

# Two Saxon Cemeteries in North Oxfordshire

By E. T. LEEDS

IN 1928 and 1930 occasion offered itself for the exploration of two Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in the north of the county, the first at North Leigh, the second at Chadlington. No full account of these investigations has since been published, though a brief notice has appeared in the Anglo-Saxon section of the recently published first volume of the *Victoria History of Oxfordshire* (pp. 357-60). The present lull in active field-work presents an opportunity to issue a fuller report of the discoveries then made, even though it involves some repetition of what has already been written in the *Victoria History*. An additional reason, if such be needed, is the scarcity of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries north of Oxford. Before these two cemeteries came to light, the only ones known consisted of graves at Hornton, Lower Heyford, Souldern and Yarnton. All were small groups; none was richly furnished, and in nearly all cases the records are quite summary. As has been remarked in the *Victoria History*, north Oxfordshire seems to have been widely, but sparsely occupied in early Anglo-Saxon days. It is all the more important, therefore, to publish as full accounts as possible of any cemeteries that have been examined in recent times.

## NORTH LEIGH (O.S. 6 in., 26 SW)

For initial information about this cemetery thanks are due to Miss Mason (now Mrs. Wickham Steed) of Eynsham Hall, who submitted for inspection certain objects which had been found by Mr. Brown of North Leigh when quarrying in a field on the north side of the road to Wilcot, immediately south of the lane leading to Holly Court Farm. From five burials orientated W. to E. Mr. Brown recovered two small knives, one  $6\frac{1}{2}$  ins. long (A.M. 1929.396 : PLATE VII, C, 5), a fine *seax*,  $11\frac{1}{4}$  ins. long (A.M. 1929.395 : PLATE VII, C, 2) a pair of iron shears,  $6\frac{3}{4}$  ins. long (A.M. 1929.397 : PLATE VII, C, 1), a narrow strip of bronze, bent at intervals and with a tiny nail piercing one end, apparently part of the binding of a wooden casket, and finally, a cylindrical bronze work-box (A.M. 1929.399 : PLATE VI, C, D), 2 ins. high and 2 ins. in diameter. The body of the box is formed of a band of sheet bronze which has been fitted round the base, pinched and riveted together at the back of the box. The metal thus projecting from the wall of the box forms an ear of two thicknesses, cut at the hinder outside

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edge into three teeth and perforated for the reception of an iron ring for suspension. The top of the lid and the base slightly exceed in diameter the body of the box. The lid is decorated with four rudely designed double-lined triquetral knots, engraved in triangular panels, occupying the angles of a cross, the arms of which are hollow-sided like St. Cuthbert's cross<sup>1</sup> or the cruciform element in the wheeled crosses. The ornamented top is bent at the edge and the collar is clipped into it. The collar, however, is formed in the same manner as the body, projecting behind into an ear of double thickness, from which a wire ring passes to the upper lobe of the corresponding projection of the body. The body is ornamented with embossed dots arranged in two tiers of panels. The lid was secured by a small pin (now missing) which passed through the collar of the lid and the wall of the box close to the rim. A work-box with a similarly large suspensory ear was found by Bryan Faussett at Sibertswold, Chartham.<sup>2</sup>

Permission to make fuller investigations was courteously granted by Mr. Brown, and, in the course of these, three additional graves all orientated W. to E. were discovered at a depth of about two feet in the brashy limestone. In addition a part of a grave was explored. It contained the lower part of the legs of a skeleton with which some of the relics found by Mr. Brown had been associated. The new graves were :

1. Skeleton of a man at full length lying on its back ; no relics.
2. Skeleton of a man, the legs measuring 2 ft. 9 ins. from the hip to the distal end of the tibia, also lying on its back at full length, with a large knife, 7½ ins. long (A.M. 1929.400 : PLATE VII, C, 3) under the left forearm, which was bent across the lap ; a small iron buckle (A.M. 1929.401 : PLATE VII, C, 4) above the left shoulder ; the right arm stretched by the side. The head, beneath which was a pillow-stone, had fallen forwards on the breast. The grave was orientated a trifle north of west, with the head at the west end.
3. Skeleton of a girl, lying rather on her right side with the head fallen down on to the shoulder, both arms folded across the chest and the right leg below the knee flexed at right angles. By each ear (A.M. 1930.772 : PLATE VI, A) were the remains of three thin silver rings on which beads had been strung. The beads were of blue and green glass, together with a small silver tube.

From the position in which these rings have more than once been found it has generally been assumed that they were earrings, but Mr. Lethbridge's

<sup>1</sup> *Antiq. Journ.*, xvii, 283, pl. lxxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Inventorium Sepulchrale*, p. 112, pl. xiii, 8.

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observations<sup>1</sup> in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Burwell, Cambs., have shown that they formed part of a necklace. I received interesting confirmation of this from Mr. F. G. Gurney of Egginton, Beds., who had explored several graves in a sandy soil near Leighton Buzzard. There he not only found the rings and beads in position, but also remains of the thread by which they were suspended. In the second of two letters received from him he speaks of a 'festoon of silver rings, attached by thread with two of the three glass beads in the centre rings still suspended by the same thread in the middle of the rings.' At North Leigh the beads were certainly on the rings themselves.

### CHADLINGTON (O.S. 6 in., 20 SE)

From the west end of Chadlington village a road called Catsham Lane leads southwards across the Evenlode to Wychwood Forest past a field lying in

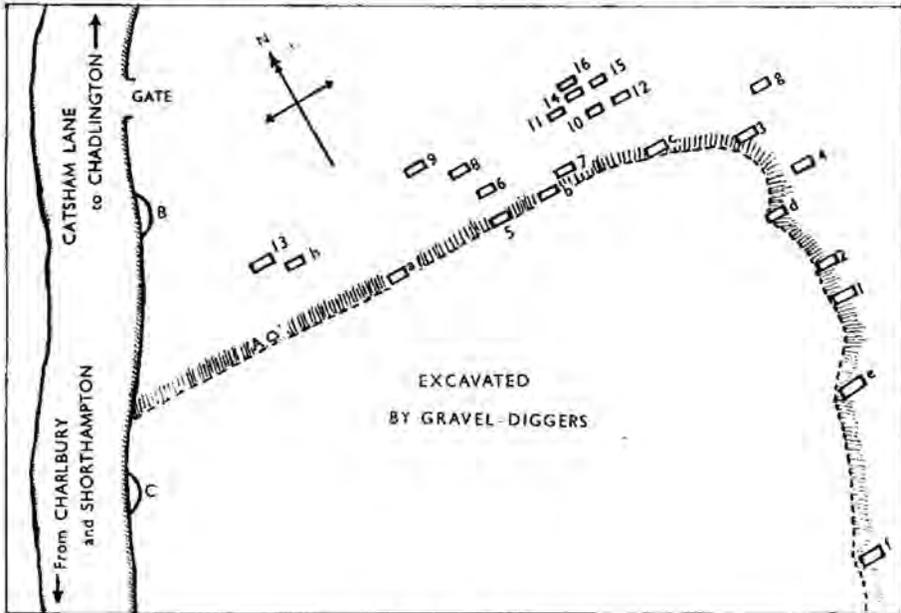


FIG. 5

Plan of the Saxon Cemetery at Chadlington, Oxon., 1931-2. Scale 1 in. = 64 ft.

the SW. angle formed by the road and another lane leading off it to Shorthampton. This field is known as Barrow Field. Superficial traces of any mounds which could have given rise to the name have well-nigh disappeared, but in

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Antiq. Soc.*, qto. publ., n.s. III, 52 and 70.

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June, 1930, Mr. O. G. S. Crawford made a flight over the field and saw the rings marking two round barrows clearly defined in the north-west corner of the field. These, two of the many similar monuments on the borders of Wychwood and on Chadlington Downs behind the village, bear witness to the presence of Bronze Age man in this part of Oxfordshire.

The field to the east of Catsham Lane, in which the Saxon cemetery is situated, is also signalized by evidence of his occupation, since not far from the road at the point marked A on the plan (FIG. 5) a cinerary urn came to light. It had been deposited in an inverted position in a hole about 3 ft. deep. When seen by me the greater part had been destroyed and the contents scattered, though the finders reported a small quantity of bone inside. Only about three-quarters of the upper half of the vessel remained *in situ*. The urn, (diameter of mouth, 9 ins.) is of the type with overhanging rim, similar to Abercromby, *Bronze Age Pottery*, II, pl. LXV, fig. 49 from Dorset, and is decorated on the rim with a trellis pattern between two horizontal lines executed in cord technique. Iron Age discoveries in the same locality are recorded in the *Antiquaries Journal*, XV, 31; the positions of the pit there described and of a second are shown at B and C on the plan.

The knowledge of these prehistoric finds and the first indications of the existence of the Saxon cemetery I owe to the interest of Mr. S. E. Groves of Shipton-under-Wychwood, and through the kind offices of Mr. Groves and of Sir Adair (now Lord) Roche, Mr William Hobbs, the owner of the gravel pit, kindly gave me permission to explore some of the graves during the course of the summer of 1930 and at intervals for some time after. Many had unfortunately already been destroyed without examination; how many it is impossible to say exactly, but according to the owner's son, Mr. R. J. Hobbs, graves had been seen some 14 yards south of No. 5, and as the graves had been observed to occur in lines at regular intervals of some 9 feet, an estimate of 45 to 50 graves is probably not exaggerated.

The position of those marked by small letters (FIG. 5) is vouched for by bones seen in position. Nos. *a*, *b*, and *c* were outstretched burials orientated W.-E. with the head at the west end. Grave *d* had a similar orientation, but the body had evidently lain on the right side facing south and in a crouching posture, since the legs (all that remained of the skeleton for examination) were strongly flexed in the same manner as those of No. 4 explored by us.

Grave *e*, of which only part of the legs remained, also lay W. to E., but apparently at full length. From this burial came the débris of a spherical bead (A.M. 1930.773), the exact purpose of which is uncertain. The débris consisted of bronze, pieces of shell and gold bands, and sufficient was recovered to permit a reconstruction of this delicate and clever piece of workmanship, as

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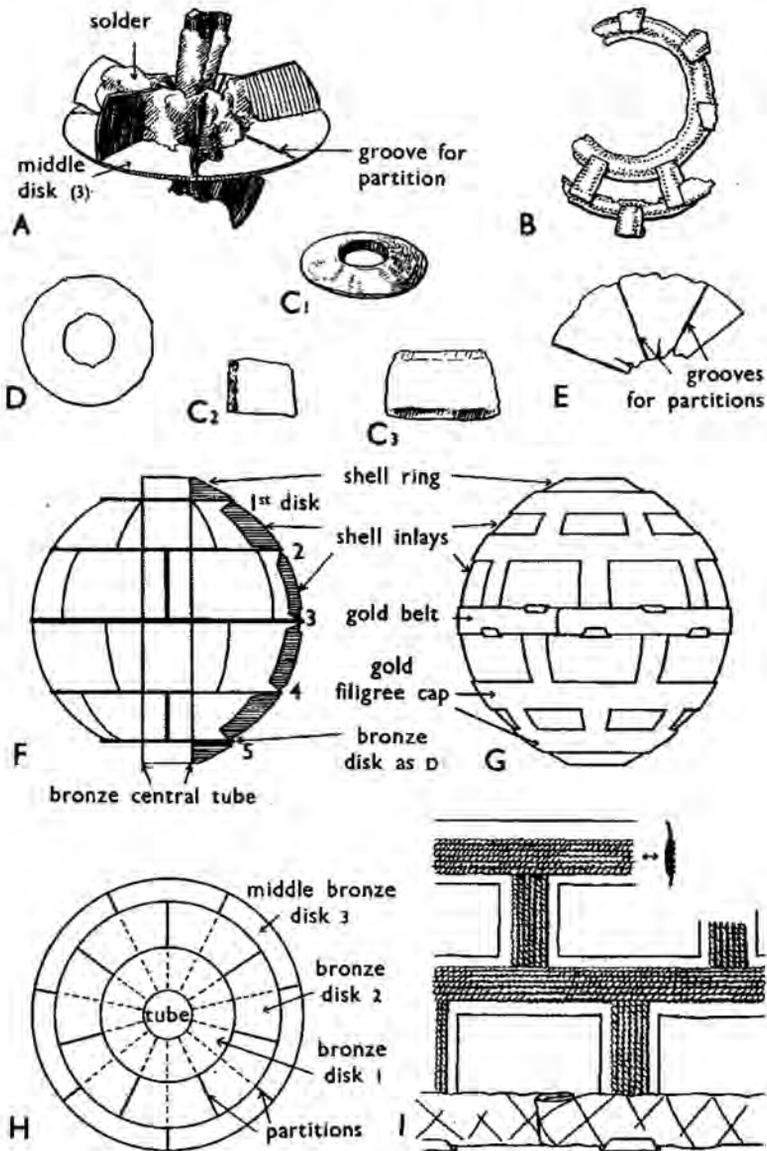


FIG. 6

CHADLINGTON, OXON.

Details of the construction of the whorl (p. 24).

I, Sc.  $\frac{1}{2}$ ; remainder  $\frac{1}{4}$ .

*From a drawing by Miss C. M. Legge.*

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the careful drawings made for me by Miss C. M. Legge amply demonstrate (FIG. 6). The basis of the bead was a thin bronze disk,  $2\frac{3}{8}$  ins. in diameter (A and F3), through the middle of which was inserted a bronze tube, 3 ins. long and with a bore  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. in diameter (A and F). On the disk 7 radiating lines had been scored on each face (A), so arranged that those on one face alternated with those on the other (A, F and H). In these grooves were set bronze *septa* of trapezoidal form, the edges fitting to the disk and to the tube, being at right angles, the external edge curving inwards from the disk, and the upper edge falling slightly inwards towards the middle (A and H). This ring of *septa* was surmounted by another disk of smaller size,  $2\frac{3}{8}$  ins. in diameter (E), and to it again was affixed a second register of *septa* similar to those in the lower register, but smaller, though also 7 in number, and these in turn were capped by a still smaller disk (like the washer for a small bolt)  $1\frac{3}{8}$  ins. in diameter (D, F2 and 4) and a perforated shell disk (C 1) of the same diameter. The inner angles of the *septa* were filled with lead solder (A) and in front of this a small shell plaque (C 2 and 3) was fitted into the space between the *septa* and the disks, the upper and lower edges being neatly bevelled so as to produce the necessary curve to complete the spherical form. Surrounding the central disk was a narrow gold band,  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. wide, hooked together at the ends and decorated with finely engraved criss-cross lines. This band served to hold in position two open-work caps fashioned from filigree plaits beaten out so as to form a framework of narrow bands with a disk at the top, and so constructed that the bands entirely concealed the bronze structure beneath, at the same time covering the edges of the shell-fillings and thus hiding all the joints. The ends of the vertical bands in the inner registers passed underneath the band which encompassed the central disk and were hooked up round the opposite side, a method of construction which accounts for the alternation of the *septa* on the sides of the central disk.

A parallel is afforded by a bead from Kempston, Beds.,<sup>1</sup> now in the British Museum, which, however, has only one register on each side, is secured by plain silver bands, and measures only 1 in. in height. By contrast the Chadlington bead is a masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon work.

Remains of further burials were explored at *f*, *g* and *h*. In burial *f* the skull was recovered for examination. The body appeared to have been outstretched with the head at the west end of the grave. Most of the burials were deposited in the gravel, but this one lay in one of the patches of clay which intrude themselves through the gravel here and there in this locality.

Three iron implements found in these graves were generously handed over to me by Mr. R. J. Hobbs. The fine dirk or hunting knife (*seax*) 17 ins.

<sup>1</sup> *Assoc. Arch. Soc. Reports*, 1864, pp. 272, 292, pl. 11, 2, 3, figs. 2 and 3. *V.C.H. Beds.*, 1, 182, pl. opp. p. 180, fig. 12.

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long (A.M. 1931.243 : PLATE VII, C, 6) was, according to him, found in the same grave as the smaller knife (A.M. 1931.244 : PLATE VII, C, 11); the third implement, also a knife, was found independently of these.

Of the remaining graves nos. 1-7 were excavated by Mr. R. T. Lattey and myself in July, 1930, the rest by the Oxford University Archaeological Society in 1931.

(1) Grave 6 ft. long; 2-2½ ft. wide; 2 ft. deep at the feet and 1¾ ft. at the head. A large stone, 1 ft. long, had been set on end near the foot of the grave on its south side. Skeleton of a man, 35-40 yrs. of age, orientated WSW. to ENE.; head at the west end crushed sideways to face south; supine; hands in lap and legs crossed. As it lay, the body measured 4 ft. 10 ins. The right ulna had been fractured in life and had mended so badly as to leave a very sharp point of bone projecting. No relics. The skeleton exhibited an advanced stage of *osteo-arthritis deformans*.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Grave 5¾ ft. long; 2¼ ft. wide; 2½ ft. deep; orientated WSW. to ENE. Skeleton of a woman, aged 45, in bad condition lying on its right side facing south, the vertebral column flexed; the legs in a crouching posture, and the left hand up to the face; the exact position of the right hand could not be ascertained. A small knife (A.M. 1931.240) was found near the left hand.

(3) Grave about 5 ft. long, and 2¾ ft. deep; orientated W. to E. Skeleton of a child, c. 8 yrs. old, sex doubtful (femur, 10-11 ins. long with the processes missing), lying supine with its head to the west. Bones in a very fragile condition, the vertebral column entirely perished. By the left hand a small knife (A.M. 1931.241).

(4) Grave about 5 ft. long and 2 ft. to 2 ft. 2 ins. deep; orientated WSW. to ENE. Skeleton of a girl, c. 8 yrs. old, outstretched and supine, hands in lap, the head forced forward so that the face was directed towards the feet. No relics.

(5) On clearing the ground in order to uncover this grave, the presence of which was first detected by unearthing the feet, just below the top soil and 15 ins. above the skeleton was found a small circular group of stones with traces of charcoal, evidently a hearth. Below this lay the remains of the skeleton of a person of over 40 years of age. The sex was described by Dr. Buxton as 'probably male, but to judge from the long bones might be female.' The burial had evidently been disturbed in antiquity. The

<sup>1</sup> The skeletal material was submitted to the Department of Human Anatomy, and a report was made by the late Dr. L. H. Dudley Buxton.

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whole of the right side except the tibia, fibula and toes, the entire pelvis, the ribs and most of the vertebrae were missing. Six cervical vertebrae from the skull showed signs of displacement; two dorsals were found 6 ins. above the rest of the skeleton and another a trifle lower; one of the digits of the right hand lay by the face. Only the limb bones on the left side were in position, showing the body to have lain on its back, orientated WSW. to ENE. On the inside of the elbow lay a knife,  $5\frac{1}{4}$  ins. long (A.M. 1930.763: PLATE VII, C, 12), and on the humerus a double-toothed bone comb,  $7\frac{5}{8}$  ins. long (A.M. 1930.762: PLATE VI, B, 1), decorated with engraved criss-cross lines. Also in the grave was an iron needle,  $2\frac{1}{4}$  ins. long (A.M. 1930.764; PLATE VII, C, 9) and two sherds (A.M. 1930.765: PLATE VII, C, 8, 10) of handmade ware.

(6) Grave about  $5\frac{1}{4}$  ft. long and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep; orientated W. to E. Skeleton of a girl, 12 to 17 yrs. old, measuring  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft. as it lay outstretched and supine with hands in the lap. No relics. This grave was 11 ft. north of No. 5.

(7) Another disturbed grave, of man 25-35 yrs. old. The skeleton, orientated E. to W., lay chest downwards, in a curving pit, the feet and shoulders at a higher level than the body at 2 ft. deep. The skull had been detached from the trunk and set upright at the back of the right femur facing northwards. No relics.

(8) Grave partly destroyed. Skull and long bones preserved; skeleton lying WSW. to ENE.; adult, 30-45 yrs., sex not stated. No relics.

(9) Graves orientated WSW. to ENE. Skeleton of male over 45 yrs. lying supine, the left hand on the thigh. The body had been decapitated shortly before or after death, and the head placed between the knees. When found it lay on its right cheek, facing south (PLATE VII, A). No relics.

(10) Grave  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep. Skeleton of male, 20-25 yrs. old, lying at full length, but decapitated, and the head placed between the legs. The cervical vertebrae had been cut by a sharp instrument. No relics.

(11) Grave  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep. Skeleton of man over 40 yrs., lying supine, W. to E., the arms by the side. By the right ulna a small iron knife, point upwards. The head lay on sand; the legs a little bent. Signs of osteoarthritis.

(12) Grave  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep. Skeleton of adult female lying supine at full length; bones in poor condition. No relics.

(13) Grave  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep, orientated W. to E.; skull badly crushed, and other parts missing, including part of cervical vertebrae, both arms and right side of pelvis. No relics.

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(14) Grave,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep ; orientated W. to E. Skeleton in very rotten condition ; supine ; adult ; skull badly crushed, face turned to S. ; knees flexed. No relics.

(15) Grave  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep, orientated W. to E. Skeleton of aged female in supine position ; atlas fused to skull, and 3rd, 4th, and 5th cervical vertebrae fused together ; limb-bones in good condition. No relics (PLATE VII, B).

(16) Grave, 6 ft. 9 ins. long, depth unrecorded, orientated W. to E. ; skeleton of adult male, in supine position, hands in lap, head twisted and rolled over. No relics.

Further evidence of Saxon occupation in this district came to light in 1938, when remains of a Saxon house-bottom was discovered in Mr. R. J. Hobbs's new gravel pit, half a mile due east of the cemetery, in the parish of Spelsbury (*Oxoniensia*, III, 168). From it were recovered a few sherds and the fine bone spindle-whorl illustrated in PLATE VI, B, 2.

### CONCLUSIONS

The scantiness of relics in these graves at North Leigh and Chadlington and their uniform orientation from west to east at once suggest that they are comparatively late in date, certainly not before the seventh century. This again seems to accord with the accepted ideas of a gradual spread from a centre in the main valley of the Upper Thames, no matter by what route the conquerors reached that point.

This is borne out also by the nature of some of the relics themselves. The first point that will be noted is the absence of the class of weapons normally found in the large cemeteries, the early date of which can be established on several grounds ; at North Leigh and Chadlington there are no swords, spears, or shield-bosses. By contrast there is the long knife or *seax*, which is very rare in early graves, but, in England as in France, appears in graves which can be attributed to the seventh century. The Chadlington *seax* is a fine specimen and still retains, adhering by rust to the upper end of the blade, a fragment of the iron guard from the base of the hilt.<sup>1</sup>

The dating is further established by the relics from the women's graves. The bronze thread-box and the silver rings with beads from North Leigh are, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> characteristics of the later graves. In particular

<sup>1</sup> I have a sketch of an unpublished *seax*,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  ins. wide and measuring 14 ins. over all with a blade 11 ins. long, found in 1908 in a grave on the hills at Burton Dassett, Warwickshire.

<sup>2</sup> *Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology*, pp. 99 ff.

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this applies to the beads. The large and varicoloured types of the early cemeteries are wanting; instead we find monochrome beads, modest in size, and either of a rich blue, contrasted with the earlier dark blue, or in dull red, green, blue or slate colour. Whether the cross on the lid of the thread-box carries the significance which might be attached to it may well be a moot point.

It is interesting to note that the Chadlington cemetery lies quite near to two springs, the one about two hundred yards eastward in a little combe with a plentiful supply of water, though not of very good quality, the other with excellent water at the top of the large field in which the cemetery is situated. It has often been observed that early settlements are located near good springs.

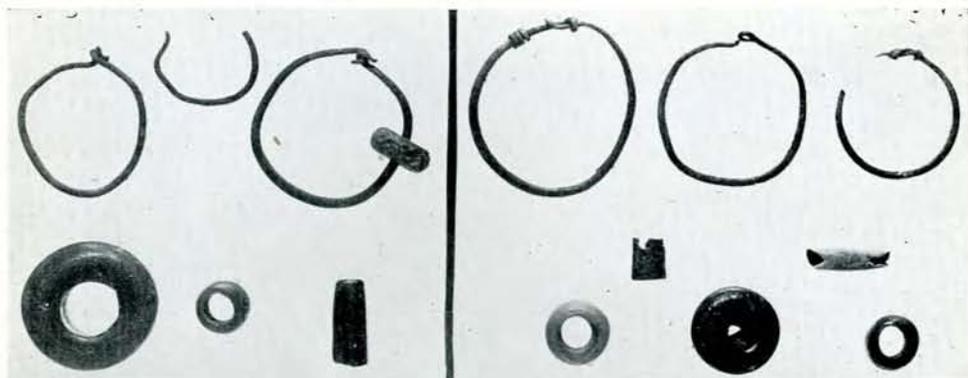
One is almost tempted to place the establishment of the 'tun' in the latter half of the seventh century and to connect it directly with Ceadwalla, who was king of the West Saxons from A.D. 685 to 688. This, however, is possibly too late, though many of these so-called pagan cemeteries may have continued in use far longer than has hitherto been believed. After all it is inconceivable that every 'tun' raised a church or chapel immediately after the baptism of Cynegils, or indeed for some time after, and without the presence of a priest the original cemetery would receive further interments.

The very name of the village is suggestive. According to students of place-names the name Chadlington means 'the hill or tun of Ceadela,' O.E. *Ceadelan tun* or *dun*, in virtue of the existence of forms like *Cedelintone* in Domesday Book and *Chadelinton*, *Chedelinton* and *Cadelyntone* in the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> *Ceadela* is a diminutive of *Ceadda* (Chad) and is taken to be a late or weak form of Ceadwalla. A similar form is found in Chadbury in Worcestershire, which occurs as *Ceadwallan byrig* about A.D. 860 and as *Castellum de Chadelburi* and *Chedelesburie* in the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

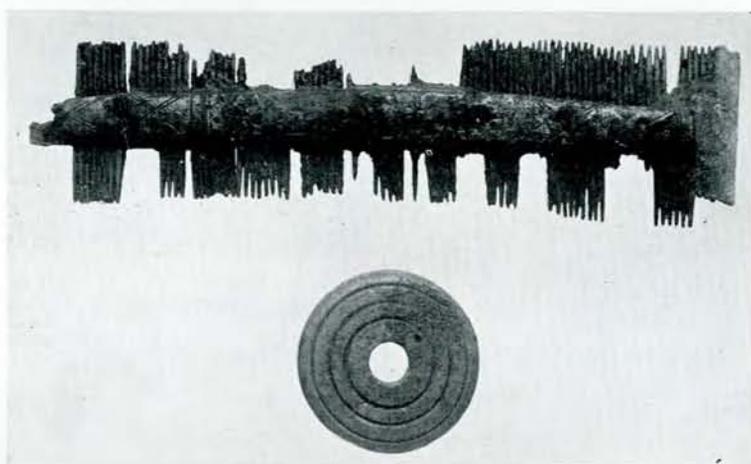
<sup>1</sup> H. Alexander, *Place-names of Oxfordshire*, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *Place-names of Worcestershire*, p. 265.

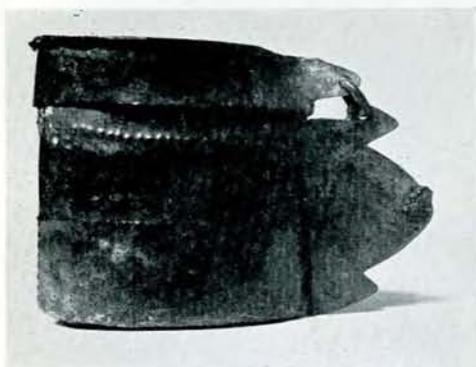
PLATE VI



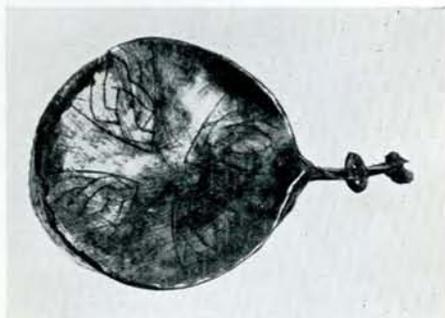
A



B



C



D

- A. Silver rings and beads from a grave at North Leigh (p. 22). Scale  $\frac{1}{4}$ .  
 B. Bone comb from a grave at Chadlington (p. 28) and spindle whorl from a Saxon house at Spelsbury (p. 29). Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$ .  
 C, D. Bronze box (side and top views) from a grave at North Leigh (p. 21). Scale  $\frac{3}{8}$ .

*Phh. Ashmolean Museum.*

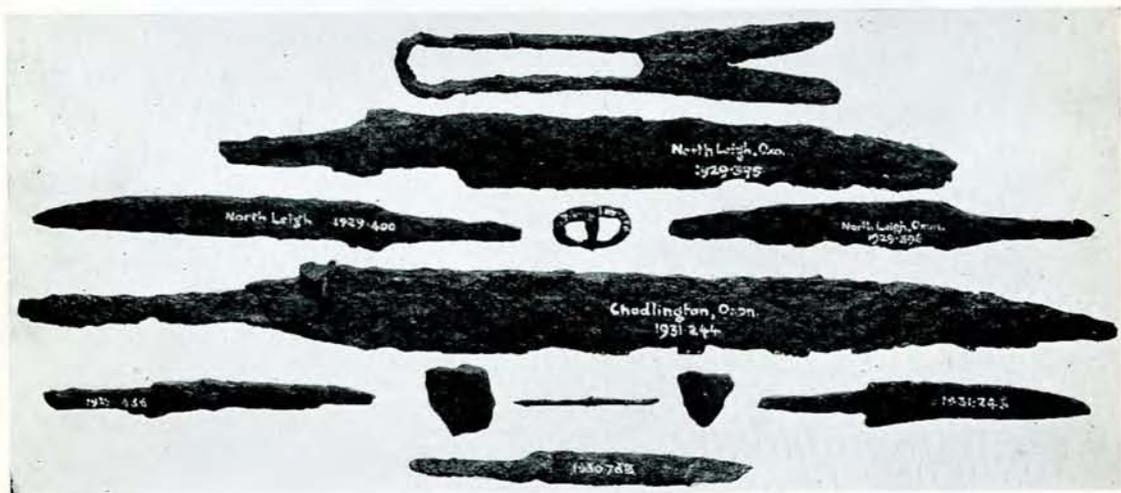
PLATE VII



A



B



C

- A. Saxon grave (no. 9), Chadlington (p. 28).  
 B. Saxon grave (no. 15), Chadlington (p. 29).  
 C. Iron implements and two potsherds (Scale  $\frac{1}{4}$ ), North Leigh and Chadlington (pp. 22, 27 f.).

A, B. *Ph.* R. T. Latley. C. *Ph.* Ashmolean Museum.