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Report On Human Bones from Duxford
for
Cambridgeshire Constabulary

Corinne Duhig and Tim Malim

January 2000

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. B67

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**Report On Human Bones from Duxford
(Incident Number 636 Of 22.8.99(FC99/12)
for Cambridgeshire Constabulary**

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On 23 August 1999, Tim Malim was contacted by PC Jane Allen of Cambridgeshire Constabulary (Sawston Police Station), who reported possible human bones which had been found at 26 Rectory Road, Duxford (TL481457). The bones had been found on 22 August during digging for a new soakaway, and digging had ceased immediately. We visited the site on the afternoon of 23 August, and inspection of a tooth and other bone fragments indicated that the remains were human and it was necessary, therefore, to excavate further in order to establish the age and origin of these bones.

A fragmented skeleton was revealed at a depth of 1 metre from the surface, having been covered by a heavily-compacted loam and chalk mixture. The lack of organic debris within the fill suggests that the pit was deliberately dug for the purpose of this burial and immediately backfilled with the same material that had been excavated. The skeleton lay on its left side, head to the north, in a position so tightly-contracted that the bones of the hands were not only over the pelvis but those of the right hand were commingled with those of the feet.

No definite artefactual evidence accompanied the burial but a man-made flint flake was found as well as two flint nodules, one of a size and shape reminiscent of a sling-shot.

Bone condition

Methods used were those of Cho et al. (1996) and Ubelaker (1989). After cleaning, the bones were found to be pale creamy-white in colour, relatively light and fragile (indicating lack of collagen) with eroded areas, particularly in the axial skeleton and at the long-bone ends, and root-marked cortices. Forty per cent of the skeleton is present, with main loss being from the sternum, ribs and upper vertebrae, and some portions of long-bone shaft (distal humeri and femora); most of the bones of the hands were recovered, and half of those of the feet. There are seven teeth.

Although the pubic bone, the most reliable part of the pelvis for sexing purposes, is absent, all other features of the pelvis and skull are of strongly-female conformation. The femoral head is, at 40.1 cm, well within the female range. Ageing is problematical, due to loss of significant parts of the skeleton, but the complete fusion of the long-bone growth plates, combined with minimal wear on the teeth and the absence of any degenerative arthritic changes in the joints suggests early adulthood. At least one molar had been lost in life or was held only by soft tissue, as the supporting bone has receded and remodelled due to chronic periodontal disease.

Time interval since death

The care taken to bury this individual within the pit, the tightly-contracted body position, the collagen-free and eroded condition of the bones and the condition of the teeth (cusps worn by attrition but no evidence of modern dental treatment) indicates that the burial is of no forensic interest but is archaeological. The occurrence of flint-work in the grave-fill may be accidental but nonetheless supports the interpretation of the burial as prehistoric, and the type of rite associated with the positioning of the burial may indicate that it was Bronze Age (2500 - 700 BC) in date.

References

Cho, H., A.B. Falsetti, J. McIlwaine, C. Roberts, P.S. Sledzik & A.W. Willcox. 1996. Handbook of the Forensic Anthropology Course of the Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford and the NMHM/AFIP, Washington D.C.

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