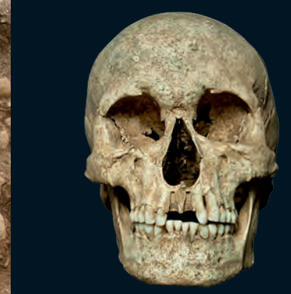
Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society
Monograph Series: No. 22

This volume describes one of the most exciting and unexpected archaeological discoveries to have been made in Britain in recent years, that of a rare mass grave of executed vikings on Ridgeway Hill, Dorset. The skeletons, around 50 in total, were predominantly of young adult males all of whom had been decapitated: heads had been deposited in a pile at the southern edge of the grave, while the beheaded bodies had been apparently thrown in with little care. Since their recovery experts have undertaken forensic studies of the bones and have applied cutting edge techniques to elicit the most information possible, in order to understand who the individuals were and what circumstances led to their demise. It reveals an extraordinary story of the discovery of what is arguably the most dramatic physical evidence for violence in early medieval Britain ever encountered by archaeologists.



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Dorset County Council

ISBN 978-0-900341-58-8
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9 780900 341588
£29.00

‘Given to the Ground’ Louise Loe, Angela Boyle, Helen Webb and David Score

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A Viking Age Mass Grave on Ridgeway Hill, Weymouth

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by Louise Loe, Angela Boyle, Helen Webb and David Score

with contributions by

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Dorset Natural History and Archaeology Society Monograph Series: No. 22

2014

The publication of this volume has been generously funded by Dorset County Council

Edited and prepared for publication by Rebecca Nicholson

Proceedings of Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society. Hon. Editor: Paul Lashmar

ISBN 978-0-900341-58-8

This book is one of a pair of monographs about the excavations along the route of the Weymouth Relief Road. The companion volume is *'Down to Weymouth Town by Ridgeway'*: *Prehistoric, Roman and later sites along the Weymouth Relief Road* (L. Brown, C Hayden and D. Score), DNHAS Monograph Series 23 (2014)

Front cover: photograph of the mass grave during excavation
Back cover: a collection of images from the mass grave

Designed and typeset by Production Line, Oxford
Printed in Great Britain by Berforts Information Press, Eynsham, Oxford

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Oxford Archaeology, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES

Fame is hushed,
the world's dignity withers up and shrivels
as comes to every man now over middle-earth:
age presses on him, his face grows pale,
white-haired, he sorrows for his henchmen,
sons of greatness given to the ground.

Extract from the Anglo-Saxon poem,
The Seafarer, translated by John Wain

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Summary

This volume describes one of the most exciting and unexpected archaeological discoveries to have been made in Britain in recent years, that of a rare mass grave of executed vikings on Ridgeway Hill, Dorset. The burial was found by Oxford Archaeology in 2009 during the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road. The skeletons, around 50 in total, were predominantly of young adult males all of whom had been decapitated: heads had been deposited in a pile located at the southern edge of the grave, while the beheaded bodies had been apparently thrown in with little care. Since their recovery experts have undertaken forensic studies of the bones and have applied cutting edge techniques to elicit the most information possible, in order to understand who the individuals were and what circumstances led to their demise. The discovery of the grave has inspired considerable speculation in this regard and here we provide the key facts as they are currently known. The volume reveals an extraordinary story of the discovery of what is arguably the most dramatic physical evidence for violence in early medieval Britain ever encountered by archaeologists.

The discovery of the mass grave was made as staff of Oxford Archaeology were undertaking work at other sites on Ridgeway Hill and nearby at Redlands and at Southdown Ridge. Unlike these sites, the area in which the mass grave lay could not be explored archaeologically for health and safety reasons, so initially the area was exposed during machine excavation under the supervision of archaeologists. The pile of skulls were the first items to be spotted, but at that stage they were presumed to represent a Roman or prehistoric funerary context. However, as more and more bones were uncovered it quickly became apparent that this was the context of something much more gruesome.

The grave was excavated by archaeologists over a period of three months. It was a highly complex deposit requiring as many bones to be exposed as possible before they could be recorded and lifted. This, in addition to two and three dimensional recording by hand, photography and computer survey, meant that it was possible to identify discrete individuals and reveal exactly how each was lying despite their jumbled positions. It was the first step in reconstructing events and is presented in the volume through a detailed archaeological description of the grave.

This information suggests that the burial had been a one-off occurrence and had taken place at the time of, or shortly after, the men's execution which had probably been performed at the graveside. The individuals seem to have been buried in no particular order, possibly more than one at a time from different sides of the grave. They may have been stripped of their clothes prior to burial and, unlike some contemporary parallels, do not appear to have had their hands bound. The grave was, in fact, a re-used quarry pit, originally dug in Roman times and probably still visible as a pit or depression when it was re-used for the mass burial. In addition, the location of the grave – on the crest of Ridgeway Hill next to a Parish boundary and Roman road, near prehistoric monuments and within view of Maiden Castle – had undoubtedly been selected to make an example of the executed individuals contained within it. This implies that the executions had been a formal event, perhaps attended by spectators. We will never know precisely how these strands of information combine to form the narrative of the individuals' fate, but the idea that potentially some 50 men had queued, perhaps naked, waiting and watching as their comrades were executed, is certainly a very evocative and moving one.

As for the total number of individuals, analysis has highlighted the difficulties in determining exactly how many men were executed. The final total could not be determined during the excavation, but was explored off site in the laboratory using methods that are employed to investigate modern day mass graves. Generally, these involved counting the most frequently occurring bone or bones and matching pairs of bones. Results indicate that between 47 and 52 individuals were present. Interestingly, there were more beheaded skeletons than skulls and this could mean that some heads had been taken as trophies following the executions.

All of the men had suffered horrific ends, their executions being an ugly affair involving excessive violence. Although it was clear during the excavation that the men had suffered significant injuries the true extent and magnitude of these did not become fully apparent until the bones had been cleaned and examined in the laboratory. Wounds were concentrated in the region of the neck indicating that, in most cases, it had taken several attempts, from a variety of angles, to remove the heads. Blows intended to decapitate had been delivered from as

high up as the back of the head to as low down as the shoulder blades, indicating that they had not been very well performed or well organised. Approximately 188 wounds were observed on all of the skeletons, that is an average number of almost four wounds per individual. Each wound has been examined and described in detail and compared with other finds of violent death and execution in the archaeological record, both contemporary (for example, a mutilated skeleton from Maiden Castle) and later in date (for example, the skeletons of soldiers who were killed in the Battle of Towton in 1461).

Forensic analysis of the wounds has allowed us to conclude that the decapitations had probably been performed with a sword. This is the weapon used in the the Jómsvíkinga saga, a probable Icelandic story of a mass execution, composed around AD 1200. The saga describes the beheading of 70 captured warriors who were roped together and had their hair secured back to keep it out of the way of the sword blade. Perhaps this had also been the case at Ridgeway Hill.

Not all of the injuries on the Ridgeway skeletons were directly associated with decapitation, however. Some individuals had received cuts to their arms and hands and the sides/tops of their heads, including perhaps one of the most vivid lesions observed: a large egg shaped wound where the bone had been completely removed causing considerable trauma to the brain. This injury had been delivered prior to this man's decapitation, but he may have still been alive when his head was removed.

The cuts to the hands, arms and tops/sides of heads may have been defence injuries and decapacitating injuries implying that not all men had succumbed to their fate without a struggle. That the injuries could suggest some other context of violence, for example, a battle, had taken place prior to their execution is difficult to reconcile with the evidence. The pattern and extent of the injuries are not consistent with those observed on other skeletons from battle or massacre related contexts, although it is important to consider that not all injuries will penetrate the soft tissues and affect the skeleton. These factors considered, it would seem that, on balance, evidence for combat prior to the executions is not very compelling, although it cannot be ruled out.

Besides the injuries a great deal of other information about the individuals was revealed during the analysis of the bones, which is given in a skeleton by skeleton description in the volume. Extensive chemical analysis suggests that they were a disparate group of people in terms of their origins, migratory histories and dietary habits, although a general emphasis on Arctic and sub-Arctic areas of Scandinavia, northern Iceland, the Baltic States, Belarus and Russia, and on terrestrial food sources, are suggested. It would appear that the majority were not living in the British Isles in the years leading to their deaths.

Although most of the men were 18-25 years old when they died the youngest was in their early or mid teens and the oldest, over 50. They possessed features, particularly those relating to height and facial appearance, that were very similar to Scandinavian populations of similar date. In addition, some had a physique that was similar to other skeletons of fighting/warrior class status, although this was not the case for all individuals. A remarkable find is that at least one individual had filed his teeth, seen as horizontal grooves on his two front central, upper incisors. In life, the grooves may have been coloured and they would have been clearly visible when the individual smiled; they may have been a status symbol or a marker of their occupation. This is a very rare find indeed: examples are known from Scandinavia, but none have been found in the UK before.

Evidence for infection and physical impairment was surprisingly frequent for a group of predominantly young individuals who had died in their prime of life. Most striking is a leg bone from one individual which, due to infection, was twice the size of a normal bone and had openings (holes) in the bone which would have oozed smelly pus during his life. The leg would have been swollen and painful and must have posed a considerable disability both to the individual and consequently to the rest of the group. Surprisingly, none of the skeletons showed convincing evidence for previous war wounds. These observations undermine the idea of an elite group of viking warriors, possibly a ships' crew, which had been promoted by the huge amount of publicity shown in the grave from the media ever since its discovery.

So what might explain the reason why these men came to be in Dorset, and what event led to their untimely executions on the Ridgeway? We can estimate that they died in the 10th or 11th century, but there are no historical records that directly link their deaths with an event. There are a number of possibilities, however. For example, they may relate to the ravaging of Portland in 982, or viking attacks on Dorset in 998, 1015 and 1016, all of which took place during the reign of Æthelred (978-1016). Although it seems very likely that these were vikings executed by the English, the possibility that they were a group of mercenaries fighting for the English and executed by vikings cannot be entirely ruled out. Other possible scenarios are that the men were merchants or recent settlers in England who were sentenced to judicial execution by the English

authorities, or were victims of the St Brice's Day massacre that took place in 1002, when Aethelred ordered all Danes (here thought to refer to all Scandinavians) in England to be killed. It is also possible that the grave relates to an event during the reign of Cnut (1016-35), with the individuals either hostages or combatants engaging in reprisals against previous enemies.

We may never know precisely what brought the men to Dorset, or how they came to be executed on the Ridgeway. This report by no means provides all the answers, rather it suggests further questions for the future. For example, if the wounding patterns suggest disorganised assaults, how does this fit with the suggestion that it had been a formal event? Can it be presumed that the victims had been restrained despite the fact that no direct evidence of this was found? Can they still be considered to have been warriors, given their unhealthy profile and lack of battle wounds? If the men had resisted their fate, why isn't this more evident on the skeletons? Not only is the mass grave one of the most remarkable discoveries to be made in recent years, it is also perhaps one of the most perplexing and will, no doubt, hold our attention for years to come.

Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology was employed by Skanska Civil Engineering, the Main Contractor building the Weymouth Relief Road on behalf of Dorset County Council, who funded the work, and the central part played by these organisations is gratefully acknowledged. The project was managed for Dorset County Council by Matthew Piles and Oxford Archaeology would like to extend their appreciation to him and his team and in particular Kerry Hall, DCC Public Relations Officer for the enthusiastic and positive way in which they supported the archaeological works. Their proactive approach to promoting and disseminating the results of the work was very refreshing and enriched the archaeological experience for all concerned. A special mention is due to Steve Wallis, Dorset County Archaeologist who monitored the works on behalf of the Planning Authority for his sound advice and guidance and constantly cheerful disposition. Also to Mick Rawlings, RPS Consulting, Skanska's archaeological consultant who produced the original project specification and provided additional valuable input during the works. Oxford Archaeology would also like to acknowledge Willie McCormick, Project Manager, Skanska and his project team for the efficient way in which they facilitated our work on site and in particular Helen Jenkins, Environment Manager, Skanska who was directly responsible for overseeing our work on the project. The ground works on the scheme were undertaken by Walters UK Ltd and thanks are due to Paul Baker, Contracts Manager, and Kevin Davies, Works Manager, and their excellent site staff for providing plant and other attendances and ensuring that our excavations ran smoothly.

A number of other individuals are also thanked for their input into the work that has resulted in the production of this monograph. The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by David Score and the excavation of the burial pit was directed by Project Officer Dan Sykes and Angela Boyle, ably assisted by Alistair Zochowski and many other field-staff from Oxford Archaeology. These include Emily Glass, Jacek Gruszczynski, Michael Harris, Robin Maggs, Emily Plunkett and Christopher Reese. All survey and initial digitising work was carried out by Emily Plunkett and Conan Parsons. The post-excavation of the project was coordinated in the earlier stages by Angela Boyle and the later stages by Louise Loe. The skeletons were cleaned and packaged by a dedicated team of OA staff, led by Kay Proctor, under the management of Leigh Allen. Angelea Boyle wrote the assessment report and project design for full analysis, with input from Róisín McCarthy and Alistair Zochowski on the disarticulated human bone and with general assistance from Ceridwen Boston and Sharon Clough. The programme of full osteological analysis was led by Louise Loe, with input from Angela Boyle on the analysis of the skulls and Helen Webb on the analysis of the infra-cranial skeletons and disarticulated human bone. General assistance was also provided by Mark Gibson. The archive is being prepared for deposition by Leigh Allen and Nicola Scott.

The following specialists have contributed advice and reports to this monograph, generously funded by Dorset County Council: Carolyn Chenery, Angela Lamb, Jane Evans, Hilary Sloane and Carlyn Stewart of the NERC Isotope Geoscience Laboratory, British Geological Survey, on the stable isotopes; Alex Bayliss (English Heritage) is gratefully acknowledged for her advice and contribution to the radiocarbon dating report. Edward Biddulph, Mike Donnelly, Ian Scott and Ruth Shaffrey, all of Oxford Archaeology contributed specialist reports on the pottery, flint, metalwork and stone, respectively. We are especially grateful to Lesley Abrams of Balliol College, University of Oxford and Gareth Williams, of the British Museum, for their generous contributions on the historical background and weaponry. The organic residue analysis of the soils was undertaken by Matthew Pickering, Carol Lang, Maria Raimonda Usai, Brendan Keely and Don Brothwell, from the Departments of Chemistry and Archaeology at the University of York, with funding from the European Research Council under the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ ERC grant agreement No. 230193. We are also grateful to Caroline Ahlström Arcini for her helpful comments on patterns of dental wear and filed teeth; to Rebecca Redfern for information on human skeletal assemblages from Dorset; Anthea Boylston, Don Ortner and Iain Watt for their comments on pathology and other specialists who responded to requests sent via the BABAO mailing list for comparative information. Radiography was by Mark Farmer of Reveal Imaging. Lesley Abrams would like to thank Jane Kershaw for her help and access to unpublished work on Scandinavian-related metalwork and to Tom Lambert for advice regarding Anglo Saxon Chronicle 1124.

Several individuals from Oxford Archaeology have greatly assisted with the later stages of the production of this monograph, which was overseen by Anne Dodd and Robert Williams. Bones and finds were photographed by Magdalena Wachnik with input from Kate Brady. Illustration was by Lucy Gane, Hannah Kennedy, Julia Collins, and Georgina Slater, led by Magdalena Wachnik. Gary Jones co-ordinated the 3D reconstructions of the grave. Ianto Wain provided comments on earlier drafts of the text and the indexing was by Edward Biddulph. Rebecca Nicholson edited and co-ordinated the production of this volume, which would not have been achieved without dedicated typesetting by Charlie Webster (Production Line, Oxford). Danielle Schumaker and Professor Caroline Wilkinson (University of Dundee) kindly provided the facial reconstruction for skull 3761 (Fig. 5.1) and Mark Gridley is gratefully acknowledged for the reconstruction drawing (Fig. 5.15). We would also like to thank the executors of the estate of John Wain for permission to quote from his translation of *The Seafarer.*

The authors are indebted to a number of external academic advisers (anonymous as well as named): Simon Mays, who kindly read and commented upon a draft of the osteology chapter; Rachel Newman, who read parts of the whole monograph and provided helpful comments on it and Paul Lashmar, the Hon. Editor of the DNHAS Proceedings, who commented on an entire earlier draft and kindly advised on the summary and cover design. The monograph has benefitted greatly from their input and any remaining shortcomings are our own.