



Book Reviews

A BRONZE AGE BARROW CEMETERY AT ANDOVER AIRFIELD, PENTON MEWSEY, NEAR WEYHILL, HAMPSHIRE: EXCAVATIONS 2007–10 BY ISCA HOWELL WITH LYN BLACKMORE, JON COTTON AND MICHAEL HENDERSON

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With a few notable exceptions (Thomas 2005; Christie 1967), opportunities for large-scale excavation of prehistoric barrow cemeteries in Wessex have been few, and therefore this excellent report, in describing a sequence of funerary activity extending across much of the Bronze Age period, is much to be welcomed.

Excavations were undertaken between 2007 and 2010 by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) on an extensive development site on the western margins of Andover, Hants. Evidence of prehistoric funerary activity had previously been identified by aerial survey, and the fortuitous recording by Williams Freeman, in 1917, of the levelling of the Mark Lane Tumulus, then the most prominent surviving monument of this barrow cemetery, and one probably mentioned in a Late Saxon charter (Williams Freeman 1918).

The site had been extensively truncated by recent cultivation, with clear implications for the survival of fills and shallower features. While limited lithic evidence suggested earlier activity on and around the site, the earliest datable interventions comprised two Beaker features. The first was a single flat grave with stepped profile, which contained a female inhumation burial accompanied by two fragmented Beakers of Wessex/Middle Rhine-type, which post-dated 2300 BC. The second comprised a small isolated pit containing worn Beaker sherds, representing an estimated 11 vessels, with worked flint and charcoal.

The barrow cemetery was represented by a discrete group of five ring ditches, with two outlying, isolated examples, which were associated with secondary cremation and inhumation burials of Middle and later Bronze Age date. The plough-damaged barrows were set on a false crest above a shallow combe. The surviving ditches of four of the group were of comparable size, with internal diameters averaging 20 m, although it was not possible to determine any development sequence. Despite the complete levelling of its mound, asymmetric ditch fills

suggested barrow S4 as a possible 'bell' barrow type. The core phase of the cemetery is estimated to have spanned the 19th to 15th centuries BC, with some later interventions. Ten samples were submitted for radiocarbon dating, with subsequent Bayesian modelling estimating a range of burial activity extending from 1820 cal BC to 1200 cal BC, at 95% confidence.

A total of 42 burials were recorded over the course of excavation, with surviving primary burials represented solely by cremations, and secondary burials within barrow ditches including a small number of poorly-preserved, contracted inhumations. Middle Bronze Age cremation burials, including those related to the ditch of the isolated barrow ditch in the east of the site, were commonly associated with Deverel-Rimbury and post-Deverel-Rimbury vessels. The later insertion of urned and unurned cremation burials into barrow mounds, most notably within the above isolated example, demonstrates a pattern of use, and (possibly episodic) reuse, of the site as a burial focus for a millennium or more. An argument can be made for selectivity in the reuse of this particular burial monument, which suggests the role of social memory and the pervasive recognition of a 'prehistoric past' (Bradley 2002).

An interesting non-funerary feature comprised a 5 m-deep shaft of Middle Bronze Age date, the lower fills of which contained deposits of animal bone, and it is tempting to associate this with feasting activity, possibly connected with funeral rites. Bone and antler from this deposit produced a radiocarbon date of 1400–1220 cal BC, at 95% confidence, consistent with associated pottery. More recent features included early modern linear field boundaries and occasional remains relating to a Second World War airfield.

Finds were disappointingly limited in terms of both quantity and range. Lithic assemblages associated with barrow ditches were composed almost entirely of unmodified debitage, and the small flintwork assemblage from the Beaker pit was the only one to contain a range of re-touched items. Accessional finds were few, but included a chalk spindlewhorl, a fragment of sarsen quern and possibly modified items of antler. The pottery assemblage, however, is regionally significant, both in terms of its early Beaker component and the Deverel-Rimbury and post-Deverel-Rimbury material. This represents a useful addition to the regional corpus of this material, perhaps best exemplified by the nearby urnfield cemetery at Kimpton (Dacre & Ellison 1981).

The report deals with component monuments and features individually, with clear, concise descriptions of chronology and contexts. Copious illustrations of finds, including excellent drawings, are integrated with plans and sections throughout the report, and provide a clear understanding of associated contexts and spatial relationships. Illustrations are easily linked to specialist reports, which are presented as a series of appendices and include admirably detailed

and referenced analyses of pottery and human bone. The plant remains report is necessarily short, but includes some valuable comparative data on wood charcoal taxa from cremation deposits. The final section of the report, a concluding discussion, is of particular value in bringing together the various strands of specialist analysis to assess funerary activity on the site within the changing regional landscape contexts of the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age periods. In placing the Andover Airfield site firmly within the wider comparative setting of the Hampshire and Wiltshire chalklands, this synthesis displays an impressive command of regional knowledge and published sources, and represents a welcome – and highly readable – updating of our current knowledge. It is perhaps unfortunate that some more recent barrow excavations in the Andover area (King 2015; Massey & Whelan in prep) were unable to be included in this discussion.

The authors are to be congratulated in producing a volume which is both affordable and attractively presented, and in a format which will be readily accessible to both an academic and a more general readership. This site seems certain to be a significant regional comparator in future studies of the Wessex Bronze Age, and the analyses and synthesis contained in this report will be highly valued.

References

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