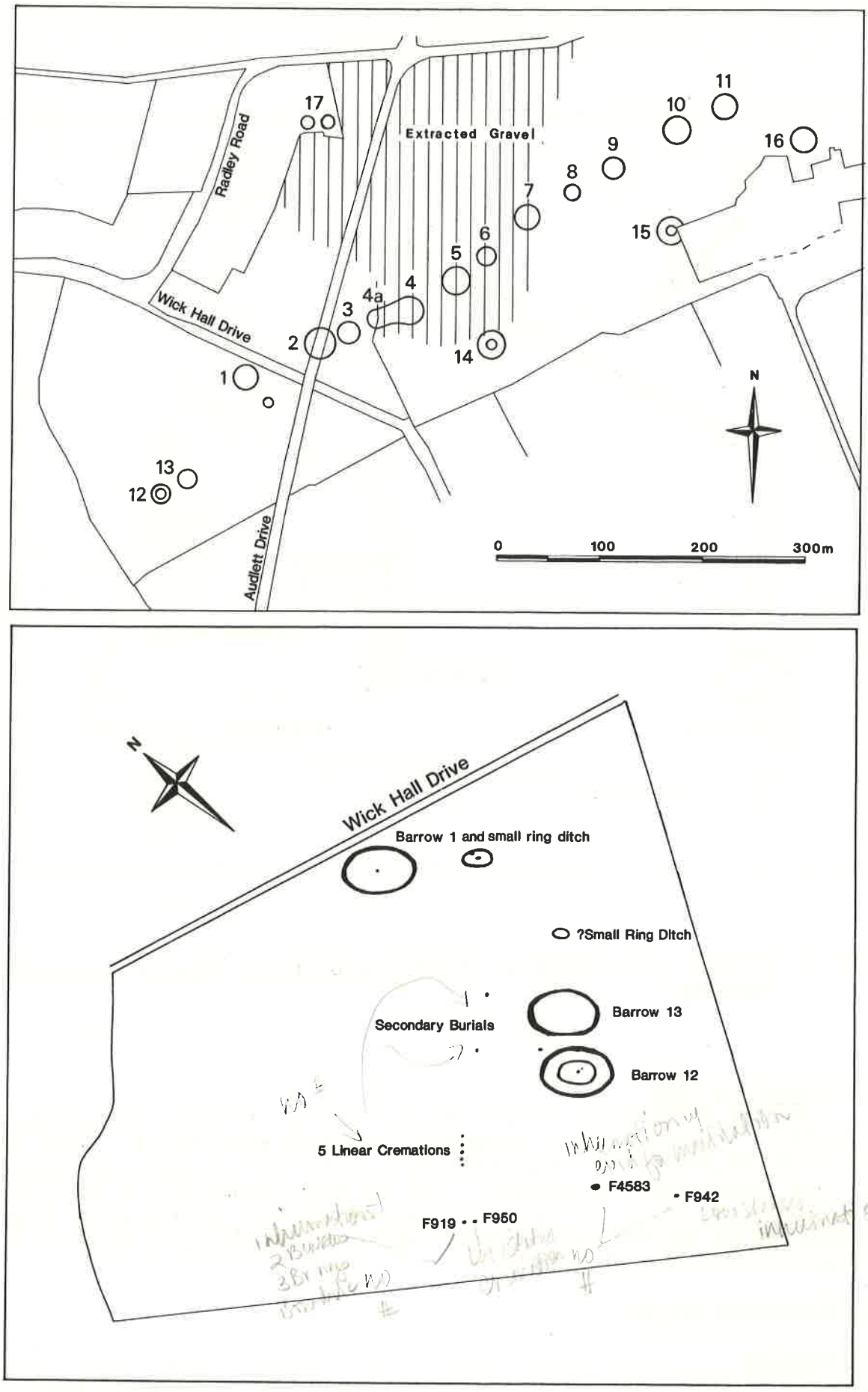


Fig. 5 Above - A plan showing the complete Barrow Hills Bronze Age cemetery. Below - A sketch plan, based on an aerial photograph, showing the Bronze Age features.

form part of the Barrow Hills Bronze Age cemetery which consisted of seventeen barrows aligned in two rows in the form of an avenue (Fig. 5). Outlying ring ditches occur. The monuments currently under investigation lie at the western end of the avenue. Eleven barrows from the cemetery were excavated in the 1930's and 1940's in advance of gravel extraction.

Form

Round barrows are the most numerous, frequently visible, prehistoric monuments. A simple and common form consists of a single burial in a central grave beneath a low circular mound which may or may not have a surrounding ditch. Such barrows are termed bowl barrows. Barrows 1 and 13 at Barrow Hills represent a common variant known as a bell barrow; here a berm or ledge separates the circular mound from the surrounding ditch. Barrow 12 is a double-ditched barrow, comparable to Nos. 14 and 15 in the cemetery, and may represent two phases of burial and construction. It compares with disc barrows which consist of a low central mound, a wide berm, and an external bank surrounding the ditch. Barrows 4 and 4a are unusual in having two mounds within a single ditch. This phenomenon is identified chiefly in Wessex where double, treble and quadruple bell barrows are apparently surrounded by a single ditch. Not all early Bronze Age burials were covered by mounds, Feature 206 for example, was a flat grave.

Barrow Hills is a linear cemetery and its nearest parallel is the well-known Lambourn Seven Barrows, in Berkshire, which are basically a group of at least four close-set linear cemeteries. Other forms of cemeteries are nucleated (centred around a barrow), or dispersed. A chronological survey of the cemetery will be undertaken during which it may be possible to identify the earliest member of the group, and trace evidence of horizontal stratigraphy. Such work is based primarily on the funerary eveidence; No. 13 post-dates No 12, however, because its ditch is flattened against the latter barrow. This is visible on the air photograph.

Reconstruction

The reconstruction of the external bank and internal mounds of Nos. 12 and 13, which were completely levelled, was based in the silting patterns of the ditches. The structure of a barrow is largely conditioned by geology - in this case the subsoil is gravel. Turf walls and loam were used to delimit the base of the mounds and bank to keep them from spreading as the loose gravel was piled on. This retaining material was taken from the interior of the monument and from elsewhere in the field. Such methods of construction have been recorded during the excavation of barrows but may not necessarily have been used at Barrow Hills. The surrounding ditches served as quarries for the earthworks. As we continued our reconstruction, we used the gravel from the ditches to form the core of the earthworks. A final loam cover was added to prevent slippage and to stabilise the monuments by encouraging plant growth. It is less probable that this final loam cover was added originally, although lenses of loam were present in the lower ditch silts. Instead, gravel dug from the depths of the surrounding ditches would have capped the monuments and provided a striking colour-contrast with the surrounding soils and vegetation.

It took 8 young and fit people (by modern standards) two full weeks to excavate and reconstruct Barrow 13, and Barrow 12 took at least twice as long. These are only rough estimates and the hot summer weather and searching for finds slowed down the progress. Our work 'simply' consisted of emptying the loose gravel from the ditches; the initial cutting must have been considerably more difficult. In place of our shovels and wheelbarrows,

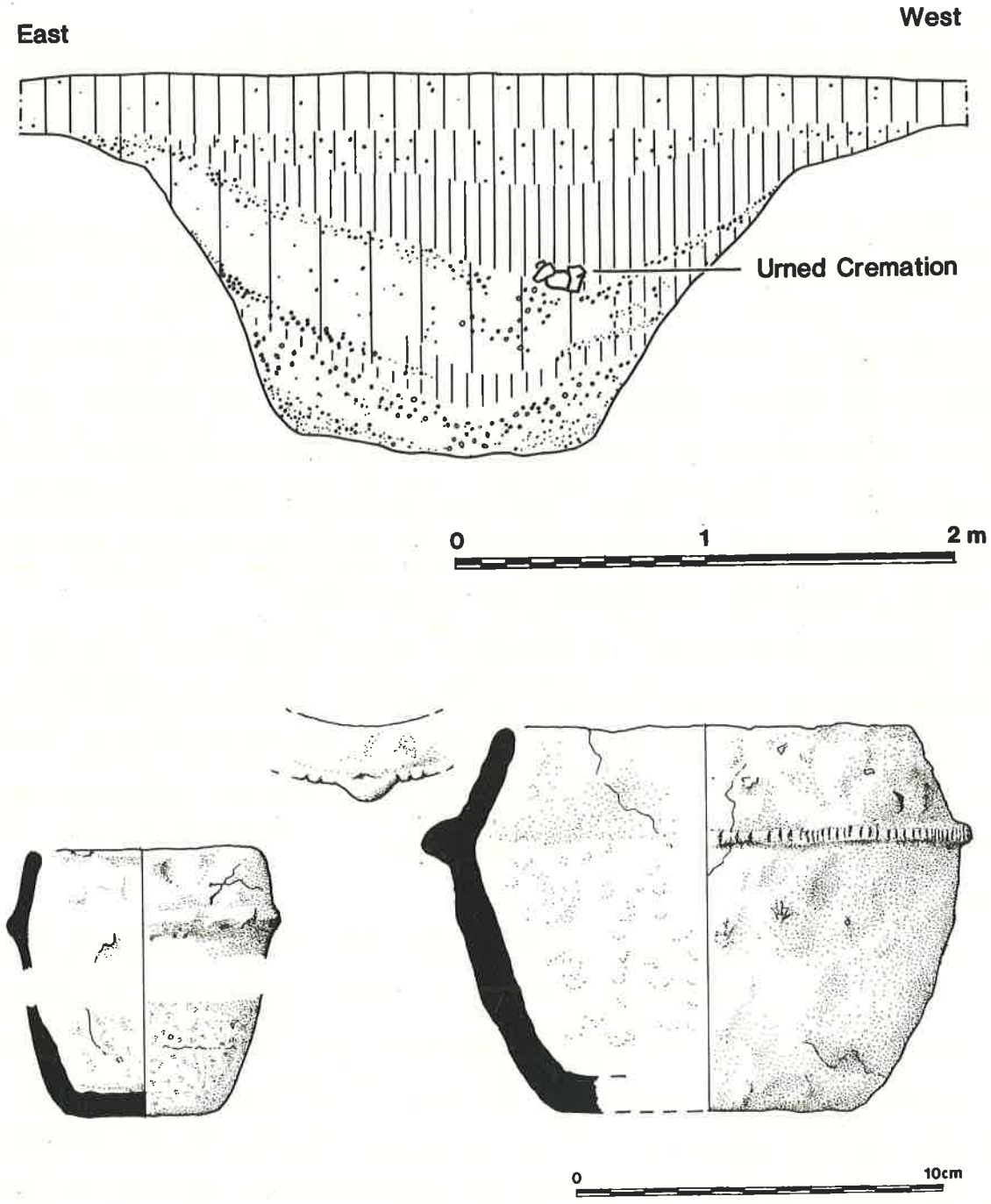


Fig. 6 Above - A section drawing of a cut through the outer ditch of Barrow 12 showing the location of an urned cremation. The find demonstrates that by the end of the Bronze Age the ditch was already half filled with silt. Below - The vessels recovered from the ditch section. The larger vessel is a collared urn and contained the cremated remains of a child. The smaller vessel was inverted over the rim of the larger.

antler picks were used to cut the original ditches, and tip lines within preserved mounds indicate that baskets were used for tipping the soil on the mounds. These burial monuments clearly represent a considerable input of energy and manpower by the family or community.

Bronze Age barrows are denuded by weathering and ploughing. An urned cremation (Feature 601) placed mid-way in the ditch of Barrow 12 demonstrates that already by the end of the Bronze Age the ditch was half silted (Fig. 6). Thereafter, in the Iron Age and Roman periods, the weathering process was much reduced.

Plough Damage

The barrows were all levelled, as noted above. Ploughing is the main destructive agent and farmers in the past have even deliberately levelled monuments. Nowadays monuments are frequently scheduled in an attempt to prevent such damage. At Barrow Hills the ditches surrounding the barrows were finally filled in the Saxon period when they were used as convenient rubbish dumps. The field has been ploughed at least since the medieval period when it was in the ownership of Abingdon Abbey. The earlier excavations of the 1930's and 1940's record the survival of much reduced mounds, standing 1 - 2 feet high, the final obliteration of the earthworks may therefore have occurred in recent decades.

Such damage obviously removes construction evidence. It also destroys the old Bronze Age land surface which was preserved under the mound. From such surfaces, environmental samples can be taken and used to reconstruct the local environment at the time of barrow-building ie. to discover whether forest, grassland or even cultivated land prevailed. Finally because of plough damage the burial evidence is lost. The 1930's and 1940's excavations frequently recorded that the grave pits failed to penetrate the gravel subsoil; instead the burials were laid on or within the Bronze Age soil. Such burials in our excavation would have been lost to the plough. Two round barrows: the Neolithic barrow with the segmented ditch and Barrow 13, both failed to produce any burials; the possibilites are that they were either cenotaphs or the evidence was removed by the plough. Burials were also placed in the mounds of Bronze Age barrows; this evidence has also been lost. Some burials which were excavated were plough damaged: an inhumation (Feature 604) had the skull broken and foot bones removed, and a pot base (Feature 609) was all that remained of an urned cremation.

Burials

In the early Bronze Age there seems to have been an even division between cremation and inhumation burials, indeed the form of the burial may have varied according to age, sex, social standing and even personal preference. A succession of five burials in the centre of Barrow 12 alternated between inhumation and cremation, with both rites represented in one pit (Feature 605).

During the 1983/84 excavations we were impressed by the contrast between prestigious brials (laid with care and containing numerous grave goods) and poor or low status burials; disarticulated inhumations which may represent reinternments or exposed burials; and fragmentary inhumations which were apparently mutilated before burial.

High Status Burials

The first prestigious burial found was the primary burial of Barrow 1 (Feature 11, Fig. 7). On one side of the shallow grave lay a dense heap of cremated bone. The compacted form of the bones and preserved leather

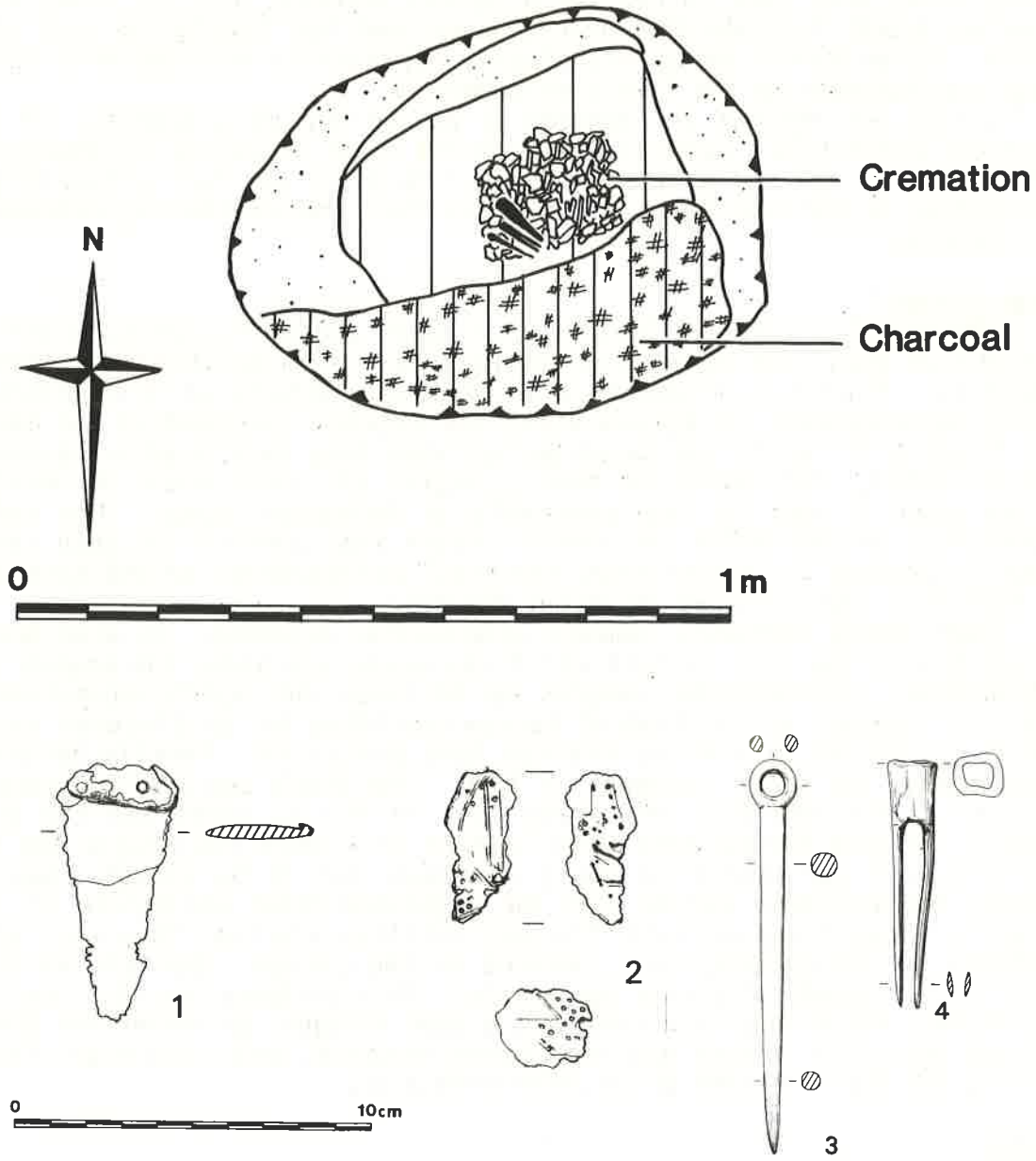


Fig. 7 Above - The primary burial (Feature 11) of Barrow 1.
Below - The grave goods associated with the cremation: 1. bronze knife; 2. fragments of leather with punched and geometric designs; 3. bone pin; 4. bone tweezers.

fragments suggest that they may have been enclosed. The bones were white and charred, but the large and identifiable bone fragments indicate that they were poorly cremated. Charcoal from the funeral pyre, clearly separated, lay on the other side of the pit. This material will be used for radiocarbon dating.

Three grave goods comprising a bronze knife, a bone pin and a pair of bone tweezers accompanied the cremation. Similar knives, and also daggers, were found during the 1930's and 1940's excavations at Barrow Hills. The knife is less than 10cm in length, thin and much corroded. It was in such a poor state of preservation that it could not be lifted individually from the grave, but was removed 'en bloc' with a section of underlying cremated bone for support. It was taken immediately to the Ashmolean Museum Conservation Department. The Museum commented tht the knife was probably already corroded when it was buried; this may indicate that it was an heirloom. Rivets for hafting the knife were apparent, and well-preserved examples from graves demonstrate that knives and daggers were hafted, sheathed, or sometimes carefully wrapped in cloth. Commenting on the dagger from the primary burial of Barrow 3 the excavator said, 'the haft appears to have been of horn, a few fragments of which adhered to the metal, also there were possible remains of a leather sheath'. Preserved against our knife were rare fragments of leather with a punched and geometric design which may represent a bag in which the grave goods, or cremation, was placed.

A polished bone pin and bone tweezers lay close by the knife. In contrast, these items were very well preserved and could be easily handled. The pin may be associated with clothing. The purpose of the tweezers is not clear but they may have been a toiletry item or associated with industrial use. The closest parallel for this burial is the Wessex II phase of burials.

The central grave (Feature 203) of the small ring ditch adjacent to Barrow I contained the most splendid burial we have excavated to date and puts paid to the argument, the lesser the barrow the lesser the burial. It contained a male skeleton, c. 20-25 years old, lying on the left side, with the head to the north and in the crouched position (Fig 8). The crouched position was most commonly used in the early prehistoric periods although extended inhumations are recorded.

A striking range of grave goods was present and may be divided into two types: i) everyday items and ii) prestige goods (Fig. 9).

i) Against the right pelvis lay a flint end scraper, a bone leather-working tool and an antler spatula which may have been used for cleaning skins. The flint scraper is probably the most common of flint tools, and as its name suggests may have been used for scraping hides, though this is far from proven. A scatter of c. 10 waste flint flakes or knapping debris, lay beyond the lower leg bones. Also against the waist lay a lump of iron pyrites which was presumably used in fire making. Within inhumation graves objects were often put in the hand or attached to the body as in life. The above objects may have been held in a pouch which was attached to the waist. Similarly an inhumation burial (Feature 919) contained a beaker lying as if it was clasped in the hands.

ii) Close by the head stood a ceramic vessel known as a long-necked pottey beaker. Beakers are regarded as prestige vessels, the privileged possession of the elite, requiring it is suggested, a technique and skill much higher than that used in normal pottery manufacture. The present example was highly decorated with horizontal bands of lozenges. An earlier example, an all-over-corded beaker, was recovered from an adjacent grave (Feature 206, Fig. 10). The latter was finely made, thin-walled, and

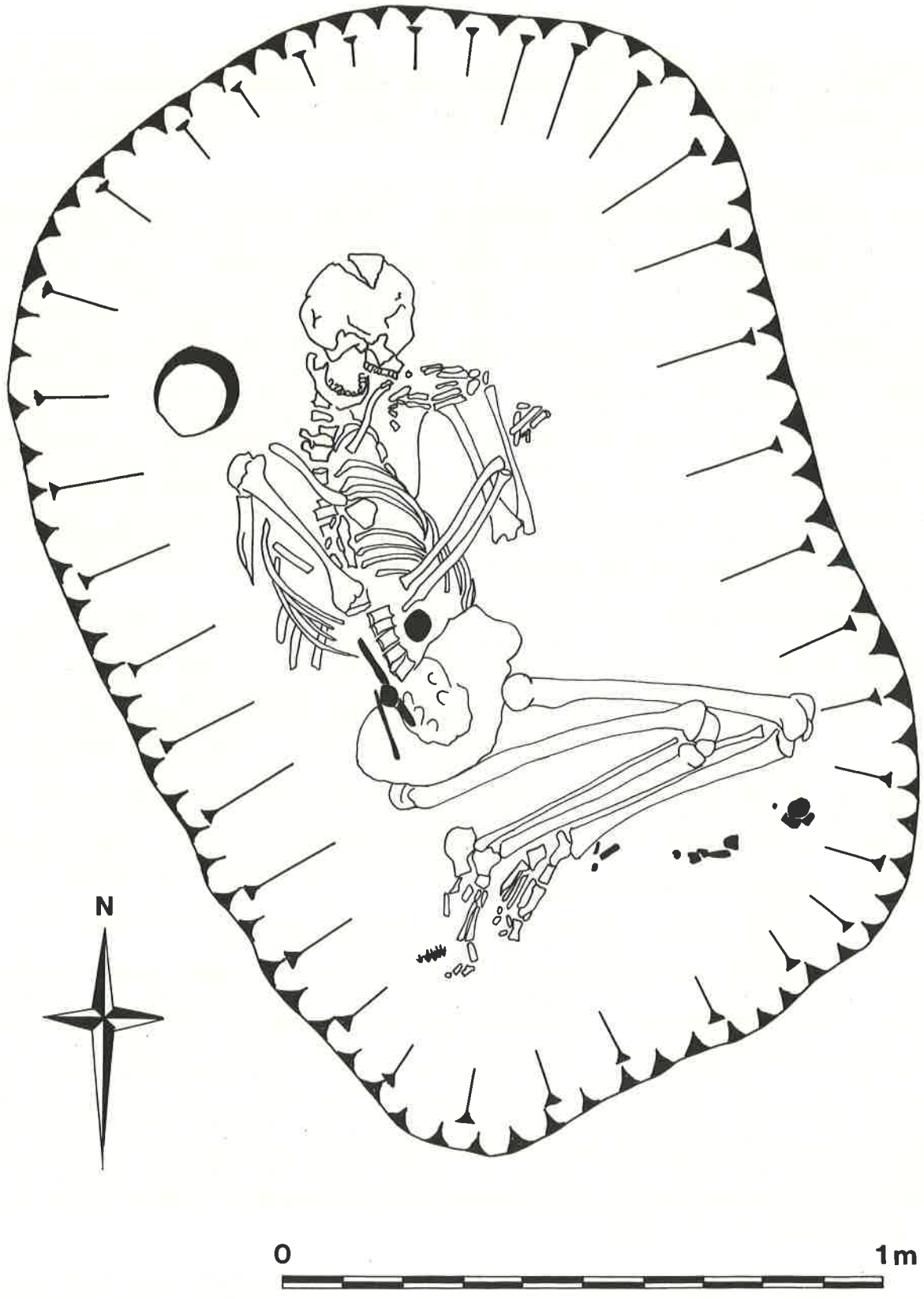


Fig. 8 The primary burial (Feature 203) of the small ring ditch adjacent to Barrow 1 - the most splendid burial we have excavated to date.

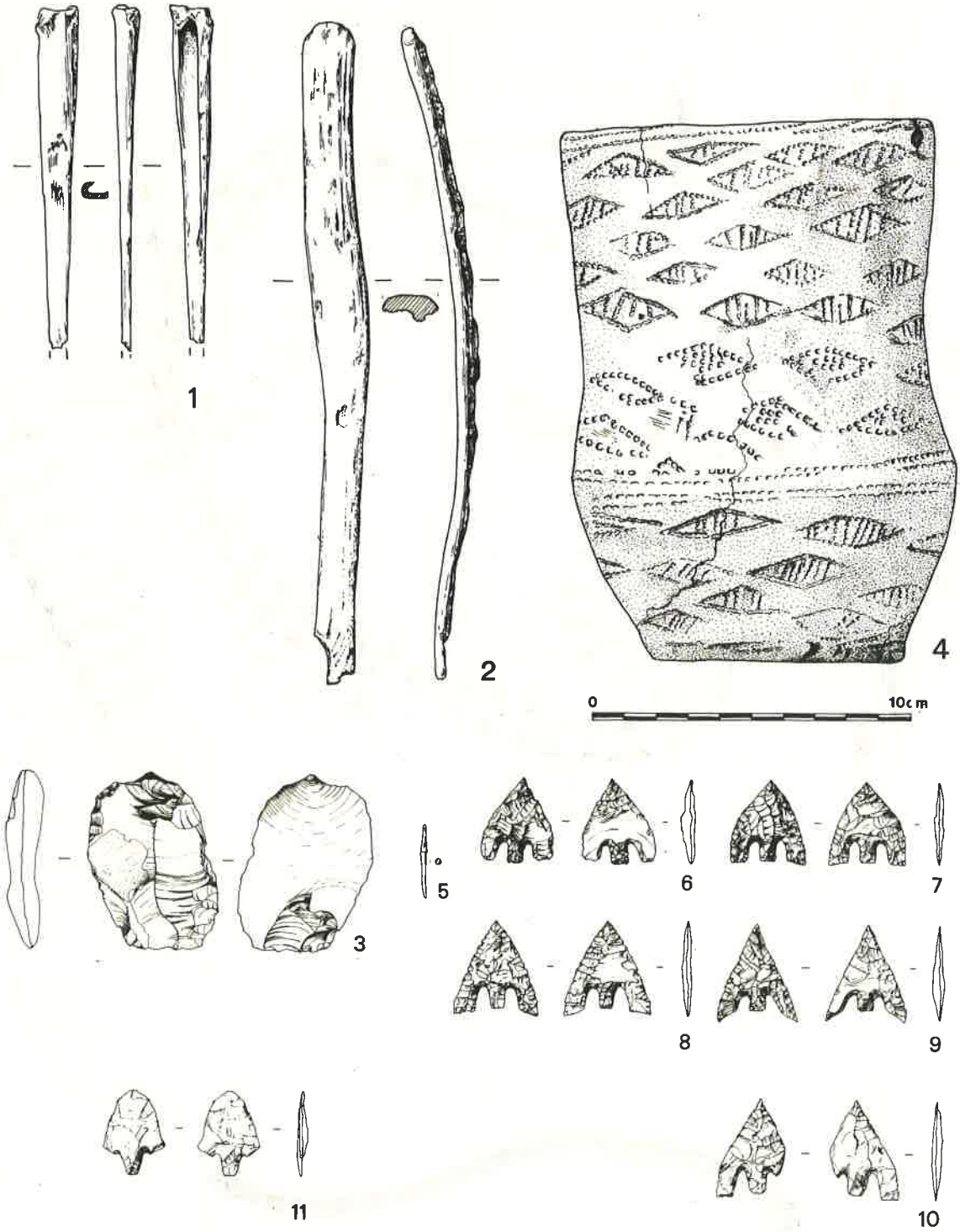


Fig.9 The grave goods found with Feature 203: 1.bone tool; 2. antler spatula; 3. flint end scraper; 4. long-necked beaker; 5. bronze awl; 6-10. five finely flaked barbed and tanged arrowheads; 11. barbed and tanged arrowhead found lying against the spine.

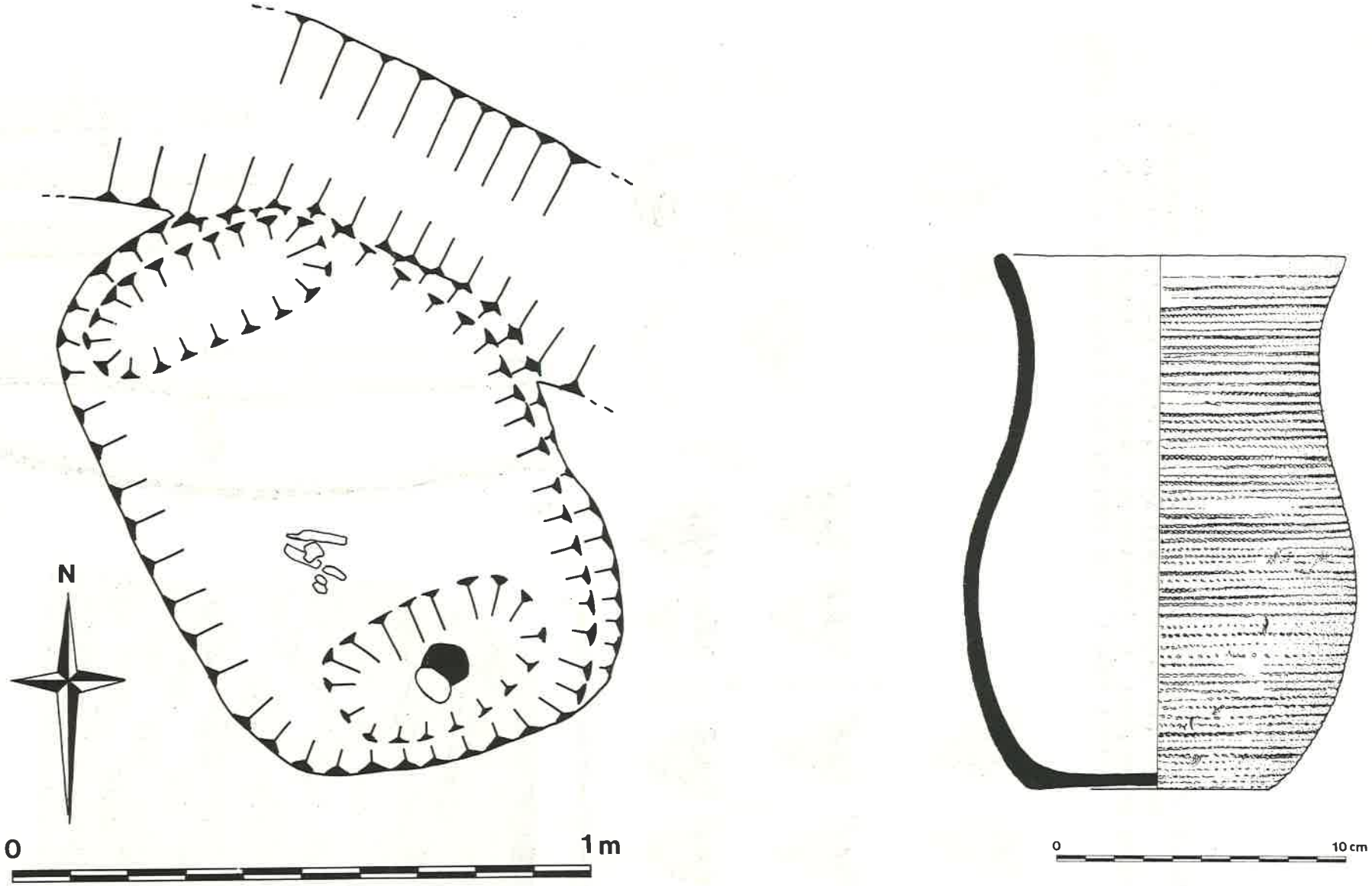


Fig. 10 Left - A flat burial (Feature 206) pre-dating the small ring ditch adjacent to Barrow 1. It contained fragmentary, disarticulated skeletal remains and an all-over-corded beaker. Right - The all-over-corded beaker.

decorated by winding cord around the pot while it was still damp, so creating a series of close set spirals.

The term 'beaker' or 'drinking cup' was first coined by early antiquarians and for convenience continues to be used today. It was for long thought that they were vessels suitable for drinking, hence their name, however very little supportive evidence is available. The beakers and the soil they contain will be examined for traces of organic remains.

The early Bronze Age sees the transition between flint and metalwork for tool production and this is witnessed in grave F203 where both materials were found. A bronze awl or point was found lying on one of the waste flakes. The purpose of this awl is obscure but leather working is a suggestion and the awl complements the tools described above. Finally against the right foot were five, finely flaked, barbed and tanged flint arrowheads of exceptional workmanship. They represent the remains of a quiver of arrows deposited against the right side of the body, the wooden shafts having decayed. These arrowheads are not common but when found suggest that the person was a skilled archer.

Considerable care in filling the grave must have been taken so as not to displace the objects. On lifting the burial a barbed and tanged arrowhead was found lying against the spine. This example was distinct from those described above being shorter with broken barbs and an impact fracture. Its presence suggests the cause of death.

Low Status Burials

The burials described above belonged to elite members of society. Barrow Hills was a markedly rich cemetery, nevertheless the number of graves containing rich or numerous grave goods is only a small proportion of the total. In addition to grave goods the time and resources given to barrow-building must be taken into account. It is not clear what happened to the majority of the population but one burial (Feature 942) may provide a clue. The burial consisted of a disarticulated inhumation apparently thrown against the side of a quarry pit, south-west of Barrow 12. No grave goods were present and the bones appeared to be arthritic though these have yet to be examined by a physical anthropologist.

Disarticulated Inhumations

During the 1930's - 1940's excavations at Barrow Hills a satellite burial beneath Barrow 12 consisted of 'the bones of a child thrown 'pell mell' into a hole'.

Feature 206 was a flat burial pre-dating the small ring ditch adjacent to Barrow 1 (Fig. 10). Two deliberately cut hollows, at either end of the deep grave, were recorded. One contained an all-over-corded beaker which was slightly damaged due to animal burrowing. The other hollow was apparently empty but the soil was retained and sent, with the contents of the pot, to the environmentalist to be examined for organic remains. The burial consisted of a couple of shaft bones, vertebrae and a skull fragment heaped in the centre of the grave.

Feature 950 was a large grave lying north-west of Barrow 12. It was cut through by an unaccompanied cremation (Feature 951). The bones were completely disarticulated and widely dispersed throughout the pit. Some bones were broken; for example, the back of the skull and the lower jaw were fragmentary and widely scattered. The front of the skull lay face upwards and the broken remains of a beaker were close by. Some care in laying the burial appears to have been taken, however, more of the pot was also scattered in the pit.

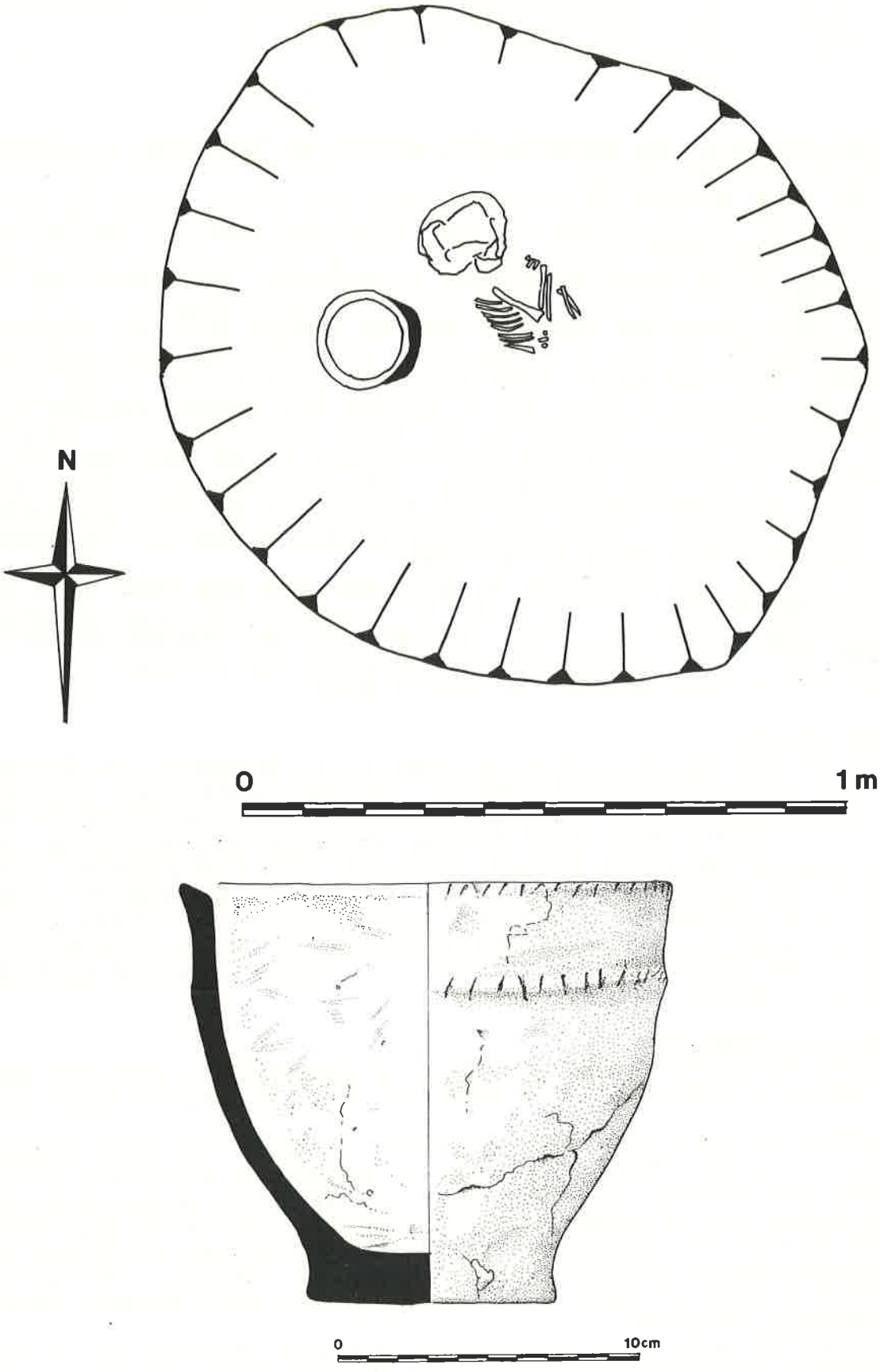


Fig. 11 Above - A central burial (Feature 605) of Barrow 12. It contained the articulated upper half of a child. A biconical urn accompanied the burial. Below - The biconical urn.

These burials may either represent reinternments, or a burial rite where the bodies were exposed or left in the open and the remains later collected and interred. The latter phenomenon is unusual in the Bronze Age and is normally met with on Neolithic sites.

Fragmentary Inhumations

During the earlier excavations at Barrow Hills it was recorded that the primary burial for Barrow 15 consisted of an inhumation. On examination of the skeleton there was some evidence that the leg bones had been dismembered after partial dessication.

A central burial (Feature 605, Fig. 11) within Barrow 12 contained the articulated upper half of a child. The bones beyond the lower ribs were missing. The fragmentary body was laid with care and the arms were flexed as was the norm with crouched burials. A biconical urn accompanied the burial.

Feature 919 (Pl. II) lay adjacent to Feature 950 (above), and north-west of Barrow 12. It consisted of an inhumation burial of a young person. The curious feature of this crouched skeleton was that the bones lay slightly askew and there was a lack of vertebrae and foot bones. Two beakers, three bronze rings and a bone disc accompanied the burial.

The most unusual of all the burials recorded to date was found in a large circular pit (Feature 4583, Fig. 12) which lay west of Barrow 12. In the upper fill, at the centre of the pit, a fragmentary inhumation consisting of a skull and four limbs was recorded. Some of the larger shaft bones appear to have been cut into two. An unaccompanied crouched inhumation of a young person lay against the north-western edge of the pit. The fill of the pit was also unusual. It contained apparently domestic debris - animal bones and waste flint flakes. A late Neolithic transverse arrowhead, and a barbed and tanged arrowhead were found, and also fragments of beaker pottery. A spread of charcoal lay against the fragmentary burial. On excavating the pit a further spread of charcoal, seemingly associated with a new, fairly dense, scatter of bones was found. These bones included animal bones and further human bone fragments. In particular, part of a human pelvis, with the severed upper end of a thigh bone close by, was recorded.

Coupled with the evidence described above, Feature 4583 may convincingly be interpreted as being evidence of deliberate mutilation, ritual or otherwise, before burial. The pit at 5m in diameter, is not like a conventional grave and may be interpreted as a working hollow. Parallels with other excavations are not easily found and we may be witnessing a local burial practice.

Conclusion

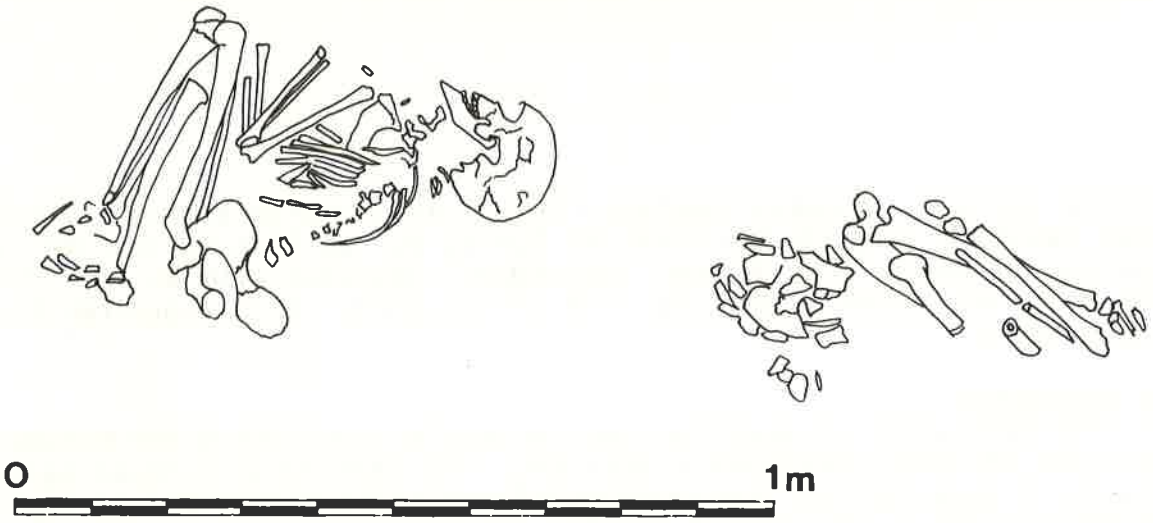
Continuity of Use

Continuity between the Neolithic and bronze Age periods may be inferred by the close dating of the burials, and the possibility that the Bronze Age cemetery was aligned on the earlier Neolithic monuments. In addition a direct overlap was recorded: the silted Neolithic ring ditch (Feature 611), whichmay have originally served as a focus for burials, had a later Bronze Age ?biconical urn overlying the centre.

The Bronze Age burials span both the early Bronze Age (Beaker period) for example Feature 206, and the full early Bronze Age, for example, Feature 11. Such continuity of use is known elsewhere, for example, the Lambourn Seven Barrows, Berkshire. A full chronological survey of the cemetery must await the specialist reports and also the results from radiocarbon dating.

Bronze Age round barrows were sometimes reused in the much later Roman

Pl. II The grave (Feature 919) of a young person. Two beakers, three bronze rings and a bone disc accompanied this inhumation.



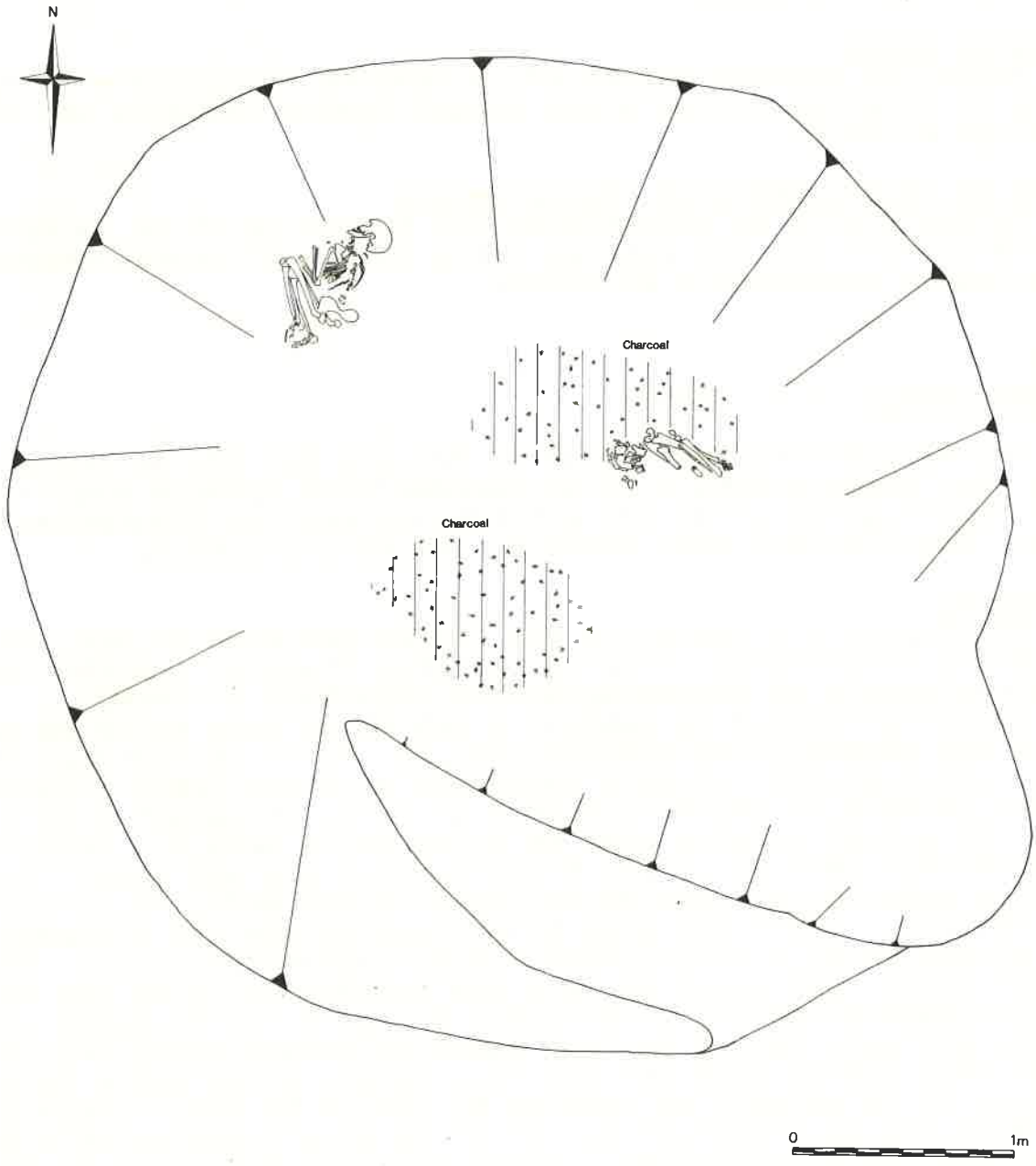


Fig. 12 Feature 4583, partially excavated. It contained an unusual fragmentary inhumation and a crouched burial. Details of the burials are shown (inset). Below the isolated charcoal spread further human remains and also animal bones were found.

and Saxon periods. A Roman cemetery lies to the north of Barrow 12, and a second cemetery lies to the north of Barrow 2. In 1976 during the re-excavation of Barrow 2 by Michael Parrington a skeleton with an iron knife lying nearby was found in the upper fill of the ditch. It is suggested to be of Saxon date.

Area Excavation

The excavation of round barrows is usually confined to the monument itself and the area immediately adjacent. The density of archaeological features of many periods has initiated large scale mechanical stripping totalling 5 acres at the time of writing, and provided a rare opportunity to locate secondary burials. Sixteen have been found to date, compared to ten from within the ring ditches.

Radiocarbon Dating

Appropriate excavated material will be submitted for radiocarbon dating and may be integrated with the British Museum's Research Laboratory work on Bronze Age artefacts.

Towards the Total Excavation of a Barrow Cemetery

On completion of the current excavations fourteen out of the seventeen or so barrows will have been examined, making this one of the most complete barrow cemetery excavations in the country.

THE ROMAN BURIALS - R. A. Chambers

The Roman period burials present on this site fall into two distinct groups: nine inhumation burials and one cremation burial scattered across the south-western quarter of the site and in the centre of the site a discrete cemetery comprising forty seven inhumations and several cremations.

The Cemetery

The presence of a cemetery on this site had been known for some time through crop mark evidence. Prior to excavation it was believed that the cemetery belonged to the surrounding extensive Anglo-Saxon settlement.

Excavation revealed the cemetery to date to the Roman period and to contain both inhumations and cremations (Fig. 13). Burial may have begun in the 1st century AD with a series of cremations, an unknown number of which have been partially or completely ploughed out during the medieval period or later. The earliest cremation which can be confidently dated is a greyware urn containing a small 2nd century AD Oxford product grey ware beaker. This cremation appears to have been the only burial to receive its own, private small enclosure. Several late Roman period cremations were also discovered, some accompanied by an Oxford product colour-coat pottery beaker. The earliest colour- coat beaker may have been manufactured in the late 3rd century although the majority of the beakers belonged to the 4th century and all were well worn. Each of the later cremations had been buried in plain domestic pots, some of which were made in a coarsely gritted shelly fabric datable to the 4th and early 5th centuries AD. None of the intact cremations appeared to have had retaining lids. All of the vessels were buried in an upright position (mouth upwards). Several cremation burial pits did not penetrate the gravel. The survival of such shallow features was due entirely to the protection they were afforded by the ridges of the medieval open field

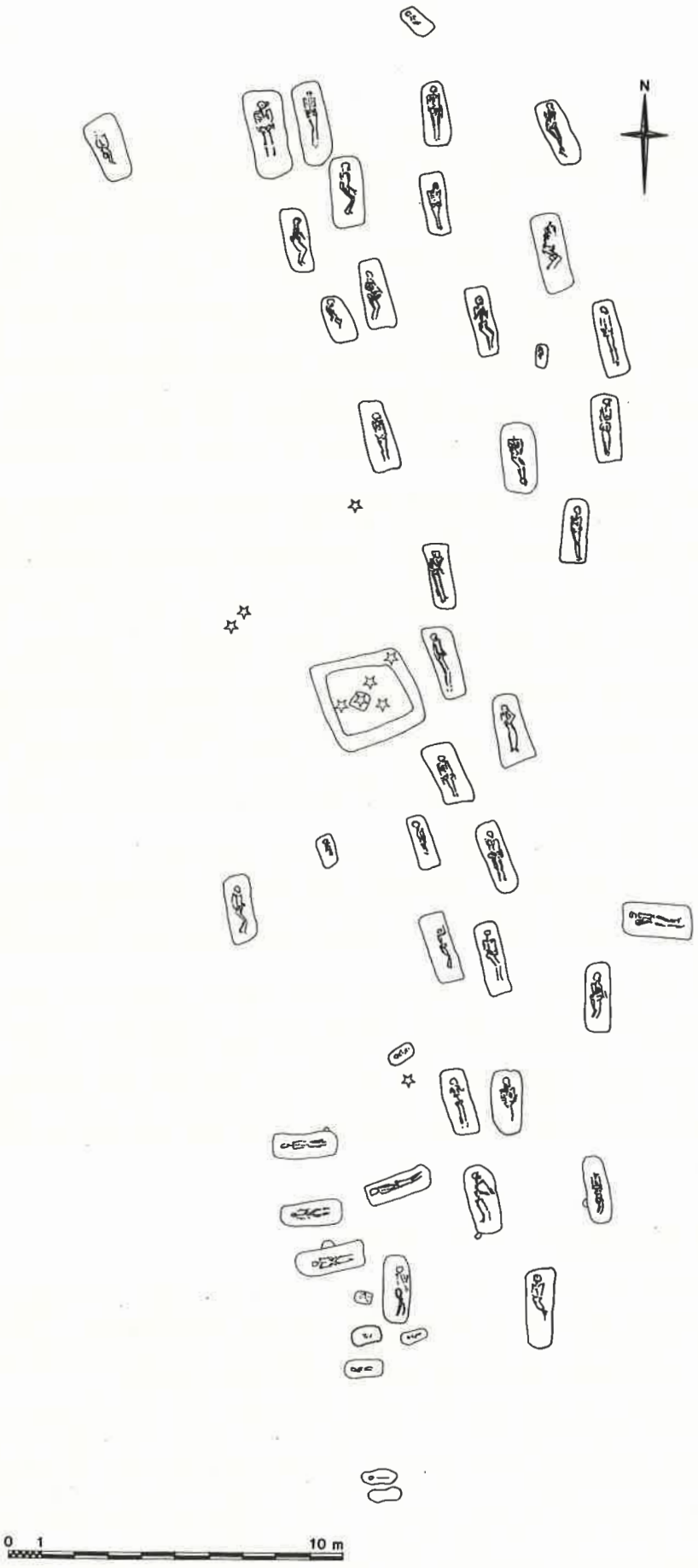


Fig. 13 The Roman period cemetery. The cremations are each marked with a star.

system.

The cemetery also contained 47 inhumation graves, each grave containing a single skeleton. Thirty six of the inhumation graves were arranged in a broad north-south line. These graves may have been aligned on a major topographical feature such as a trackway or hedgerow for which no other archaeological evidence has survived. In each of the thirty six north-south graves the body had been laid head northwards. These graves reflected many of the customs prevalent at the time including decapitation and prone burial. Several graves contained evidence of coffins and several graves each contained a 4th century Oxford product colour coated pottery beaker. A child's grave included hobnail boots, bracelets and glass beads.

A further eleven inhumations grouped at the southern end of the cemetery were orientated west-east. None of these graves produced any grave goods.

This small cemetery displayed several important features which suggest that it is of a different character to the usual small rural Roman period cemetery of the Upper Thames Valley. The cremation and inhumation graves all respected each other and none of the grave pits cut previous graves. This is unusual in small cemeteries spanning the whole or major part of the Roman period and indicates that the graves had been carefully marked, including at least some of the cremations. The dated 2nd century cremation, several of the adult north-south inhumations and the late Roman period cremations all had a common feature, a small pottery beaker suggesting a continuous local burial tradition spanning the 2nd to 4th or early 5th centuries AD.

Other features of the cemetery were that almost all of the inhumations faced east, and that three of the four decapitations displayed similar but unusual postures for this ritual.

Until the specialist reports have been completed no detailed analysis of this cemetery is possible. However the burial customs exhibited in this small discrete cemetery suggest a burial ground serving a small, closed social group with strong, long lived traditions, possibly a locally important land owning family.

There is no direct evidence to link this cemetery with the villa excavated in the 1970's close by at Barton Court although a trackway appears to lead from Barton Court Farm villa towards the cemetery site. The whole area is known to have been heavily occupied during the Roman period. A second, small discrete inhumation cemetery excavated 40 years ago some 200m to the north-east displayed similar qualities to the Barrow Hills cemetery.

RN 03

THE ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT - R. A. Chambers

Two hectares (5 acres) of this site have now been stripped of topsoil to reveal the major part of a migration period settlement. The settlement was established sometime during the first quarter of the 5th century AD. The site appears to have been deserted during the 7th century.

The settlement occupied the area between the south-west end of the prehistoric barrow cemetery and a stream which runs through Daisy Banks to the west. In the medieval period the stream valley was altered to form a fishpond for Abingdon Abbey. In 1928 early Anglo-Saxon pottery was found within the area occupied by the pond. This suggests that pond construction destroyed the western edge of the Anglo-Saxon settlement.

The archaeological remains of this settlement take three distinct forms: sunken featured buildings, sometimes termed "grubenhauser";

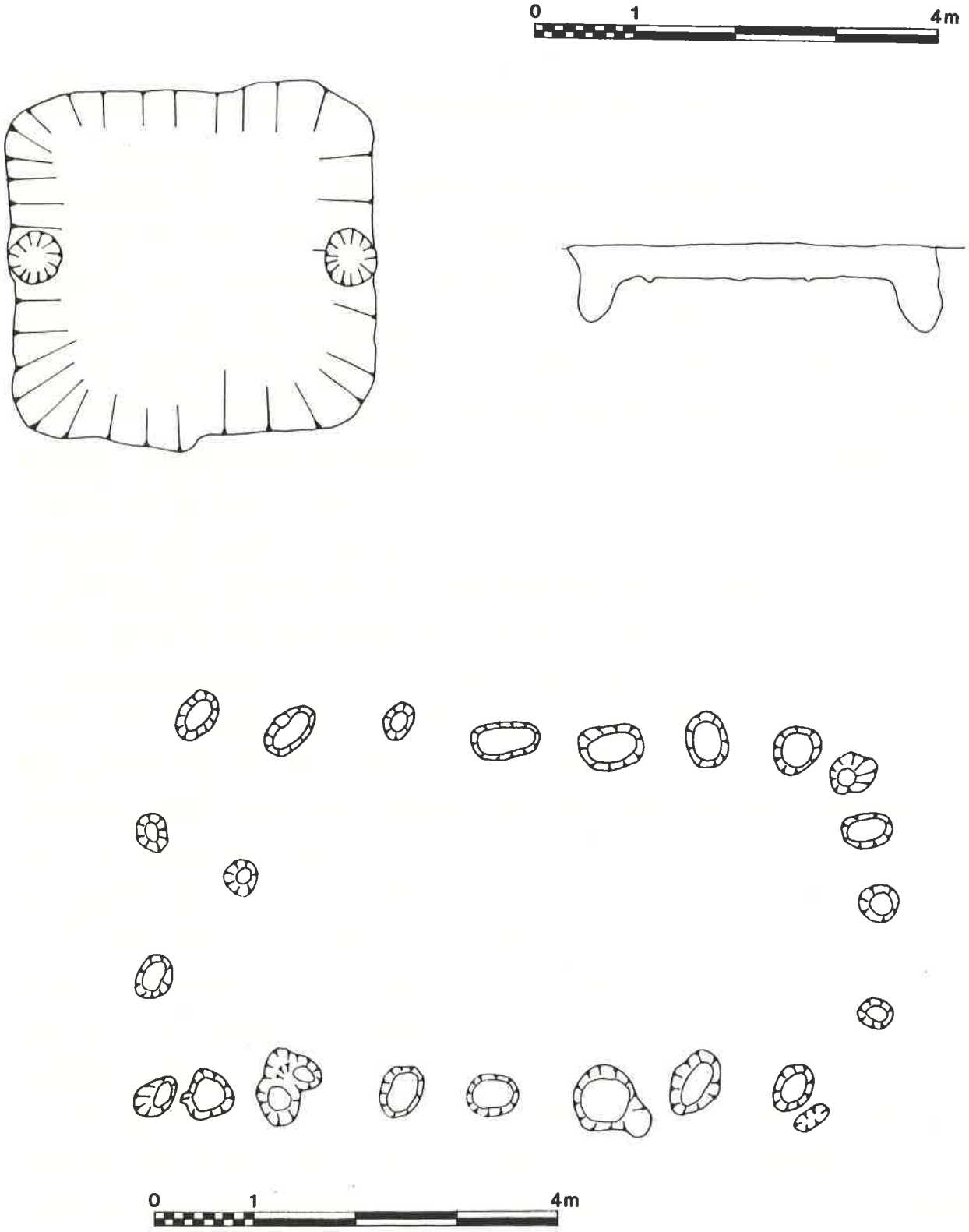


Fig. 14 Building plans from the early Anglo-Saxon settlement.

rectangular post-built structures and domestic rubbish deposits which accumulated within the earthwork remains of the Bronze Age and Neolithic barrow ditches.

More than 40 sunken featured buildings have now been excavated. Each building is represented by a generally subrectangular pit with a post hole placed centrally at either end (Fig. 14). The pits varied in size from 1m deep by 4.5m square to shallow scrapings. In several buildings the end posts had been replaced indicating a general refurbishment of some structures which may consequently have remained in use for a considerable time. Several sunken featured buildings also contained other possible post and stake holes.

In only one of the sunken featured buildings so far excavated had the pit bottom been used as a floor surface. In the remaining buildings the pits appeared to have been covered with floor boards. The walls of each building lay beyond the pit edges and may have been founded on timber sill beams laid on the ground surface as no archaeological evidence survives.

Timber post-built structures form the second building category found on this site. This category can currently be divided into two distinct building techniques. Firstly, post-built rectangular structures such as the example in Fig. 13 where the spaces between the individual uprights would have been filled perhaps with wattle and daub panels. An out building open on two or three sides also appeared to have been built in this manner. An example of the second technique used within the settlement is also represented in Fig. 13. Each wall is constructed using pairs of posts in place of large single posts; presumably posts were placed either side of wattle panels to form a secure, strong structure. More than ten post-built structures have so far been identified but in many cases only a few of the post holes had penetrated the topsoil to leave recognisable traces in the gravel beneath.

Many of the redundant sunken featured buildings did not exhibit any erosion of the sides and bases and had been filled-in as soon as the superstructure had been demolished and removed. They were almost certainly backfilled to remove the nuisance of an open pit close to a replacement building. Some pits were allowed to fill up gradually as refuse tips for domestic rubbish. There is no evidence to suggest that debris accumulated in the pit of any sunken featured building while the building was in use. In two instances partly filled in pits were used briefly to protect open fires, possibly for cooking.

Items derived from domestic refuse deposits included 5th century decorated pottery of a type parallelled on the continent as well as plain pottery and animal bones. Other items included beads, bronze pins, an iron arrowhead, knife blades, hooks, bones, pottery spindle whorls and occasional fragments from circular loomweights used in weaving. Bone objects included pins, needles, spindle whorls, combs and a knife handle. A number of pottery discs may represent gaming pieces. Some bone and horn objects were almost certainly manufactured on site; fragments of sawn, whittled or polished bone and antler were present as well as horn cores. Several pieces of what may be hearth slag suggest that iron smelting was also practised from time to time.

This settlement appears to have been finally deserted around the time of the foundation of Abingdon Abbey, itself one of the earliest English monastic foundations. Early charter evidence suggests that Barrow Hills may have been included in the initial 20 hides of land granted to the Abbey in the 670's AD.

Acknowledgements

The writer would like to thank Miss Dympna Irwin for drawing figures 13-14.

GLOSSARY

Abingdon Ware: A type of middle Neolithic pottery.

Anglo-Saxon: The period in this area between the end of Roman Britain and the Norman Conquest (5th to 11th centuries AD).

Articulated Burial: Skeletal remains with the bones jointed.

Barbed and Tanged Arrowhead: Early Bronze Age arrowhead.

Barrow: A mound of earth covering a burial(s). The mound may be elongated in plan (a long barrow) or circular (a round barrow).

Baulk: A strip of soil left undug to allow soil sampling or to provide vertical sections.

Beaker Period (or early Bronze Age): The term is derived from a new pottery form, the beaker. Bronze metalworking is introduced. The period dates from c. 2750 BC. See also Beaker Pottery.

Beaker Pottery: Decorated pottery found in burial contexts with a restricted range of grave goods, including for the first time metalwork, first in copper and then bronze. Beaker pottery dates from the early Bronze Age, c. 2750 BC.

Biconical Urn: Early Bronze Age urn type, frequently associated with burials.

Bronze Age: The period when bronze was the main metal used for the manufacture of tools and weapons. In Britain the Bronze Age extends from c. 2750 to c. 700 BC. See also Beaker Period.

Causewayed Enclosure: In plan such enclosures consist of roughly oval areas enclosed by one to four concentric ditches with external banks. The ditches were broken by numerous causeways at frequent but irregular intervals. These monuments date to the Neolithic period. They appear to have variously served as religious, economic and social centres, settlements and defensive sites.

Cenotaph: A token burial or monument to someone who is buried elsewhere.

Chisel Ended Transverse Arrowhead: Late Neolithic arrowhead.

Conglomerate: A rock composed of pebbles cemented together.

Cremation: The remains of a corpse which has been burnt.

Crouched Burial: A body buried on its side in a crouched position.

Debitage: Waste flakes and fragments resulting from the production of stone tools and weapons. Also referred to as knapping debris.

Disarticulated Burial: Skeletal remains with the bones disjointed.

Embanked Enclosure: An area enclosed with a bank and ditch.

Flat Burial: A burial which consists of a grave pit with no visible evidence of a mound, ring ditch or bank.

Grey Ware: A type of Romano-British pottery.

Grooved Ware: A style of late Neolithic decorated pottery.

Grubenhaus: A mainly early Anglo-Saxon building type with a sunken floor or a pit beneath the floor.

Haft: A handle.

Henge Monument: A circular or oval area enclosed by a bank and ditch; the bank normally lies outside the ditch. The enclosure is broken by one or more entrances. They were probably used for ritual or ceremonial purposes. Most were built in the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.

Inhumation: The burial of a corpse as opposed to the burial of cremated remains.

Iron Age: The period from the introduction of iron about 700 BC to the beginning o the Romano-British period in AD 43.

Iron Pyrite: A mineral used for a strike-a-light.

Knapping: The process of manufacturing stone tools.

Knapping Debris: See Debitage.

Long Barrow: See Barrow.

Medieval: In this publication the medieval period begins with the Norman Conquest in AD 1066 and ends in the 15th century.

Mortlake Ware: A type of late Neolithic pottery.

Mortuary Enclosures: These Neolithic structures preserved represent enclosed areas where corpses were stored until their numbers had accumulated sufficiently to warrant the construction of a long barrow.

Neolithic: The 'New Stone Age' when farming, as opposed to hunting and gathering, was first introduced. Stone continued to be used for making tools and weapons. In Britain the Neolithic period extends from c. 4000 to 2750 BC.

Open Field System: A communal agricultural system in which the arable land was divided into strips within two or more large fields. This often resulted in a ridged effect. This agricultural system reached its peak in the medieval period.

Primary Burial: The first or original burial. This term is commonly used for the central burial of a round barrow.

Radiocarbon Dating: A dating technique confined to organic material such as wood, charcoal, seeds and bone.

Residual Material: Finds of an earlier period which are found in a later conext, for example prehistoric flintwork in Roman and Saxon layers.

Ring Ditch: A circular ditch. The majority represent the remains of round barrows, the mounds and banks having been levelled.

Romano-British: The period from the conquest of Britain in AD 43 to the early 5th century.

Round Barrow: See Barrow.

Satellite Burial: A burial(s), other than the primary or central burial, made before the mound of a barrow was built.

Secondary Burial: A burial(s) made sometime after a barrow is completed. It may be inserted into the barrow mound, placed in the ring ditch or buried adjacent to the barrow.

Stratification: This term refers to the successive layers revealed during an excavation.

Sunken Featured Building: See Grubenhaus.

Urn: A pottery vessel whose function is generally to contain cremated bone.

Waste Flakes: See Debitage.

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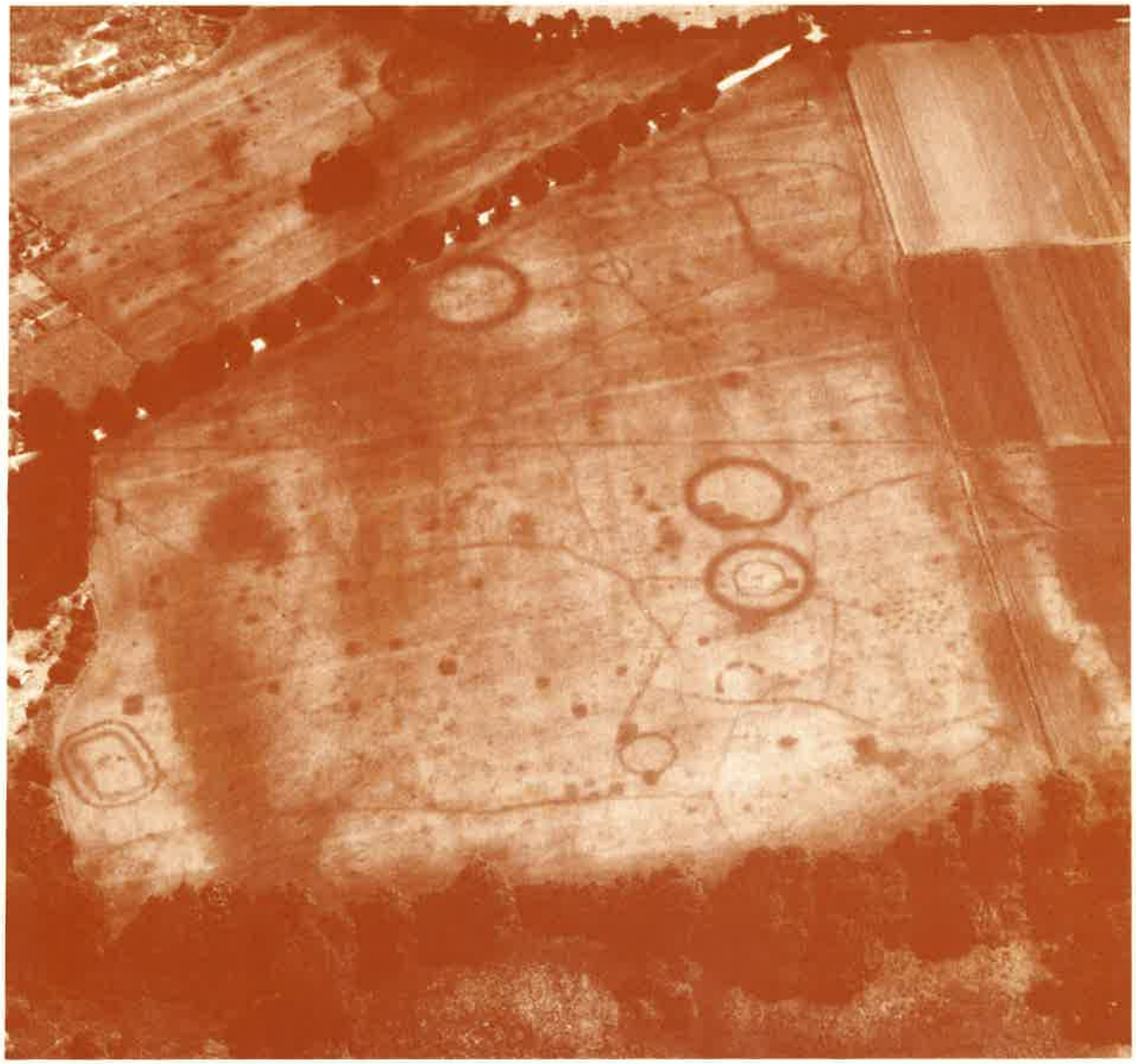

Pl. III The cropmarks photographed from the air.