Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2009, during an archaeological watching brief on the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road, Dorset, a completely unexpected discovery was made of a mass grave on Ridgeway Hill (Fig. 1.1). Full excavation of the grave revealed up to 52 adolescent and adult males who had been decapitated, their heads piled on one side of the grave and their bodies apparently thrown in with little care, one on top of another. An interim report (Boyle 2011) indicated that the individuals, who had sustained multiple wounds at around the time of death, included at least some with probable Scandinavian origins. They seemed to have been executed during one event which took place in the 10th or 11th century AD. A full programme of archaeological, osteological and isotopic research was proposed with the aim of exploring the pattern and extent of the trauma and the circumstances of the individuals' deaths. This report presents the results of these investigations.

BACKGROUND TO THE EXCAVATION OF THE MASS GRAVE

The excavation was part of a wider programme of archaeological works (Brown *et al*. 2014) undertaken prior to the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road by Skanska Civil Engineering in partnership with Owen Williams (part of Amey PLC), on behalf of Dorset County Council. This new road was constructed between 2008 and 2011 to replace a 7km stretch of the A354 running from the Ridgeway to the Manor Roundabout, Redlands, to provide a bypass for Redlands, Broadwey and Upwey.

Prior to the excavations, the route of the Weymouth Relief Road had been subject to several phases of archaeological assessment, including desk-based assessment, walk-over survey, test pitting, geophysical survey, earthwork survey, field-walking and auger survey (Dorset County Council 2005). Although the route of the road was designed to avoid significant archaeological sites as far as possible, RPS Planning and Development was commissioned by Dorset County Council to provide additional archaeological consultancy and advice. This resulted in a Written Scheme of Investigation which specified the archaeological works that were to be carried out to mitigate the impact of the scheme where significant archaeological remains would be affected (Rawlings 2007). These mitigation works included excavation at the sites of Redlands, Southdown Ridge and Ridgeway Hill, and a scheme-wide watching brief on all ground works. It was during a watching brief to the north-east of the Ridgeway Hill excavation that the mass grave was discovered (Fig. 1.2). This watching brief incorporated stripping and hedge line removal along the edge of the A353 which, for health and safety reasons, had to be undertaken during the main construction phase of the relief road, when protection measures were in place for traffic.

LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The mass grave occupied an area *c* 7m (N-S) by 6.8m (W-E) on the crest of Ridgeway Hill, which lies on the South Dorset Ridgeway, at NGR SY 672 859 (Fig 1.3). It was bounded by the A354 immediately to the west, the road to Broadmayne to the north, the unclassified road to Bincombe to the south and the existing fields of Down Farm to the east. The Roman road from Durnovaria (Dorchester) to Radipole, Weymouth, is partly fossilised in the line of the A354 and is located in the Domesday hundred of Cullifordtree. The underlying geology consists of Upper Chalk of Cretaceous date. The Chalk was overlain by ploughsoil, which was approximately 0.3m deep. Prior to the excavation the site lay under the line of a boundary hedge which had marked the western extent of arable fields. Topographically, the site straddles the summit of the Ridgeway at approximately 140m OD. Immediately to the west of the site the ground drops sharply into the cutting for the A345.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site is located in an extremely diverse and rich archaeological landscape, in an area with remains that date from the Neolithic through to the early modern era. From the site of the mass grave there is clear view of the Neolithic causewayed enclosure and multivallate Iron Age hillfort at Maiden Castle, which is situated just two kilometres to the south-east and is where the remains of a mutilated skeleton ('Q1') of Saxon date was excavated (Brothwell 1971, and see below). To the north-east of the site lies Chalbury Iron Age hillfort and a Bronze

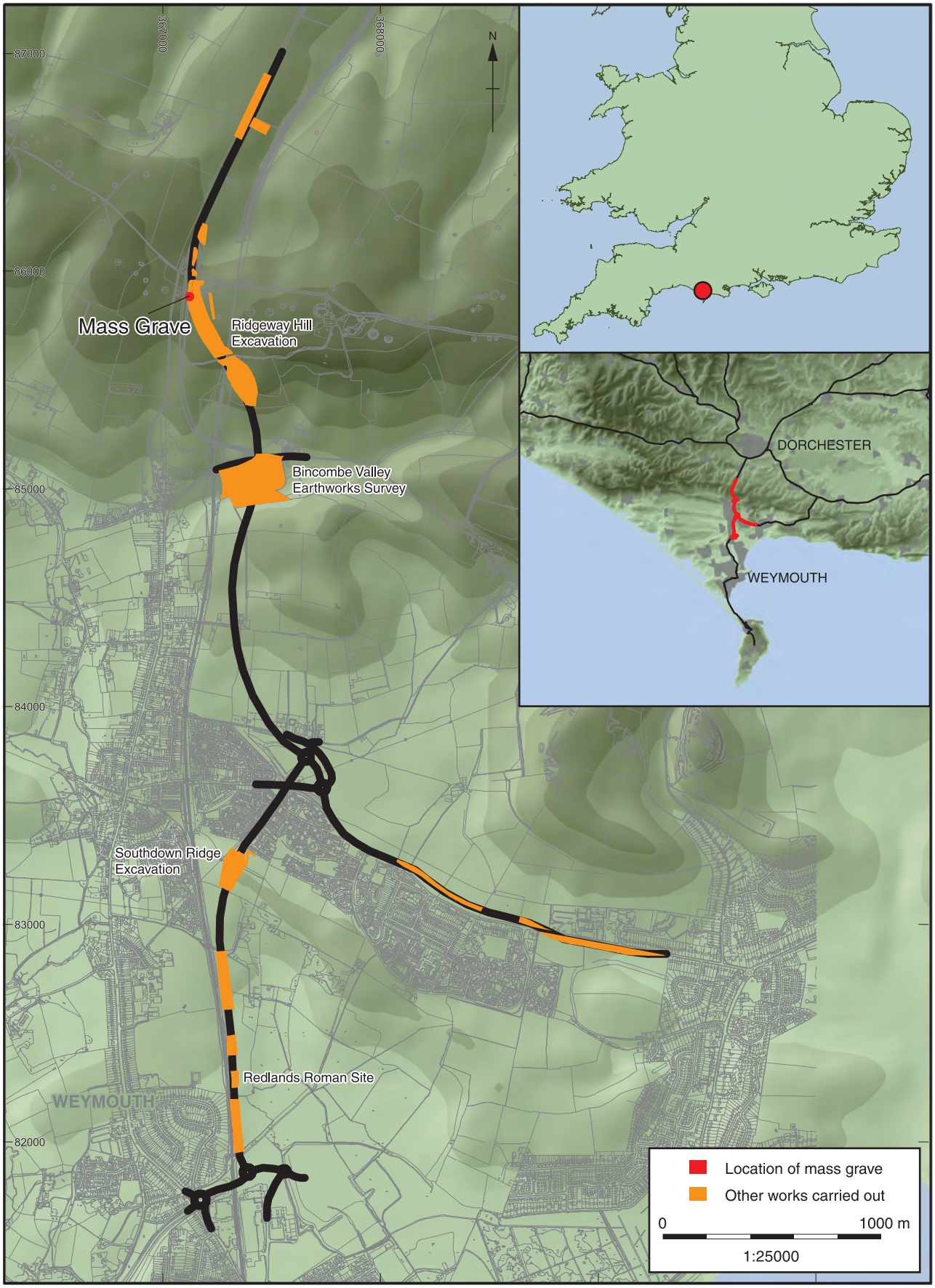

Fig. 1.1: Site location (contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2014 (contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright 2014 Ordnance Survey 100005569)

Fig. 1.2: Overall plan of excavation and watching brief areas at Ridgeway Hill (contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright 2014 Ordnance Survey 100005569)

Age cremation cemetery, Rimbury Unrfield, lies just to the south-west of Ridgeway Hill. Dorchester, which began as the Roman town of Durnovaria, lies 5km to the north, on the road network between Silchester and Exeter. Earlier features of this town and its environs include Neolithic monuments, a Bronze Age settlement and an Iron Age hillfort at Poundbury. Overviews of this landscape and detailed descriptions of the archaeology are covered in several key texts (for example, Gale 2003; Grinsell 1959 and 1982; Webster 2008; Wheeler 1943; Woodward 1990; Woodward and Woodward 1996). The development site was also the subject of detailed research by Wessex Archaeology (2003), undertaken specifically in respect of plans for the Weymouth Relief Road and the subsequent related works which resulted in the discovery of the mass grave. The next sections in this chapter will focus on burial activity within the locality of the Ridgeway, considered in chronological order. This is followed by a summary review of execution burials from England and other comparable contexts, including mass graves, and a historical background to the events that took place on Ridgeway Hill and which are described in this volume.

Burial activity within the locality

Prehistoric

Neolithic long barrows comprise the earliest burial activity identified on the Ridgeway. The preservation of these monuments varies, from extant long barrows with a megalithic component (chambered long barrows) to cropmarks in ploughed fields. They have recently been the subject of a detailed survey by English Heritage and the Ridgeway Survey Group, incorporating global positioning systems (GPS), analytical earthwork and geophysical techniques (Riley and the Ridgeway Survey Group 2008). The barrows were a focus of antiquarian interest during the 18th and 19th centuries, but the megalithic chambered long barrow of Grey Mare and Her Colts is the only one that has any associated excavation record. This refers to 'many human bones' which were found when the tenant of the land explored the site (ibid.).

The collection of Bronze Age round barrows, for which the Dorset Ridgeway is perhaps best known archaeologically, is one of the densest concentrations of this type of monument in the country (Figs 1.2 and 1.4) (Dorset County Council 2005). These tend to be bowl shaped and lie along the top of the Ridgeway all around the excavated site, the most noteworthy being those that comprise the R8 Ridgeway Hill group (RCHM(E) 1970) because they occupy the top of the Ridgeway to its east and west in a more-or-less diffuse string. These preserve both primary and secondary burials, both inhumations and cremations, dating to the Bronze Age and the Iron Age periods. Two adult male primary burials, one of which was associated with a Beaker bowl, were found beneath the ground surface of Bincombe barrow (Bincombe 24) when it was excavated following accidental disturbance (Payne 1943). This barrow also incorporated four secondary inhumations, although their date is uncertain owing to the presence of both a handled Beaker, found with a juvenile, and an Iron Age vessel, found with another individual. Bincombe 25, comprising a cairn covered by a turf stack with a chalk capping, included an adult female inhumation associated with a Beaker and a copper alloy awl in the central cist, as well as a satellite burial of a child in a cist and a pit containing a cremation burial. Four secondary cremation burials were also found within the mound, one of which was contained within an enlarged food vessel. Bincombe 27, also a cairn covered by a turf stack and capped with chalk, had a primary central cist burial associated with a Beaker as well as a satellite cist burial of a child (Best 1965, 103). There were also six secondary burials, all inhumations, one of which was in a cist at the bottom of a very deep shaft grave and was accompanied by a food vessel, while another was found in association with part of a bow.

These and other barrows are discussed in more detail in the report of the Ridgeway Hill and Southdown Ridge excavations (Brown *et al.* 2014 and see Fig. 1.1). Here, they describe new Bronze Age and Iron Age burial evidence, including early Bronze Age burials (four cremation and 17 inhumation) which contained the remains of 21 individuals from the Ridgeway Hill site (see Fig. 1.4), and 20 Iron Age inhumations from the Southdown Ridge site. The Bronze Age burials took the form of simple pits or stone cists set in pits and one of these – a badly truncated cremation burial, containing also some uncremated bones from a child – was found at the centre of a ring ditch (Brown *et al*. 2014). The other Bronze Age burials may have been associated with small bowl barrows, lost as a result of modern ploughing activity (ibid.). The group was notable for the high number of young individuals present; it included 11 children and adolescents as well as 10 adults.

At Southdown Ridge the excavations revealed a middle Iron Age pit burial of a young adolescent, located to the north of an Iron Age settlement on the high ground of a scarp slope, within a pit group (Brown *et al.* 2014). This was in addition to 19 late Iron Age inhumations, a group of predominantly young individuals with fairly even numbers of males and females, buried in a variety of positions

Fig. 1.3 Aerial photographs showing the location of the mass grave, circled in yellow (above) © Still Imaging

and located in association with earlier settlement features such as early Iron Age fencelines and early Iron Age enclosure ditches (Brown *et al*. 2014). These contained elements of the Durotrigian burial traditions described by Whimster (1981) and seen elsewhere in Dorset. The Southdown Ridge late Iron Age burials share similarities with the late Iron Age cemetery situated at the eastern entrance of Maiden Castle hillfort, published by Wheeler in 1943. Here, the burials, collectively known as the 'war cemetery', because of the high number of individuals with skeletal injuries (Wheeler 1943), also observed Durotrigian burial traditions. Some were accompanied by vessels of a type described by Wheeler as the 'war cemetery bowl' (ibid.), which were also found on the Southdown site. Further prehistoric burial activity at Maiden Castle includes 40 middle to late Iron Age individuals, recovered from ramparts, ditches and pits within the hillfort (Sharples 1991a and 199b). One skeleton, Q1, was originally thought by Wheeler to be Neolithic, but has since been assigned a Saxon date (see below).

Other late Iron Age assemblages have been found at Alington Avenue (Davies *et al*. 2002) and the settlement site at Gussage All Saints (Wainwright 1979). At Gussage All Saints, disarticulated human bones, recovered from pits and ditches, have recently been re-examined alongside the bones from ramparts, ditches and pits at Maiden Castle (Redfern 2008). The study found that the individuals (primarily males) had evidence of injuries sustained at around the time of death by a blunt instrument (peri-mortem blunt force trauma) and/or by a weapon, in addition to ancient modifications indicative of excarnation, secondary burial and curation (ibid.).

Roman

Several Roman burial sites are known from the area, these include Greyhound Yard, Dorchester, where human skeletal remains were recovered from 23 contexts (Woodward *et al*. 1993); to the north of Maiden Castle Road, where 23 graves were excavated (Smith 1997, 56-67); and Maiden Castle where at least two burials of infants were associated with a 4th century Roman temple (Sharples 1991). However, those from the late Roman cemeteries at Poundbury have received perhaps the greatest attention to date (Farwell and Molleson 1993). Totalling over a thousand individuals, this is the largest Roman assemblage from the region and is in addition to an isolated Bronze Age burial and a crouched inhumation cemetery also found at the

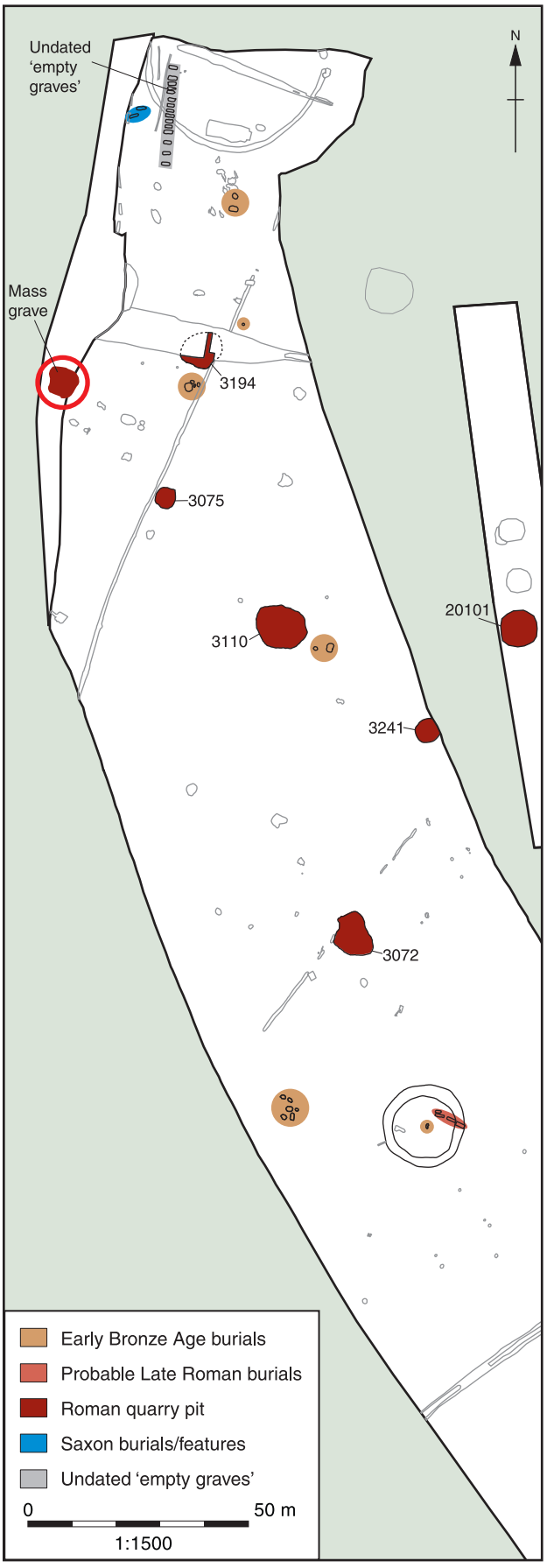

Fig. 1.4 The mass grave in relation to other burial activity and Roman quarry pits

site. A variety of rites were indicated by the Roman burials, which were placed in ditched funerary enclosures, plain earth cut graves, mausolea, stone lined graves and cists, some with grave goods and evidence for coffins.

The recent Ridgeway Hill and Southdown Ridge excavations have also identified further Roman burial activity in the area. Among them are three probable late Roman graves from the Ridgeway site; these were cut into a Bronze Age ring ditch feature and each grave contained a single inhumation, two of females and one of a juvenile (Fig. 1.4). All of the individuals were accompanied by evidence for coffins and hobnail shoes or boots. At Southdown Ridge three Roman inhumation burials were found, all buried in a supine position in wooden coffins, two with hobnail shoes or boots. Two of these are considered to be 26-35 year-old males and one a 20-25 year-old female.

Finally, it is worth mentioning six negative features of Roman date that were found within the Ridgeway Hill excavation area. These were not related to burial activity but, in addition to the feature used for the mass grave described in this volume, form a group of seven chalk quarry pits (Fig. 1.5). All of these were irregular or oval in plan and appear to have been cut with limited attention to their final form or profile. Those found on the Ridgeway site are described in full by Brown *et al*. (2014), while the one used for the mass grave is described in the following chapter (Chapter 2).

Early medieval

Few early medieval burials, either Christian or pagan Scandinavian, are known from the Dorset Ridgeway and local area and none are known that match the date range that has been assigned to the Ridgeway Hill mass grave. During the main Ridgeway Hill excavation two graves, containing three skeletons, were found. One of these has been radiocarbon dated to cal. AD 650-780 at 95.4% confidence (1305+/-25BP, SUERC-41556), suggesting a 7th or 8th century date for the burials (Brown *et al*. 2014). These were located approximately 58m to the NNE of the mass grave and approximately 5m to the west of 15 undated east-west aligned features, possibly empty graves (Fig. 1.4) (ibid.).

Elsewhere in the region a few Saxon burials and cemeteries have been identified. For example, burials once thought to be Roman from Wareham House (more recently known as the Trumpet Major Public House) west of Mount Pleasant (Dorchester) have since been re-assessed and are now believed to be Saxon (Sparey Green 1987). Cemeteries at Shepherd's Farm, Ulwell (Cox 1988) and Tolpuddle Ball (Hearne *et al.* 1999) dated to the 7th and to the 5th–7th centuries respectively, have also been investigated. At Ulwell the burial assemblage consisted of at least 57 extended east-west inhumations, arranged in rows. With the exception of one, they contained no grave goods, but some of them were associated with secondary burials, and some of them with stone cists or kerbs (Cox 1988).

Individual Q1 from Maiden Castle (see above), is another example of a Saxon period burial from the region and is particularly relevant here because it concerns an adult male who, like the Ridgeway Hill mass grave individuals, had sustained multiple peri-mortem wounds, in other words injuries sustained at around the time of death. The skeleton was originally excavated by Wheeler who dated it to the Neolithic period and described it thus:

> '...the limbs and the head had been roughly hacked from the body shortly after death, and three fruitless attempts had been made to obtain access to the brain by circular incisions.... Those are the main facts: the body of a man in the prime of life was butchered at the time of death, and a special effort was made to extract the brain. Further, the mutilated body was given a place of honour in the longest "long barrow" yet discovered' (Wheeler 1943, 21).

However, when Brothwell examined the skeleton in the early 1970s, he concluded that the individual had been butchered with metal implements and a radiocarbon date was therefore obtained, of 1315+/-80 BP (BM-458). This then placed the skeleton in the 7th century at *c* AD 635 (Brothwell 1971), although a wider date-range of cal. AD 578-892 at 95.4% probability is obtained using OxCal. 4.2 (Bronk Ramsey and Lee 2013 using atmospheric data from Reimer *et al*. 2013). Brothwell identified eight separate cuts, varying considerably in position and angulation: (a) on the left temporal, anterior to the glenoid fossa; (b) on the left parietal, resulting in a pseudo-trephination (ibid, fig. 22a); (c) one superficial incision near the right asterion; (d) one superficial incision on the endocranial aspect of the occipital, towards the left asterion; (e) a well-marked cut on the right side of the occipital near the external occipital protuberance; (f) a large and very straight cut, behind the foramen magnum, and nearly extending from one temporal bone to the other (it is unlikely that such an injury could have been inflicted without the individual lying with the back of the head placed upwards, ibid., fig. 22b); (g) a well-defined cut, nearly at right angles to incision f, and placed a little medially from the left mastoid process (this cut is not in line with the endocranial cut d, although not far from it); and (h) a deep cut angled

down into the right ramus, which was not an extension of any incision noted on the cranial vault.

Brothwell argued that the 'clean' nature of the skull incisions, in most cases with no marked stress fracturing extending from the limits of the cuts, was very strong evidence in favour of a relatively flat and extremely sharp weapon, probably a sword, being used (Brothwell 1971, 236). Skeleton Q1 also had numerous sharp force injuries involving upper and lower extremities. Brothwell concluded that the lesions were consistent with intentional hacking at the body with a sharp weapon to dismember it, while some cranial injuries may refer to combat wounds or 'unplanned adventitious mutilation' (ibid., 237).

Execution cemeteries

Ridgeway Hill is among a growing corpus of middle and late Anglo-Saxon sites from England to have been interpreted as instances of execution burials. These have recently been synthesised by Reynolds (2009) who describes 27 such sites, referred to as execution cemeteries, where 'wrong doers', subjected to judicial punishment, were buried. Dating between the second half of the 7th and 12th centuries, they are characterised by the presence of prone burials, unusual burial postures, variable burial alignments, decapitations, mutilations, multiple interments, evidence of restraint, a predominantly adult male demographic, and undersized shallow graves (Reynolds 2009, 44-45 and 96-178). Other features that are common to this class of burial site are their location upon or adjacent to county boundaries, hundreds or boroughs; their proximity to prehistoric monuments and visibility from, or proximity to, communication routes (by water or road) (Reynolds 2009, 155-156). In addition, burial in coffins is extremely rare and grave goods are uncommon. Some are associated with execution sites, either by place-name evidence (for example, Gally Hills, Surrey), or by the presence of posts from gallows (for example, Sutton Hoo), while for others this can only be presumed.

While decapitation is clearly a feature of the Ridgeway Hill skeletons, this is not the case for all execution type burials. Although some refer to this form of treatment in the form of skull displacement and/or cut marks, others have been identified with the skull intact and with no associated skeletal trauma. This may relate to individuals who had been hanged or, in the case of later Anglo-Saxon examples, because they were excommunicates or other 'outsiders' who did not qualify for burial in a Christian cemetery (Buckberry and Hadley 2007, 324 and see Abrams below).

Virtually all of the execution burials identified to date are located in southern and eastern England, but extremely few have been identified from Dorset. Only one site is included in Reynold's (2009) synthesis, the context for which is the Neolithic monument, Wor Barrow, which occupies an elevated position next to a hundred boundary and the Old Sarum-Dorchester Roman road and is within view from the execution site at Bokerley Dyke on the former Wiltshire-Dorset border (Reynolds 2009, 113-114). Here, execution burials had been cut into silted up quarry ditches and the summit of the mound (ibid.). Although no detailed osteological report has been published on the burials, they are said to include 17 individuals, many of whom had been decapitated (ibid.).

To date, many of the skeletons from execution cemeteries have received limited osteological analysis, largely as a result of their having been excavated from prehistoric sites in the 18th and 19th centuries, when interests primarily lay in the monuments and not the burials (for example, Bran Ditch, Cambridgeshire and Old Sarum, Wiltshire). Often lacking dating evidence, the burials were typically interpreted as victims of battle or massacre, rather than execution. Exceptions are recent publications on a single execution burial from Stonehenge (Pitts *et al.* 2002) and the skeletons from execution cemeteries at Walkington Wold, east Yorkshire (Buckberry and Hadley 2007; Buckberry 2008) and Chesterton Lane Corner, Cambridge (Cessford *et al.* 2007). This is in addition to Tucker's (2012) unpublished osteological survey of 146 decapitated individuals from 19 execution cemeteries.

At Stonehenge, a single male adult had been decapitated by what appeared to be a single blow from behind and had been buried in a shallow grave that was too short for him, suggesting a '...lack of effort and degree of contempt...' (Pitts *et al.* 2002). The individual was not associated with any finds suggesting that he may have been stripped before burial. Buckberry and Hadley's (2007) work on Walkington Wold is a re-analysis of several burials recovered in the 60s from the site of a Bronze Age barrow and originally interpreted as victims of a late or early post-Roman massacre or execution. Features of the burials included decapitation, shallow graves, multiple alignments, a variety of postures and in one case three individuals had been buried in the same grave. By obtaining radiocarbon dates from some of the skeletons, Buckberry and Hadley were able to assign the burials to the mid to late Saxon period and, coupled with detailed osteological analysis of cut marks associated with decapitation, re-interpret the context as an execution cemetery. The skeletons were all males or probable males aged between 18-25 or 26-35 years old.

Decapitations were also identified among the skeletons from the Anglo-Saxon execution cemetery

at Chesterton Lane Corner, Cambridge, excavated in 2000 and considered at length by Cessford *et al*. (2007). Nine of the skeletons were radiocarbon dated, indicating an 8th century date overall '….. although the cemetery may have originated in the seventh century and continued into the ninth' (Cessford *et al*. 2007, 214). A total of 15 individuals were identified, in addition to some disarticulated or semi-articulated skeletons recovered from grave fills and later deposits. Characteristics of the burials included shallow graves, prone burial, tied hands, unusual orientations, displaced skulls or skulls in correct anatomical position with cut marks. All of the individuals were male, or probably male, with the exception of a possible female. Apart from one older sub-adult and one older juvenile, the individuals ranged from 19 to 44 years old. Aspects of the peri-mortem trauma observed on these skeletons, as well as those from Walkington Wold and those considered by Tucker (2012), are discussed further in Chapter 5 in relation to the lesions observed on the Ridgeway Hill skeletons.

Other comparable contexts

Although multiple burials are a feature of Anglo-Saxon execution cemeteries (see previous section), none have been identified that are on the scale seen at Ridgeway Hill (Reynolds 2009). Other contexts of multiple burial and/or violent death in the archaeological record are few in number and most are not contemporary with those from Ridgeway Hill. Contemporary examples include the mass graves from Repton, Yorkshire and St John's College, Oxford and individuals from St Andrew's, Fishergate, York.

The Repton mass grave was found below a mound in Vicarage Garden, outside a D-shaped enclosure that encompassed the church and shrine of St Wystan. It was located on the site of a two-celled stone building which was cut down to ground level to serve as a burial chamber (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 42). The main burial deposit comprised a minimum of 249 individuals whose bones had been stacked against the walls; there was no surviving central burial (op. cit. 45-46). Anthropological study found that 80% of the individuals were males aged between 15 and 45 years old (Grenville forthcoming). The circumstances of the deposit are still being studied and it has been variously interpreted as the context of a high status kingly burial which included individuals from the Viking Great Army who had wintered at Repton in AD 873-4 and had died during the season, in addition to those who had died and been buried elsewhere during previous seasons, or the exhumed skeletons of monks from the monastery who had been buried there (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 45; Richards 2008, 369). The fact that peri-mortem trauma was largely absent led to the conclusion that the deposit was not a battle grave (ibid.).

Other Viking Great Army burials identified from Repton by Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle include individual furnished inhumations from the east end of the church. The most noteworthy of these is a warrior grave of a male, approximately 35-40 years old, with extensive cuts to the skull, lower vertebrae, left leg and arm (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992; Richards 2003). The individual was found with weapons, dress fittings and a necklace comprising glass beads and a plain silver Thor's hammer (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 40). According to Richards (2003, 4) the individual had sustained horrific injuries from '…..Christian defenders of a Mercian royal monastery'. He had probably been killed by the point of a blade which had fully penetrated his eye socket through to his brain; the trauma to the femur had probably removed his genitals and that to the vertebrae may suggest that the individual was disemboweled (ibid.).

Another contemporary context of extreme violence was encountered during recent excavations at St John's College, Oxford, where at least 34 skeletons had been buried, up to four deep, in a disorganised manner, in the ditch of a partially infilled Neolithic henge (Falys 2010, 34). The skeletons were all males or probable males, with the exception of one unsexed sub-adult. Peri-mortem trauma was frequent, the patterns of which were most consistent with a massacre-type situation, possibly St Brice's Day Massacre which took place in Oxford on 13th November 1002 (Preston 2010; see Abrams below for a more detailed discussion). However, recent radiocarbon and isotope analysis suggest that the assemblage is more likely to represent a captured Scandinavian raiding party than a group of residents of Danish extraction who were rounded up and executed (Pollard *et al.* 2012, 98).

At St Andrew's, Fishergate, a group of 29 male skeletons recovered from discrete graves were noted for having peri-mortem injuries sustained as a result of inter-personal violence and consistent with the effects of projectiles such as arrows, cross bolts, and/or blades. Some of the individuals were dated to the 11th century and may have died in one event, perhaps a battle, while others date between the 12th and 14th centuries and had possibly sustained their injuries as a result of trial by combat (Daniell 2001, 220).

Besides Repton, St John's and St Andrews, other contexts worth mentioning here are the earlier mass grave from Heronbridge, Chester, which is believed

to contain victims of the Battle of Chester (AD 613), or a later battle between Norse-Irish settlers (AD 905). Later examples are from Towton, North Yorkshire, linked to the Battle of Towton in AD 1461; the 16th century Battle of Good Friday, Uppsala, Sweden and victims from the Battle of Visby (AD 1361) in Gotland, Sweden. All of these comprise individuals who died in a single event and have evidence of peri-mortem trauma consistent with violent deaths. Details pertaining to these, including burial context and patterns of trauma, are considered in Chapters 3 and 5, where relevant (see also Abrams below).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND *by Lesley Abrams*

Introduction

The period from *c* AD 790 to *c* 1050, when a variety of reasons – predation, trade, conquest, and settlement – accounted for the presence of Scandinavians in Britain and Ireland, is often characterised as the Viking Age. No historical sources survive which specifically refer to vikings at Ridgeway Hill at the time the mass-grave was constructed, but entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the evidence of English law codes, as well as hagiographical and literary texts, can perhaps help to provide some context for its interpretation.

Scandinavians Overseas

Visits from predatory bands, initially seasonal, are recorded in English and Irish annals from the 790s. More concerted warfare in the second half of the 9th century resulted in the collapse and conquest of two and a half of the four English kingdoms. By 890, half of England (divided approximately along a line running north-west from London along Watling Street, now the A5) was in Scandinavian hands. While these political takeovers naturally initiated a new range of contacts with the Scandinavian homelands and other settlements of the viking world, the written sources give preference to wars and conflicts among elites. As a result, the various other forces that drew Scandinavians overseas, and the channels of connection that were established through migration and trade, are particularly poorly represented in the historical record. By the late 10th century, settlements had been established overseas by Scandinavians in the North Atlantic, Britain and Ireland, Francia (in what became Normandy), and along the Russian river systems en route to Byzantium and the Khazar world. Greenland was the last to be settled, after 985. The nature of the connections between peoples settled overseas is difficult to reconstruct, as so little evidence survives; but that links were maintained is shown by the widespread continuity and evolution of cultural traits – language, mythological traditions, dress and art styles – as well as evidence of trading, military, and diplomatic connections (Abrams 2012, 17-38).

In England, as Scandinavian activity changed from raiding to land-taking in the last third of the 9th century, the three kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia came under Scandinavian control. Southern England, however, thanks to King Alfred (871-99) and his West Saxon successors, successfully resisted viking conquest. The numbers of immigrants following on from this military and political takeover of northern and eastern England is uncertain, but recent interpretations have favoured a relatively generous assessment of numbers (compare Sawyer 1962 and Kershaw 2013). Language and place-names attest to the significance of Norse-speakers there, as do many finds of imports, both finished objects and raw materials. These Scandinavian connections continued throughout the 10th century, even after the regimes were defeated and replaced by the West Saxon kings, who created a unified kingdom of England. In the 980s, military aggression from Scandinavia revived, largely directed at the south of the country, and a lengthy period of warfare led to the accession of the Danish king Cnut in 1016 (Bolton 2009). His followers obtained positions of power in the English court and held estates outside traditionally 'Scandinavian' areas, such as in Kent and Gloucestershire (Keynes 1994, 43-88), leaving for the first time a visible Scandinavian cultural imprint in the South. Integrated into the English elite, their family connections opened up further channels of contact and exchange in the early 11th century. Cnut, who was king of Denmark as well as England, also exerted control over Norway for some of his reign. His family had Slavic links as well: his mother was the daughter of Miezko I, head of the Piast state (later Poland). The distribution of Cnut's coinage, some of which has been found in Novgorod, indicates connections further east; a diplomatic alliance in the second decade of the century between Cnut and Jaroslav, ruler of the Rus, has been suggested, since the number of coins minted in England and found in lands of the Rus increases significantly after Cnut's accession (Franklin and Shepard 1996, 201). Cnut's grandfather Harald Bluetooth and his father, Svein Forkbeard (who led many of the attacks on England in the late 10th and early 11th century until his death in 1014), also had Baltic connections: recent analysis of cemeteries in the fortresses built by Harald in the 980s reveals the presence of foreigners from the eastern Baltic (Price *et al*. 2011).

The activities of vikings in southern England began to be recorded in some detail in the reign of King Alfred, thanks to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC), first compiled in the 890s (Whitelock 1961; Swanton 2000; Whitelock 1979), and to a biography of the king composed by Asser (Keynes and Lapidge 1983). Alfred dealt with vikings mainly in the early and the late parts of his reign, with an intervening period of peace. An incident in 896 is recorded in unusually full detail in the first continuation of the Chronicle, perhaps indicating that it represents an eye-witness account (ASC 896). Several viking ships were captured, and many of the men were said to have been killed in the fighting; two men from a ship which escaped ended up back on land and were taken to Winchester, where Alfred ordered them to be hanged. The king was evidently willing to subject viking prisoners to formal execution when he was in a position to do so. When Alfred died, the succession was contested between his son Edward and his nephew Æthelwold. Æthelwold lost out and went north, where he joined forces with vikings based there. He died in combat in East Anglia a few years later, fighting on the viking side. There is no record of him in the Dorset region, but the Chronicle is far from complete in its narrative.

Viking wars continued throughout the 10th century, but the conflict followed West Saxon expansion north and east, apparently moving away from southern England; the period is not well documented, however, and there is a great deal that we do not know about interactions in the South during this period. Regular military engagements elsewhere are recorded between the accession of Alfred's successor and that of his great-great-grandson, Æthelred (978-1016), but the reputation of English kings may have kept attackers at bay along the southern coast, where so much of earlier raiding had been focussed. King Athelstan (924-39) was active and militarily very successful, but King Edgar (959-75) seems to have extended his overlordship over Scandinavian regimes in England without campaigns of fighting. He was criticised in his otherwise glowingly positive obituary in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for favouring foreigners too much (ASC 959). This comment, which could be interpreted as a reference to his use of viking mercenaries and allies, remains enigmatic.

Viking attacks on England resumed in the 980s during the reign of King Æthelred and continued until the conquest of the kingdom by the Danish king Cnut in 1016. Much of this activity took place in regions accessed from the south coast. Although not restricted to the south of England, the recorded fighting focusses there, with activity ranging from Cornwall to Kent, extending to East Anglia especially in 1004-5 and 1010 (see Hill 1981 and maps 12-14 in Keynes 2000). The army wintered in Southampton in 994 and had a base on the Isle of Wight. Viking activity relevant to the site near Weymouth includes the ravaging of Portland in 982 and attacks on Dorset in 998, both recorded in the Chronicle. Dorset may have been somewhat to the west of the main theatre of war for a while thereafter (it is excluded from a list in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 1011 of counties which had been overrun by vikings), but the county was specifically mentioned by the Chronicler as being ravaged by viking fleets in 1015 and 1016, when English resistance was led by the king's son, Edmund. The accounts in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are not detailed enough to exclude Dorset being targeted at other times.

Æthelred's reign was a fractious one, with much internal disarray. Treasonous English leaders abandoned the national cause and fought on their own behalf, and the king himself made alliances with bands of vikings. The disloyalty of the elite was notorious: several of the king's main men deserted him at crucial points, setting off either to join with viking forces or to ravage on their own account. Wulfnoth, for example, left Æthelred's army in 1009 and did 'all manner of damage along the south coast'; in 1015, Ealdorman Eadric seduced 40 ships away from the king (and, after returning to the English side, deserted again the following year) (ASC 1009, 1015, 1016). Some of the followers of these English traitors may have been Scandinavian. The complicated political landscape is exemplified by the army of Thorkell the Tall: it had first ravaged England in 1009, but then changed sides and entered Æthelred's service, fighting in 1013 for the English king against Thorkell's Danish compatriot, Svein Forkbeard; later, when Cnut became king of England and Denmark, Thorkell changed sides again and became Cnut's right-hand man in England (Abels 2004).

The confusion of this time is exemplified by the so-called massacre of St Brice's Day, November 13, 1002. Historians are divided in their interpretation of what happened. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for the year 1002, the king, hearing of a plot to kill him and seize power, ordered 'all the Danish men who were in England' to be killed ('Danish' being the contemporary word for what we would now call Scandinavians). A charter for St Frideswide's in Oxford issued two years later refers to Æthelred's orders that 'all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like cockles amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination' (Sawyer 1968, no. 909). Exactly who these Danes were is a matter of disagreement. Some think that the order referred to the descen-

dants of the Scandinavians who settled in northern and eastern England in the late 9th and 10th centuries, although Oxford is an unlikely place for a colony of that heritage, however, being outside the area of known Scandinavian settlement. Others point out that in the laws of the 10th and 11th centuries, the term '*Dene*' (Danes) refers to all the inhabitants of those regions which had once been under Scandinavian rule and subject to immigration (later called the Danelaw), regardless of their ethnic origin. It has also been suggested that the Danes in question were 'recent Danes', mercenaries employed by Æthelred. One band of these, led by Pallig, had deserted the king in the previous year 'despite all the pledges he had given him' (ASC 1001). Early in 1002 a large tribute payment of 24,000 pounds was paid to the viking fleet, perhaps based on the Isle of Wight, in the hope that it would go away, and in November Æthelred may have been worried by some vikings still hanging around for the winter. This army remained active until it left in 1005, when England was hit by famine. Later sources (such as William of Malmesbury) claim that Pallig was a victim of the St Brice's Day orders (Mynors *et al.* 1998, 300-303). The more contemporary Anglo-Saxon Chronicle names no names.

The intensive viking warfare in southern England during the reign of Æthelred continued during the short reign of his son, Edmund Ironside: these were violent times in England, with numerous military campaigns throughout 1016. The Chronicle does not mention Dorset specifically (the places named are all to the north and east), but the entry for 1016 says that Edmund had taken possession of Wessex and that the people had submitted to him. When Cnut (1016-35) became king there were violent reprisals against previous enemies, including the killing of one of the English princes, Eadwig, and of Ealdorman Eadric, whose corpse, according to a later account, was thrown over the city wall in London and left unburied (Darlington *et al*. 1995-8, vol. 2, 502-5).

There may be some reflection of all this activity in stray finds of coins and metalwork of Scandinavian character found on or near beaches on the south coast: some, such as two finds from Devon (a gold arm-ring from Goodrington and a twisted-rod finger ring from near Sidmouth), may have been associated with earlier viking campaigns (Kershaw forthcoming). A silver finger-ring found near Shaftesbury, Dorset, bent and possibly cut, with two nicks characteristic of metal treated as bullion, may also have come from the earlier period, but two Hiberno-Scandinavian ringed pins, from Wooton Creek, Isle of Wight, and Week St Mary, Cornwall, are firmly dated to the late 10th to 11th centuries (Kershaw forthcoming). A dirham struck in Islamic Spain in 999/1000 was discovered near Cerne Abbas, Dorset. Dirhams generally belong to a Scandinavian context, but other explanations (for example, pilgrimage) could be found for this particular find (Naismith 2005, 207-9).

Information on armies in the early Viking Age is scarce, but there are a few snippets of evidence from the later 10th and early 11th centuries that indicate that they included men with a range of geographical origins. A runestone at Yttergärde in Uppland, Sweden, declares that the man commemorated, Ulf, took three tribute payments in England, and it names three viking leaders under whom he served: Tostig, Thorkell, and Cnut (Jansson 1987, 77-9). If the last two are the same as the Thorkell and Cnut whose activities we know of, this would show that a man from east Sweden could serve in armies led by 'real' Danes (ie from Denmark) in the early eleventh century. Another runestone, now in the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo but originally from a farm at Galteland in Evje, Aust-Agder (in south-east Norway), bears an inscription to a local man who 'met his death in the army when Cnut attacked England' (Spurkland 2005); this confirms that Norwegians participated in campaigns led by the Danish king in the second decade of the eleventh century. Men from the Baltic and Rus territories with whom Svein Forkbeard and Cnut were associated could also have joined them on campaign. Two Norwegians, Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson, also engaged in viking activity in England before returning home to become king (*c* 995 and *c* 1000 respectively); although themselves based in more southerly regions of Norway, they both had close links with Iceland, and could have attracted men from the North Atlantic to their service. Although each chief probably kept his men together as a fighting unit, any one leader could have accumulated warriors from a wide area, as young men routinely sought their fortunes in the households of great men, some of them being fostered there, others just submitting themselves to their authority in order to prosper and to cement personal, political, and economic relations between families. Collaborations such as these must have made for very mixed companies. Although the hostilities recorded in the Chronicle continued year on year, suggesting that the armies involved were made up of veteran campaigners, fresh legs would have presumably been required to supplement existing forces and replace losses.

The channels of communication between England and Scandinavia opened by trade are badly represented in written sources, although the exchange of goods and materials is well attested archaeologically. Four eleventh-century inscriptions on runestones from eastern Sweden mention *gildar,*

'guild-brethren', most likely (but not necessarily) associations of traders (Jesch 2001, 65, 239-41). Much later Icelandic laws specify what arrangements should be made if a man died abroad; for example, 'if a man dies in England or in the islands to the west or in Dublin, [it is prescribed] that his property is not to be valued until the man who is taking it comes to where his property and life are not in danger' (Dennis *et al*. 2000, vol. 2, 19-20). For the Viking Age, we might cite continental parallels: trading companies formed by men whose shares were the subject of careful regulation are almost accidentally recorded in Frankish hagiographical texts of the mid-ninth century (Lebecq 2007, 170-9). Stéphane Lebecq has drawn attention to one Frisian merchant, 'a small independent entrepreneur, master of his ship and his slaves, owner of his cargo... in charge of his ship even in difficult waters' (ibid. 173). Merchants such as these would have sought protection from kings through their representatives in commercial centres. Although there is little documentation of these relationships in the late 10th and early 11th centuries in England, laws of Æthelred describe the king as the 'kinsman and protector' of strangers if their goods or life were threatened (for example, VIII Æthelred, issued in 1014, §§33-4, in Whitelock 1979, no. 46). Kings courted and patronised merchants. Most famously, a reindeer baron from north Norway, Ohthere, visited King Alfred's court, an event described in the Old English updating of Orosius's *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*. There King Alfred is described as Ohthere's 'lord' (Bately 2007).

Death and Burial

While warfare may have been the most common context for mass killing, it seems that battle mêlées would not normally have ended with the decapitation of all the participants. The killing of prisoners after battle was routine, however. The poem 'Beowulf' – a literary source of unknown date and therefore an unreliable, though suggestive, parallel for a 10th or 11th century context – suggests that the aftermath of battle could include the killing of defeated enemies by the sword or by stringing-up on the gallows (Bradley 2003, lines 2940-2). As discussed above, battle graves have been identified, such as the one at Heronbridge associated with the battle of Chester *c* 613, but fatal head injuries and the systematic laying-out of the bodies distinguish this site from that on Ridgeway Hill (see Chapters 2, 3 and 5). Substantial remains from later war graves such as that from Towton (North Yorkshire) or Visby (Gotland, Sweden), provide useful comparanda for battle injuries, though both date to the later medieval period (Fiorato *et al*. 2000; Thordeman *et al*. 2001). Skeletons from early cemeteries at Portchester Castle and St Andrew's, Fishergate (York), have been interpreted as battle-dead, because of their injuries and probable contemporaneity of deposition (Reynolds 2009, 42). They are all respectfully laid out, however. Less clear are the sites at Ashtead (Surrey), excavated in the 1920s, consisting of mutilated and dismembered bodies next to a more orderly execution cemetery, the latter revealed in more recent excavations (ibid., 43). A mass grave containing eleven individuals at the confluence of the Fleet and the Thames might be a relevant parallel for the Ridgeway Hill burial (*ibid*., 45; see also http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/laarc/catalogue/siteinfo.asp?id=2059&code=VAL88). Four males and one female were buried together without apparent ceremony in a ditch by the wall of the defensive enclosure at Llanbedrgoch on Anglesey (Wales); the men have recently been identified as Scandinavians and their context reinterpreted (Redknap, pers. comm.). Repton's 264 individuals buried in a mausoleum raise unique problems of identification, as they include women and children and a proportion of bones dated to the 7th or 8th centuries as well as others from the 9th (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 45-96; see above). Thirteen burials apparently dated AD 970-1050 were excavated in 1973 on a boundary at Malling Hill (an estate belonging to the archbishop of Canterbury) and recent excavations have uncovered more (Allen and McKinley forthcoming). The mass grave from St John's College, Oxford, is said to have contained the remains of at least 34 individuals buried together (see above); like Ridgeway Hill, the dead appear to have been male, bundled naked into a single pit (only one buckle has been associated with the bones), some of them decapitated. Unlike the Dorset mass grave, however, the site is very near a settlement, perhaps 300 metres north of the Oxford town wall. Several of these examples are discussed further in Chapters 3 and 5, below

Prisoners of war could provide another context for mass killing, but captured enemies seem to have been despatched on the battle site in this period, with occasional exceptions (see the example of 896, above). The purpose of warfare was to annihilate the elite of your enemy, and prisoners did not serve that end (Strickland 1992 and 2006). The Sueno Stone in northern Scotland (Forres, Moray) shows at least one row of headless bodies, in what may be a pictorial narrative of a military encounter (http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/propincare/investigating-suenos-stone.pdf). The date of the stone is uncertain, though it is generally agreed to be early medieval. Asser, in his *Life* of King Alfred, tells us that in 882, after a naval attack, the king

captured two of the vikings' ships and killed everyone on board; the crews of the other two ships, badly wounded, surrendered (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 86). There is no reference to their fate.

Hostages provide another possible context for the mass disposal of a group of men. Hostages could be and were commonly exchanged in times of peace, to establish bonds between groups, and they could spend long periods in other households away from their families. They served a presumably more precarious purpose in wars. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser's *Life* routinely refer to hostages given or exchanged in negotiated settlements, but unfortunately the logistics are rarely spelled out. Wartime hostages would seem to have been at great risk, as armies regularly reneged on arrangements that had been sealed by the exchange of hostages. In 876 and 877 King Alfred received hostages from the viking army, which swore to leave his kingdom; Asser tells us that the vikings broke the treaty and killed their hostages (though there is a slight problem here with the text) (ASC 876 and 877; Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 82-83 and 246). It could easily follow that the English killed theirs. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that English hostages were given to Svein Forkbeard's army by every shire in 1013, and at Olney in 1016 a hostage exchange was part of the dealings between Cnut and Edmund Ironside. In 1014, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Svein put his English hostages ashore at Sandwich, mutilated. The Chronicle also says that in 1016, after Cnut's accession to the English throne, Earl Uhtred and other English hostages were killed by the king, despite having submitted to him. Some of the hostages given to viking armies from the English side could of course have themselves been Scandinavian, since men of Scandinavian origin were fighting on both sides.

Jómsvíkinga saga offers a fictional account of a mass execution in a military context (Hollander 1955, 107-114). This literary text, composed probably in Iceland around 1200, ends with a stirring account of a battle fought in the late 9th century off the coast of Norway. The saga describes the execution by beheading of a number of warriors captured by the forces of the Norwegian jarl Hákon. Seventy captured prisoners, roped together, were brought before the king; their hair seems to have been twisted back and held in place by some form of tie to keep it out of the way of the sword blade. Perhaps for narrative effect, the executions did not begin with the senior captive. Ten beheadings (nine from behind, one from the front) took place in sequence, with each man being given the opportunity to say something brave and noteworthy before being killed. The eleventh played a trick on the executioners, saving his life, and thereafter the remaining warriors were allowed to escape the sword. There is no reference to how the bodies of the dead were dealt with. Another literary source, the *Encomium Emmae reginae*, a text written in 1041 or 1042 for Queen Emma when her son Harthacnut was on the English throne, gives us an account of a politically motivated killing (Campbell and Keynes, 1998, 42-45). Alfred, a son of Emma and her first husband King Æthelred, had returned to England from exile in Normandy. He was murdered by those who feared that he might be aspiring to the throne. The story is concerned to blame the then king, Harald Harefoot, for Alfred's murder. It tells how Alfred's followers were taken from their lodgings by force, disarmed and fettered and delivered to their fate with their hands bound. Seated in a row (the better to observe?), they were killed by spears while still bound. The author opposes this barbaric behaviour to the nobler method of beheading practised by Emperor Maximian in the third century when he slaughtered an entire legion of Roman soldiers who had converted to Christianity. The account clearly aims to promote Alfred as a martyr, and its detail therefore cannot be accepted as realistic testimony. But the condemnation of the method of killing does seem to refer to an idea current at the time of writing that the means of death could be more or less honourable (for the perpetrators as well as the victims). At least in the 11th century, beheading was more noble, it seems, than other methods (including hanging). The story's account of the rounding-up of possible conspirators provides an interesting parallel to the context of 1002, which (according to the Chronicle) also involved a plot against the king.

Several crimes could warrant judicial killing in Anglo-Saxon England. While the most commonly recorded cause of execution was theft, treason was also a capital crime. A law of King Alfred states that anyone plotting against the life of the king, or abetting such activity, should be killed (Whitelock 1979, no. 33, §4). This was repeated in slightly different ways in several laws of the 10th and early 11th century: III Edgar (§7.3), V Æthelred (§30) (Whitelock 1979, nos 40 and 44), VI Æthelred (§37) (Robertson 1925, 102-3), and II Cnut (§57) (Whitelock 1979, no. 49. V Æthelred §28 asserts that anyone deserting an army under the personal command of the king could lose his life, and II Cnut §77 condemns to death 'the man who, through cowardice, deserts his lord or his comrades on an expedition, either by sea or by land'. As far as I know, no mass executions of a legal nature are known from this period, with the possible exception of the great slaughter (of townspeople?) at Thetford ordered in 952 by King Eadred 'in vengeance for the abbot Eadhelm, whom they had

slain' (ASC 952). Much later, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that a council led by Ralph Basset ordered forty-four thieves to be hanged in a single session in 1124 (ASC 1124).

More descriptions of executions could probably be found in contemporary hagiography, but it would be difficult to separate reality from literary licence. Ælfric's Sermon on the Seven Sleepers (from the late 10th/early 11th century), for example, describes how the martyrs were cut up, their heads impaled on stakes, and their headless bodies hung on the town-walls (Skeat 1966, vol. 2, 492-3). Historians of the post-Conquest period, such as John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury, and Henry of Huntingdon, sometimes supply more detail in their accounts of how hostages, prisoners, and traitors were dealt with, but there is an issue of reliability with these non-contemporary sources.

The Site

Decapitation and mass burial could perhaps have been seen as equally appropriate treatment for pagans, traitors, and prisoners of war. While the choice of the site at Ridgeway Hill deliberately excluded any Christians in the group from church burial, the method of execution – decapitation rather than hanging – may nonetheless have bestowed some honour on the dead, if decapitation was considered a more elite form of killing. On the other hand, most of the dead in identified execution cemeteries received at least the dignity of an individual grave, unlike the mass burial at Ridgeway Hill.

An organised beheading at a site with all the trappings of a meeting-place potentially associates the killing with an act of governance delivered through local infrastructure. Ridgeway Hill is not identified in any surviving written source as a nodal point in the network of governance, but its position near a routeway and a boundary and in the vicinity of prehistoric monuments and other graves is highly significant. There is increasing evidence for the importance of sites such as these in the exercise of royal and regional administrative power (Brookes and Reynolds 2013; Baker and Brookes 2013). The royal council that met at Dorchester in 937, for example (according to a royal charter), may have met at the neolithic henge, Maumbury Rings (Sawyer 1968, 434; Maumbury Rings was used as a place of execution in the early modern period). Smaller, more local, sites of administrative business were probably dotted around the countryside. Viking armies also made use of these places. In 1006, for example, an army gathered at Cuckamsley Barrow (aka Scutchamer Knob) on the Ridgeway in response to a taunt by the English (that if the vikings went there they would never get back to their ships in one piece) (ASC 1006). Scutchamer Knob was a prehistoric barrow remodelled some time in the post-Roman period and still active as a site for fairs in the 16th century. It is situated on the Oxfordshire/Berkshire boundary and is recorded as an assembly site in the 990s (Sanmark and Semple 2008).

The site on Ridgeway Hill is clearly out of the ordinary for the purpose of burial, both in its location and its form. The Church was keen to impose a monopoly on treatment of the dead in this period, with conventional burial in churchyards sanctioned and managed by religious professionals. Exclusion from these consecrated places had real force: pagans and those convicted of certain crimes were not allowed in hallowed ground. A charter of 995 in Æthelred's name refers to two brothers killed in a scuffle over stolen goods who were given Christian burial 'illegally' (*non recte*); their crimes should have excluded them from the privilege (Sawyer 1968, 883; Whitelock 1979, no. 118). A layman who tried to blind King Athelstan to prevent him from acceding to the throne, and who died in Rome while swearing his innocence in front of St Peter, needed the king's permission to be given Christian burial: two charters (Sawyer 1968, 414 and 415, dated 931 but possibly forged soon thereafter), tell the story, complete with unbelievable flourishes, but the message that traitors and perjurers would not normally receive this privilege is nonetheless authentic. Athelstan's law code issued at Grateley specifically excludes perjurers from burial in consecrated ground (Whitelock 1979, no. 35, §26). A law of King Edmund (939 x 946) denied Christian burial to homicides and men who had sex with nuns (I Edmund §4; Robertson 1925, 6-7) and Æthelred's first law code applied the same penalty to those who had committed crimes and had no sureties to vouch for them (I Æthelred, §4.1-2; Robertson 1925, 54-5). Andrew Reynolds's work on deviant burials has identified specialist sites where graves that deviate from Christian norms suggest that justice was enacted and execution performed on the spot (Reynolds 2009). It seems, as might be expected, that the victims of an ordinary judicial execution were generally provided with individual graves, but the Harley Psalter (London, British Library Harley 603, fo. 67r), of the 11th century, shows three or four men in a mound, with their heads cut off; another is about to be beheaded outside (http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=26210). It is unclear whether this was intended to represent a judicial process or a military event.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AND EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

During all groundworks relating to the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road the general area had been subject to an archaeological watching brief. Topsoil and overburden were being removed under archaeological supervision, using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, but this was halted as soon as the existence of the feature became apparent and the area was subsequently cleaned by hand in order to define it, followed by careful excavation supervised by skilled osteo-archaeologists.

Data-capture for site plans was by a combination of electronic distance measurement and GPS; data-capture for site plans is, as standard, capable of reproduction at a scale of 1:100; more complex features or areas of complex archaeological remains were recorded at greater resolution (for reproduction at 1:10, 1:20, or 1:50 as necessary). The site grid was established relative to the Ordnance Survey National Grid and all levels taken were relative to Ordnance Datum.

The mass grave and the deposits within and below it were issued with unique context numbers and artefacts were issued with small finds numbers, as appropriate, prefixed with the letters sf. All context recording was carried out in accordance with established OA practice (Wilkinson 1992). The photographic record of the excavation includes 35mm colour transparencies, monochrome images and digital images illustrating both the detail and context of the archaeological features. All photographic records include information detailing site name and number/code, date, context, scale and orientation and all photographs are cross-referenced onto the context records.

Artefacts were treated in accordance with UKIC guidelines, *First Aid for Finds* (1998). All finds, including pottery, flint, animal bone, two limestone balls and a small amount of metalwork, were sorted by material type and were bagged and labelled according to the individual deposit from which they were recovered, ready for later cleaning and analysis. All flints were individually bagged to prevent damage. All registered finds were processed and packaged according to standards of good practice.

The human remains were cleaned by hand with minimal disturbance, prior to recording and removal. Investigation and excavation of human remains was undertaken by, or under supervision of, suitably experienced specialist staff and in accordance with IFA/BABAO Guidelines (McKinley and Roberts 1993; Brickley and McKinley 2004). Each skeleton and skull was assigned a unique context number from a continuous running sequence. Each skeleton was planned by hand at a scale of 1:5 and by means of geo-referenced photography, from which digital plans were generated using a CAD programme. A digital, black and white and colour slide photographic record was made of each individual skeleton.

Skeletons were recorded by trained osteologists using pro-forma sheets which included details on preservation and completeness, the presence/absence of individual bones, body position, and a provisional assessment of age, sex and pathology, where seen. Particular attention was paid to skeletal evidence for trauma.

It is standard practice to recover bulk samples of soil from the abdomen, chest and neck areas of each skeleton in order to recover any calcified soft tissues, calcified masses (such as gall, bladder and urinary stones) or foetal bones (McKinley and Roberts 1993). Samples are also taken from around the hands and feet to ensure complete bone recovery, and from around the head area to recover any teeth that have come loose from their sockets. In a mass grave context, where there are overlapping skeletons, it is not possible to recover soil samples relative to discrete individuals and therefore this practice was not employed for the mass grave. In any case, the manner in which the deposit had formed meant that there was very little soil between skeletons. Instead, in order to maximise recovery excavators removed the entire deposit by hand using small specialist tools.

Every skull and every infra-cranial skeleton was recorded using the Crossbones survey programme which uses the X-Bones recording system (Isaksen *et al*. 2008). X-Bones is a way of recording spatial skeleton data in a systematic fashion so that it can be reconstructed in 3D. A total of 44 points are recorded on each skeleton using a Total Station. A pre-excavation plan of the entire deposit of skeletons was drawn at a scale of 1:5. In addition, every skeleton or part thereof was planned at a scale of 1:5. The deposit of skulls was planned at a scale of 1:5 but individual skull plans were not produced in every case.

Soil samples for organic residue analysis and micromorphology were taken from immediately around four of the infra-cranial skeletons (skeletons 3753, 3754, 3755, 3756) and from within the brain cavity of skull 3751 (see Chapter 2 and Appendix 1).

CONTENTS AND LOCATION OF THE ARCHIVE

The project archive comprises the records listed below. Among them are a series of photographs, taken with a digital camera which was fixed to the ceiling, of each infra-cranial skeleton laid out in the laboratory in correct anatomical position.

These photographs are intended as a tool for future researchers to view the completeness and level of fragmentation of the skeletons before accessing the physical remains. It is hoped that this will negate unnecessary handling of the remains, thus maintaining their level of preservation for the future. The archive will deposited with Dorset County Museum (accession code yet to be confirmed).

Archive contents

- Hand drawn site plans and sections (including individual plans showing each skull/skeleton)
- Original site recording forms (context sheets, registers etc.)
- Site photographs (digital images and black and white film photographs)
- Digital survey data
- Original osteology recording forms
- Digital photographs of notable osteological findings (working shots)
- Overhead photographs of each skeleton (post-cranial) laid out in anatomical position
- Digital spreadsheet (Excel format) of osteological data (including full skeletal inventories)

STRUCTURE OF THIS VOLUME

This chapter has described the background to the project, including the development and planning requirements that led to the discovery of the mass grave, its historical and archaeological context and the methodology that was employed to excavate it. Chapter 2 presents a detailed archaeological description of the grave, by considering all of its constituent parts (the soils, skulls, infra-cranial skeletons, flints, pottery, animal bone and artefacts) and their relationships in stratigraphic order. The results of radiocarbon and soil chemistry analyses are also described. Detailed osteological reports, one on the skulls, followed by one on the infra-cranial skeletons, are presented in Chapter 3 in addition to the results of extensive isotope investigations. Chapter 4 is an illustrated catalogue that presents the key archaeological and osteological information for each skull and each infra-cranial skeleton. In Chapter 5 the archaeological, osteological and isotope findings are combined in a discussion that considers the identity of the victims, the trauma that they sustained, the weapons which might have been used and the disposal of the corpses. This is concluded with current interpretations and suggestions for further work.