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# An Early Anglo-Saxon Cross-roads Burial from Broad Town, North Wiltshire

by Bob Clarke

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*A single unaccompanied burial located at a cross-roads at Broad Town, North Wiltshire, has recently been radiocarbon dated to the 6th-7th Century AD. Its excavation forms part of the ongoing investigation, by the University of Bath in Swindon, into settlement patterns in Kingsbridge Hundred, North Wiltshire. The results open up the possibilities of an earlier date than hitherto supposed both for the practice of cross-roads burial and for the burial of criminals near boundaries. The landscape context of the burial is further discussed, considering the potentially early date for what later became a hundred boundary marked by the Broad Town escarpment.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Project Background

On Thursday 12 October 2000 Tony and Leigh Lucas discovered the partial remains of a human skeleton protruding from a bank overlooking the village of Broad Town, North Wiltshire. Broad Town Archaeological Project (BTAP) was informed by the County Archaeologist of the discovery and the site was visited by two members of BTAP who reported their findings to him. The County Archaeologist gave full support to excavation, which took place on 11-12 November 2000.

The burial site is located on the north-west facing chalk escarpment of the lower Marlborough Downs, overlooking the village of Broad Town, North Wiltshire (Figure 1), on the 175 m. contour line at NGR SU 0955 7765.

## THE BURIAL: RESULTS

Prior to excavation, a record was made of the initially visible remains and other finds that had eroded out of the bank. That record forms the first part of this report.

### Visible Remains in Section

The left side of the individual was exposed to the north due to a number of factors, primarily natural erosion and cattle interference. No grave cut was visible in the section, but there was a slight soil change immediately around the bones. The visible remains were exposed for a length of 72 cm. in the section. Depth from surface at the final visible thoracic vertebrae was 20cm., at the femoral head 25 cm.

Protruding from the naturally formed section were a number of bones, including seven articulated thoracic vertebrae and the left pelvic bone and femur, both articulated. Overlying the top of the femur were three bones from the left hand, probably metacarpals.

From the disposition of the bones in the section it was possible to suggest that the head of the burial would have lain to the south-west and that the burial was not made in a coffin.

### The Excavation

The grave cut was extremely difficult to locate as it was not visible in the eroded section and only a



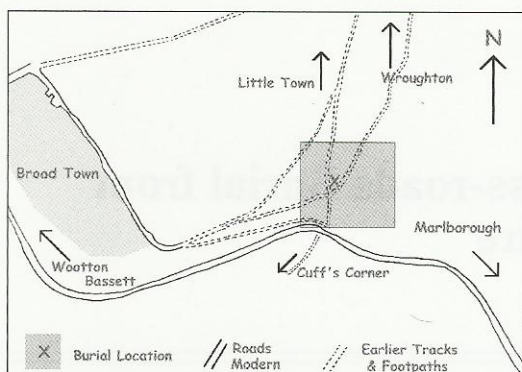


Fig 1. Burial location, with local routes and destinations

slight difference of soil matrix was noted in the deposit above the grave. That said, the grave was presumably rectangular in shape when first dug owing to the position of the remains. The grave was very shallow being on average 25 cm deep.

## The Burial

The alignment of the grave was north-east to south-west with the head to the south-west. The body lay

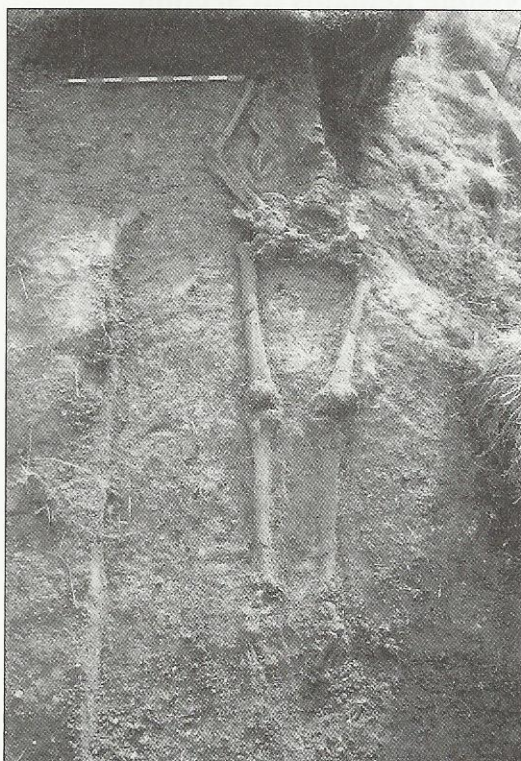


Fig 2. Burial viewed from the north-east

supine, with the legs straight, and the arms flexed with the hands placed on the pelvis (Figure 2). The left arm (upper and lower), clavicle and ribcage were all missing, as were the cranium and mandible, all seven cervical vertebrae and the first four thoracic vertebrae (Figure 3). The individual has been estimated by Jacqueline McKinley of Wessex Archaeology as between 35–45 years old, 1.705 metres (5 ft. 7¼ in.) tall, and male.

## Pathology

The spinal column shows the beginnings of osteoarthritis with slight lipping evident on the lumbar vertebrae and first three thoracic vertebrae. Slight bone nodules on the rear of the iliac crest and a pronounced linea aspersa on both left and right femurs suggest the individual may have spent a significant amount of time riding. Muscular damage to single bones in the left hand and the left foot also suggest horse-related injuries, perhaps from a fall (McKinley *pers com*).

## CERAMIC FINDS

Six ceramic sherds were recovered during the excavation, three from the burial itself, the remainder from the subsoil; all were inspected by Rachael Seager-Smith of Wessex Archaeology. The sherds spanned the Mid/Late Iron Age up to the 4th Century AD, and their well rounded condition suggest that they were residual.

## DATING

In response to the lack of reliable dating the University of Bath in Swindon funded a radiocarbon determination at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford. A date of 1430±45 BP (OxA 11173) was obtained from the right femur, which calibrates to possible calendar date ranges of 595–665 cal AD at 68% probability or 540–680 cal AD at 95.4% probability.

## DISCUSSION

The position of the Broad Town burial is important for a number of reasons. The site is visually prominent over a wide area. It is situated just a few





Fig 3. Detail of the burial showing the extent of erosion.

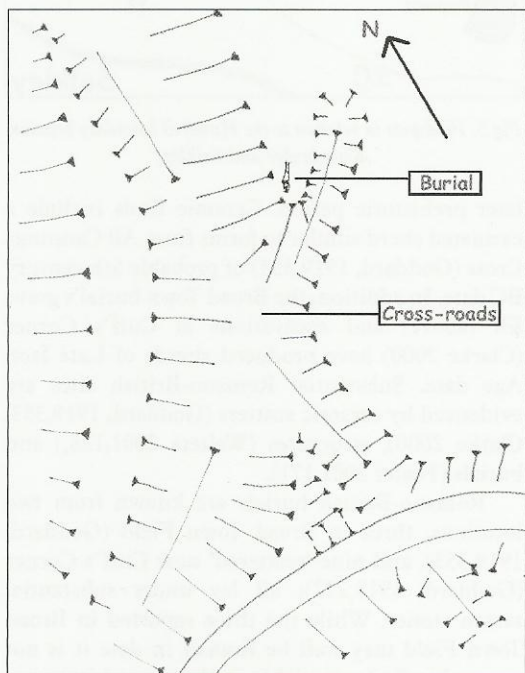


Fig 4. Burial location in relation to cross-roads.

hundred metres north of the boundary between Kingsbridge and Selkley Hundreds, while the spur of land on which the burial lay is described by two hollow ways crossing at the point where the remains were found (Figure 4). These factors suggest deliberate burial at a place both elevated and inter-visible between a number of routes, coupled with interment in unconsecrated ground (although the burial could well be pre-conversion) at the geographical limits of local territories. While no evidence of trauma was found on the skeletal remains, the incompleteness of the remains ensures that execution cannot be ruled out.

Andrew Reynolds has demonstrated that at least one of the cross-roads tracks is of mid to late Anglo-Saxon date (Pollard and Reynolds, 2002, 225). This track originates in Marlborough and traverses the Downs, past Mans Head, a possible Hundred meeting place (Reynolds *pers com.*) then down Hackpen Hill. From there it cuts across the lower chalk terrace, in a north-westerly direction, crossing the Kingsbridge-Selkley hundred boundary, then down the lower escarpment, past the burial site and on to Wootton Bassett. As the



track cuts the escarpment it is met by another holloway from the shrunken settlement of Little Town, forming the cross-roads element of the site. The possibility of this track also having a mid-Saxon date cannot be ruled out. If this is so and the burial is purposely situated on the cross-roads it makes, by later analogy, the possibility of execution all the more likely.

## Beyond Broad Town

The Broad Town burial mirrors traits found at other Wessex sites, most notably that at Stonehenge. There an executed male in his early 30s was found, probably supine, in a shallow grave with no finds (Pitts *et al.* 2002, 134). This burial also benefits from a radiocarbon determination of 1359+38 BP (OxA-9361) & 1490+60 BP (OxA-9921), a weighted mean calibrates to a possible calendar date range of 600-690 cal AD (Bayliss, in Pitts *et al.* 2002, 134). The grave is again situated at a prominent place, close to the hundred boundaries of Amesbury and Underditch (Reynolds and Semple, in Pitts *et al.* 2002, 142).

Another pertinent site is known at Tan Hill, overlooking the Vale of Pewsey, where a single unaccompanied burial was discovered in a pre-historic ditch. It was suggested at the time of discovery that the hands were tied behind the back, but again no dating evidence was present (Anon, 1951, 228). This site is on a parish boundary, again in a very prominent position, and may well be Anglo-Saxon in date (Pollard and Reynolds, 2002, 175).

The discovery of a single unaccompanied burial at Gomeldon also potentially fits into this picture. Discovered in 1936, the individual was buried in a shallow grave, having the appearance of being thrown in and was suggested by J.F.S. Stone to be a possible hanging victim (Stone 1942, 108). Again a prominent location appears important, with the individual interred close to the edge of the escarpment which overlooks the river Bourne. The burial is also just to the North-west of the original Winterbourne to Porton road and just under 200 m north of the parish boundary.

## Beyond Wiltshire

Counties other than Wiltshire are beginning to present similar evidence. Reynolds has demonstrated that all known execution sites in Hampshire lie on hundred boundaries (1999, 108-9), while

Martin Carver's work at Sutton Hoo has shown that prominent sites of an earlier age became the focus of execution, during the formative phase of 'Christian Kingship' (1998, 142). The comparable dates of two of the burials described above suggest a trend in 7th-century Wessex. This would appear to underpin the evidence from Sutton Hoo where execution sites also seem to have started in the seventh century (Carver 1998, 142).

## The Burial in its Landscape Context

A picture of continuity in the landscape is arguable if consideration is given to archaeological finds and sites in the immediate area of the Broad Town Burial (fig 5). Evidence suggests that the escarpment has been the focus of human activity since the

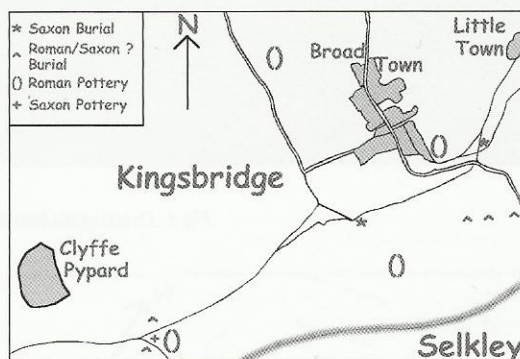


Fig 5. Findspots in relation to the Hundred boundary between Kingsbridge and Selkley

later prehistoric period. Ceramic finds include a carinated sherd similar to forms from All Cannings Cross (Goddard, 1919, 353) of probable 5th century BC date. In addition, the Broad Town burial's grave fill (above) and excavations at Cuff's Corner (Clarke 2000) have produced sherds of Late Iron Age date. Substantial Romano-British sites are evidenced by ceramic scatters (Goddard, 1919, 353, Clarke 2000), structures (Walters 2001, 128,) and burials (Foster 2001, 171).

Romano-British burials are known from two locations, three in Broad Town Field (Goddard, 1919, 353), and nine 'scattered' near Cuff's Corner (Goddard, 1913, 227); all lay under substantial sarsen stones. While the three reported in Broad Town Field may well be Roman in date it is not unusual to find material from that period in graves up to the 6/7th Century AD (White, 1988, 160). This



situation has also been recently addressed from an Anglo-Saxon perspective by Helen Geake (2002, 145). The SMR (SU07NE302) suggests a single site for all three interments, while the letter published by Goddard gives a regular spacing and orientation (1919,353). What is clear is that three individuals were buried underneath presumably visible sarsens, spaced about 200 yards apart in an east-west line, broadly following the later hundred boundary. Whatever their date they would seem to be a component of the boundary at this point.

It seems likely that a linear cemetery stretches from at least Cuff's Corner to within 200 metres of the Broad Town to Broad Hinton road, possibly indicating the early foundation of what was to become the Hundred boundary at this point. This argument can be underpinned further by the evidence of Saxon intervention. Chaff-tempered pottery was located at Cuffs Corner (Anon. 1975-6, 136). A secondary burial containing glassware, an iron spear and an amber and a glass bead was located in a prehistoric barrow at Thornhill lane (SMR SU07NE400), while in the 6th/7th century the Broad Town individual was buried on the cross-roads at the edge of the escarpment.

Based on the work of others, Ken Dark has suggested that hundreds in Cornwall, first recorded in the ninth century, may well have their origins in Romano-British territorial divisions (Dark, 2000, 151). That possibility has to be considered here. This is not to say that Selkley and Kingsbridge Hundreds have their origins in the Romano-British period, but that the archaeological components coupled with the topography of the locale may well indicate an early origin for the boundary at this point.

## CONCLUSION

It seems likely that burials such as that from Broad Town performed a number of functions. Those at Broad Town (Figure 6) and Tan Hill are visible from c. 10 km. while Stonehenge is a striking landscape feature. The position of the Gomeldon burial adds a potential ford or river crossing to the equation. All four places lay on tracks; clearly this is an important component of such burials. Exclusion from settlement would also appear to have been a major aspect as was the role played by emerging Christianity. The chronological closeness of the two dated burials suggests a trend in seventh-century Wessex that can be recognised elsewhere.



Fig 6. View from the grave looking north-west illustrating the prominence of the site within the landscape.

It is also clear that elements of the Broad Town landscape exhibit a multi-period chronology. This realisation is not new in landscape studies; research, however, tends to rely on the monumental rather than discreet evidence. This small piece of Wiltshire landscape may go some way to help us understand that chronology. Ultimately the creation of boundaries that feature so heavily in our understanding of the development of the landscape may have been set out far earlier than generally thought (but cf. Bonney 1966), as appears to be the case at Broad Town. Clearly there is much more work to do.

## Acknowledgements

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