

# Two Early Saxon Cemeteries at Cassington, Oxon.

By E. T. LEEDS and MARJORIE RILEY

## CEMETERY SOUTH OF CASSINGTON VILLAGE

ALREADY in 1933 at the time of the construction of the Oxford Northern by-pass the presence of Saxons at Cassington was revealed by the discovery in Tolley's Pit (*Oxoniensia*, v, 12, fig. 1) of a few hut-bottoms, from the floors of which were recovered meagre remains of Saxon occupation, including a bronze disk-brooch. Not, however, until 1940 (*ibid.*, 163) did any graves which might be connected with this occupation come to light. In that year workmen employed in Smith's Pit II immediately west of the accommodation-lane leading southwards from the cross-roads reported the unearthing of graves close to the eastern edge of the pit (*ibid.*, fig. 1). From these some relics had been collected; a low conical iron shield-boss (FIG. 16, *g*) surmounted by a small flat-topped spike, the fittings of a bronze-bound bucket or stoup, *c.* 3 ins. high, and a tall funnel-shaped vase of pale green glass, 9½ ins. high. This last (PL. V, A) is of a familiar type, but one which has not, so far as is known, been previously found in Oxfordshire, though examples are known from Dinton, Bucks.,<sup>1</sup> and East Shefford, Berks.,<sup>2</sup> all probably traded from Kent, which seems to have been the entrepôt for these products of Belgic or Rhenish factories. All the objects above named apparently came from one grave. A second shield-boss, like the first complete with grip, was found later. In addition I have been shown by Mr. F. Lay of Cassington, who has kindly allowed me to publish them, a pair of gilt bronze brooches, *c.* 3¼ ins. long, acquired from the same source (PL. V, B). They belong to a class with radiate, semicircular head-plates, not Saxon in origin, but one which links on to the Gothic element in continental art diffused westwards from south-eastern Europe at the time of the great migrations. The brooches, cast and chased, have only three knobs (an early trait) on the head-plate, each composed of three roundels decorated with a circle; the decorative filling of the head-plate consists of five notched, slightly curving, horizontal ridges, through three of which springs a vertical

<sup>1</sup> R. Douglas, *Nenia Britannica*, p. 69, pl. xvi, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Journ. Roy. Anthr. Inst.*, XLV, 120, pl. III, which the Cassington vase closely parallels.

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ridge. The foot, of lozenge-form with a lozenge decoration, has a roundel at each side and at its extremity, while at the shoulders the normal drooping animal heads are replaced by groups of three roundels. Three-knobbed brooches are uncommon anywhere in England, as compared with the five-knobbed variety and both types belong rather to the culture of eastern Kent.<sup>1</sup> The interest of the Cassington brooches lies, however, firstly in that they are almost unquestionably neither of Kentish nor continental fabric, but local imitations of some model derived from one of those two sources, and secondly, in that a close parallel exists in a brooch from grave 10 at Little Wilbraham, Cambs.,<sup>2</sup> itself associated with another, a simpler version of the same type, decorated with the more normal spiral design on the head-plate. The Little Wilbraham cemetery may be regarded as a border-line cemetery of the Cambridge region, with preponderantly Anglian features. Had these brooches come from Linton Heath a few miles south-east, there would have been nothing particularly strange, for this latter cemetery is particularly rich in originals or imitations of Kentish jewellery. But what does immediately concern us is that we have here one more to add to the steadily increasing number of links which join the early life of the settlers around Oxford with those of the Cambridge region, particularly its southern part.

E.T.L.

### CEMETERY AT PURWELL FARM

This cemetery (FIG. 14) lies about a mile NW. of the village and some 300 yards S. of Purwell Farm and about the same distance E. of the Evenlode, which here flows southwards to join the Thames two miles downstream. The graves lay on the south-western slope of the gravel plateau occupied by the farm at 300 ft. above sea-level, and only a few feet lower than the plateau's highest point of 316 ft., north of the farm. West from the cemetery there is a rapid slope down to the Evenlode, whereas eastwards the ground rises slightly to a point of 307 ft., which affords a little known view of Oxford's spires over the gradual slope down to Cassington village.

During the summer of 1941 a gravel-pit was opened south of the farm, but owing to the remoteness of the spot its existence was not discovered until several months later, when Mr. J. S. P. Bradford visited the site and learnt of its archaeological importance. One of the gravel-diggers, Mr. A. J. Evans, reported that soon after the opening of the pit he had disturbed about thirteen skeletons in the SW. corner, all lying supine with heads to S. and with limbs stretched out normally, at a depth of 18 ins., *i.e.*, about 6 ins. below the top of

<sup>1</sup> N. Åberg, *The Anglo-Saxons in England*, p. 90 f.

<sup>2</sup> Hon. R. Neville, *Saxon Obsequies*, pl. 9.

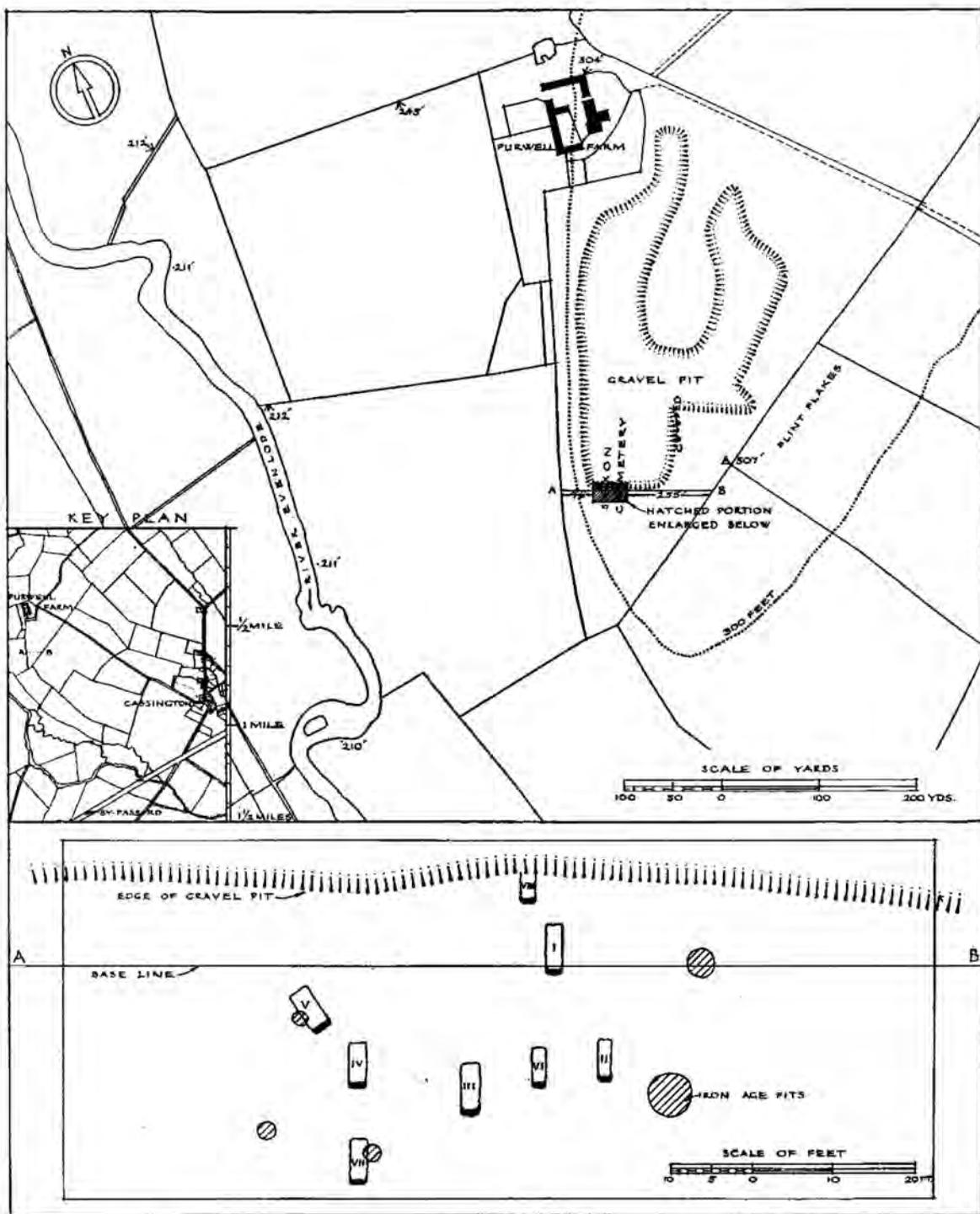


FIG. 14

MAP AND PLANS OF SAXON CEMETERY, AT PURWELL FARM, CASSINGTON, OXON.

Based on the O.S. 6-in. map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

the gravel. He had also noticed in the centre of the pit 'signs of a settlement . . . perfectly round holes in the ballast containing fragments of black pottery and animal bones,' and 'interspersed with trenches like drains.' The few pits which could still be seen when the Oxford University Archaeological Society began further exploration proved to be of Iron Age date.

Miscellaneous objects from the disturbed graves were acquired for the Ashmolean Museum. These include a bronze disk-brooch (D.  $1\frac{9}{16}$  ins.) retaining the impression of a woven fabric on its upper surface; an iron knife (L.  $5\frac{11}{16}$  ins.) and part of another; the upper part of an iron shield-boss with a thin bronze sheet soldered on to a lead-filled bronze disk superimposed on its spike by means of a socket clinched into the iron; a pair of gilt-bronze saucer-brooches (PL. VI, B), D.  $1\frac{1}{4}$  ins., decorated with a swastika-like motive with a central boss, within two circles themselves surrounded by a rayed border within an outer circle, identical in design with those from B.118 in the Abingdon cemetery;<sup>1</sup> and two necklaces (PL. VI, B), one of fifteen beads (nine amber, one large paste barrel with three-tiered yellow and red diagonal stripes, one small greyish paste, one dark red paste and four red paste with white guilloche and eyes), the other of forty-two beads (thirty-five amber, one red and yellow paste barrel, but with white and red stripes in the middle band, two small glass melon, one greenish and one dark blue, one large dark green glass bugle, one paste barrel (decayed) with yellow ends and swirled inlay, and one heptagonal glass prism, with red ends bounding a white and red millefiori pattern in a green background,<sup>2</sup> a coin of Gratian (A.D. 375-383), an irregular piece of sheet-bronze and the lower canine of a wolf).

Owing to various imperfections in the ballast, gravel-digging was brought temporarily to a standstill by the summer of 1942. As it could not be foreseen how long the untouched ground towards the south-western end of the pit, where the presence of other graves was suspected, would be allowed to remain undisturbed, members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society dug trial-trenches in this area, resulting in the discovery of a burial, the first of eight eventually unearthed, all inhumations.

The bodies had been laid in shallow hollows (averaging c. 4 to 6 ins. in depth) in the gravel, which was itself some 12 to 18 ins. below the surface of the soil. It proved, however, impossible to ascertain the exact depth of each grave, as all along the edge of the pit the surface-soil had been upset. In spite of its weight, 30 tons according to Mr. Evans, the mechanical excavator had fortunately not disturbed the skeletons in their graves beyond some crushing.

<sup>1</sup> E. T. Leeds and D. B. Harden, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Abingdon, Berks.*, pl. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Sarre, grave xx (*Arch. Cantiana*, vi, 160 and vii, pl. vii) associated with one large amber several glass-paste, and two amethyst beads, evidently of late 6th or 7th century.

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The orientation of the dozen or so graves reported by Mr. Evans proved, according to a plan furnished by him, to have been SW. rather than S. In the case of seven out of the eight graves afterwards excavated, the head was orientated in the same direction; only in grave V was the head laid directly S. No traces of coffins or biers were discovered, but large stones were found at the head, sides and/or feet of graves I, V, VI and VIII. The skull of V was raised at the neck to 2 ins. above the level of the body, since the bed of the grave had been made, or was, uneven. In most cases (I, II, III, V, VII and VIII) the head had fallen to one side. All the skeletons, with the exception of VIII, a child, which lay on its side, were supine, with the legs straight and the arms either at the sides (I, II and III), or folded over the chest (V, VII, VIII).<sup>1</sup>

### THE GRAVES

I. Young adult male; SW.; in grave, L. 6 ft. 9 ins., W. 2 ft. Body supine, arms and legs extended, skull on l. side.

Over r. ankle—*Shield-boss*, iron; domed with small disk-knob; on rim five circular studs (D. 1 in.). H. 3 ins.; D. 6 ins. *Shield-grip*, iron; short; small stud at each end.

By l. elbow—*Knife*, iron. L. 4 $\frac{5}{8}$  ins.

To r. of skull—Two *spear-heads*, iron; split sockets; narrow leaf-shaped blades: (a) point to SW.; raised rib on both faces. L. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.; (b) point to S.; flat; poorly preserved. L. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.

Over l. toes, 6 ft. from spear-head (b) in direct line N.—*Ferrule*, iron. L. 2 $\frac{1}{8}$  ins.

II. Young adult female; SW.; in grave, L. 5 $\frac{1}{2}$  ft., W. 1 ft. 8 ins. Body supine, arms and legs extended, skull on l. side.

On shoulders—*String of beads*; 36 amber, 1 crystal.

On r. and l. breast—Two *saucer-brooches*, gilt bronze (PL. v, c); five-linked spiral round circle with central raised point. D. 1 $\frac{1}{8}$  ins.

By head of l. femur—*Knife*, iron (FIG. 15, b). L. 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.

Over head of l. femur—*Needle-case*, bronze (FIG. 15, a); tubular, tapered to upper end; perforated for suspension-ring (missing). L. 2 $\frac{3}{8}$  ins.

By l. femur—*Purse-ring*, iron (FIG. 15, c); flat. W.  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.; D. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.

Within, under or close to the purse-ring (FIG. 15, d-p)<sup>2</sup>—(d) *Fr. of glass vase*, green with inlaid white threads; (e) *Stud*, bronze; flat. D. 1 in.; (f, g) *Boar's tusks*; one perforated for suspension; (h) *Ring*, iron. D. 2 ins.; (j) *Keys*, iron; fragmentary, on ring; (k) *Ring*, cast bronze. D. 1 $\frac{3}{4}$  ins., from which are suspended by (l) a *loop of bronze wire*, (m) a *strap-tag*, bronze (half the butt-end (n) broken away and lying separately) and (o, p) two *bone disks*; (q) *Piece of sheet bronze* (not figured), 1 in. square, punched with dots and with holes at each corner.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Society is greatly indebted to Miss Beatrice Blackwood for notes on the skeletal remains, as for much other valuable help; also to Miss Gabrielle Sowerby, who has drawn FIGS. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> The objects are depicted in the positions in which they were found.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Marston St. Lawrence, Northants.: *Archaeologia*, XLVIII, pl. xxiv, 3.

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III. Elderly male; SW.; in grave, L. 6½ ft., W. 2 ft. 4 ins. Body supine, arms and legs extended, skull on r. side. Worn teeth; leg-bones deformed by arthritis.

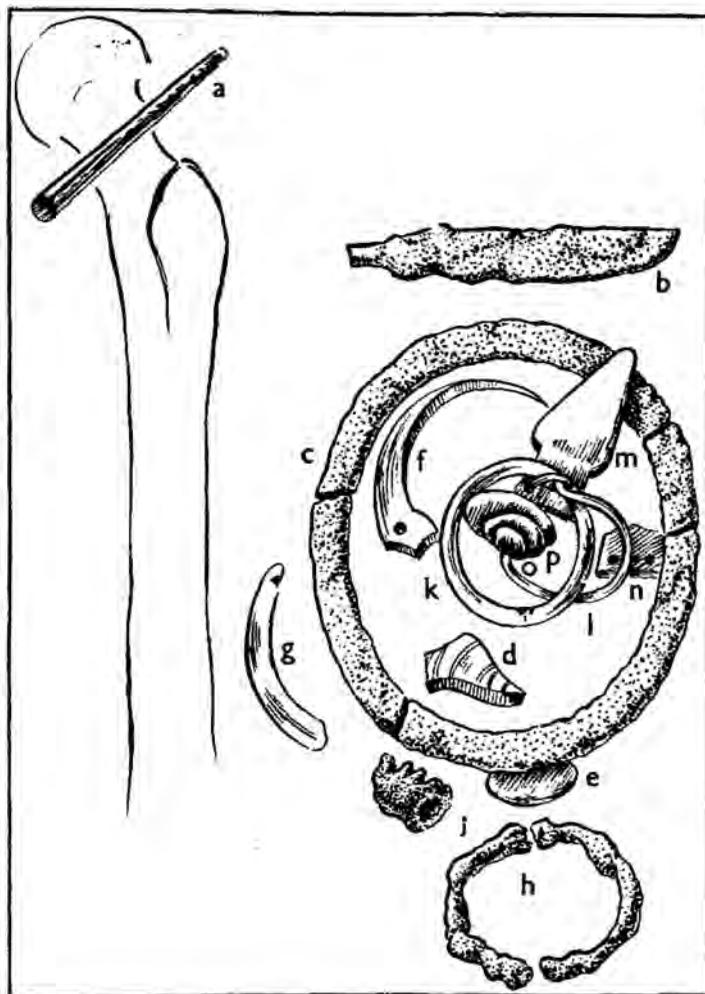


FIG. 15

SAXON CEMETERY AT PURWELL FARM, CASSINGTON.

Objects near left femur of skeleton in grave II depicted as they lay when found. Sc. ¼.

By third lumbar vertebra—*Pin*, cast bronze; head decorated with pelta-scroll with remains of red enamel; three tongues of red enamel in groove below (FIG. 16, *b-d*).

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Under pin—*Knife*, iron; imperfect.

On fourth lumbar vertebra—*Buckle*, iron; small. Small cylindrical lump of iron.

Across pelvis—*Shield-grip*, iron (FIG. 16, a); with large disk-stud at each narrow end and two short prongs projecting from outer side of wider middle portion<sup>1</sup>. L. 15 ins. *Disk-stud*, iron. (The shield-boss was missing).

IV. Adult male; SW. Body supine, left arm flexed under body, skull on r. side. Skeleton badly crushed; legs cut off above the knee.

At waist—*Shield-boss*, iron; domed with small disk-knob; rim broken. H. 2½ ins.; D. 6 ins. *Shield-grip*, iron; short; fragmentary. Five studs, iron; various sizes.

At l. of skull—*Socket of spear-head*, iron.

By waist—(a) Two knives, iron. L. 5¼ and 5 ins. (b) *Buckle*, iron; folded sheet-bronze plate for attachment to belt.

V. Adult male; S.; in grave, L. 6 ft., W. 2 ft. Body supine, r. arm and legs extended, l. arm folded diagonally across chest, skull on r. side and pillowed by bed of grave to 2 ins. above body level.

By r. humerus—*Knife*, iron. L. 7¼ ins. Point towards skull.

Below l. hand, in ribs—*Ring*, iron; fragmentary. D. 1 in.

Over ribs—Two sherds; blackish ware with red grain.

VI. Child, male, aged c. 6 years; SW.; in grave, L. 4 ft. 7 ins. Body supine, arms and legs extended, skull on l. side. Skeleton disintegrated.

To l. of skull, upright in soil—*Spear-head*, iron; lozenge-shaped blade, ground down from long use. L. 7¼ ins.; L. of socket, 2¾ ins.

In crook of l. arm—*Knife*, iron. L. 5⅞ ins.

VII. Middle-aged female; SW.; in grave, L. 5 ft. 10 ins., W. 1 ft. 9 ins. Body supine, arms folded straight across body, l. above r., legs extended, skull crushed. In a small pit to r. of skeleton, and 18 ins. lower than the grave were two sherds (? Iron Age).

On r. and l. shoulder—Two saucer-brooches, large, cast gilt bronze (PL. VI, A); central boss within chiseled trefoil; outer border of 'light-and-shade' pattern in each case showing variations in execution, in one case inferior workmanship.

On l. breast, at level of fourth dorsal vertebra, pointing towards l. arm—*Pricker*, bronze (FIG. 16, e); splayed, perforated butt.

Over tenth dorsal vertebra on l. hand—*Finger-ring*, silver (FIG. 16, f); spiral of three coils, ornamented with dots and rings.

Among l. ribs—c. 70 beads, amber.

VIII. Child, female, aged c. 8 years; SW.; in grave, L. (to knee), 3½ ft., W. 2 ft. Body on r. side, l. arm across body, r. arm extended. Lower legs broken off at edge of gravel-pit.

No associated objects; some stray animal bones in grave (leg of sheep behind skull).

M.R.

<sup>1</sup> Cp. Marston St. Lawrence, *Archaeologia*, XLVIII, pl. xxv, 36.

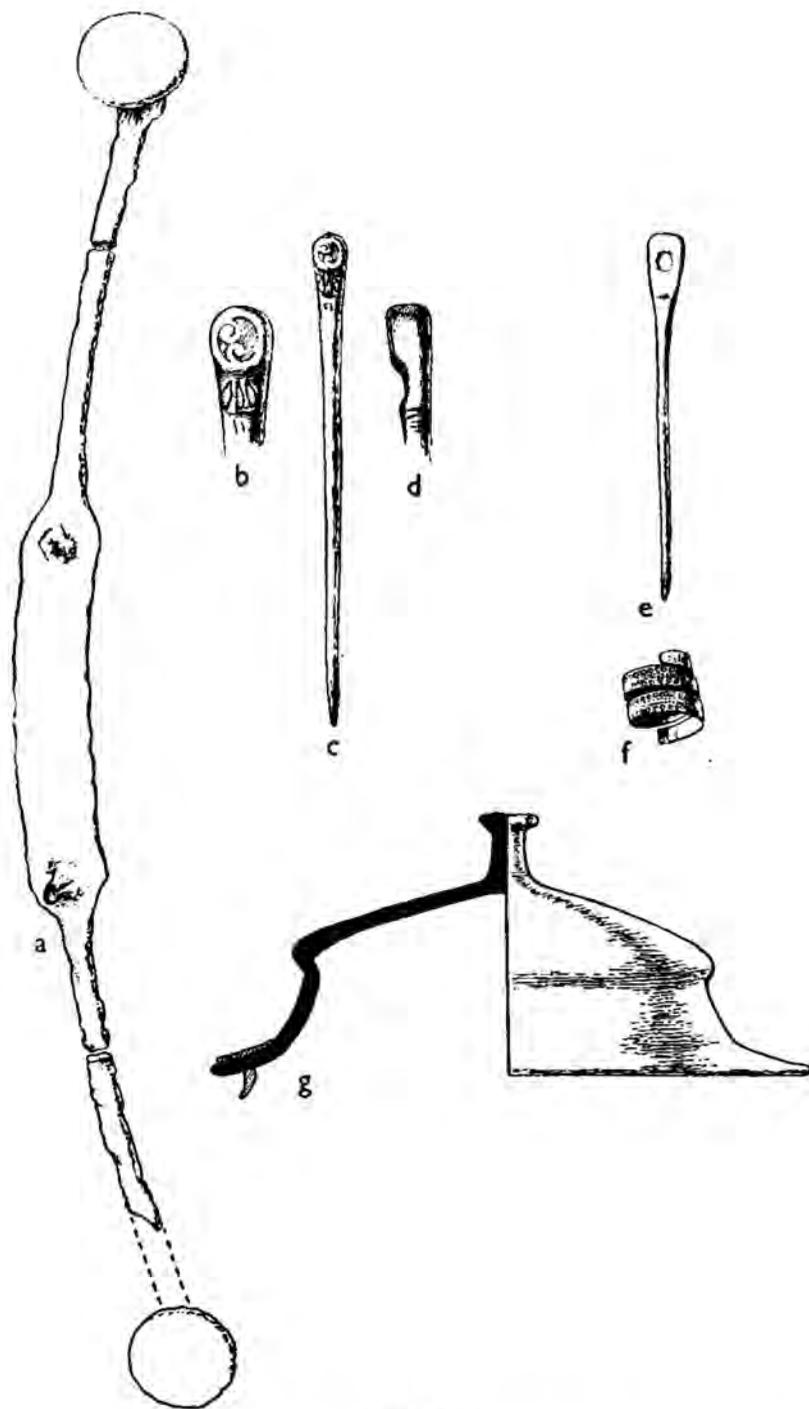


FIG. 16

SAXON CEMETERIES AT CASSINGTON.

- a-d.* Purwell Farm, grave III: shield-grip, iron, and decorated pin, bronze.  
*e-f.* Purwell Farm, grave VII: pricker, bronze, and finger-ring, silver.  
*g.* Smith's Pit II, from a grave: shield-boss, iron.

*b* and *d.* Sc.  $\frac{1}{4}$  *a, c, e-g,* Sc.  $\frac{1}{2}$ .

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### NOTES

1. *Location.* It is probably the first time that two cemeteries of this period have been found in Oxfordshire, within the limits of a single parish and only  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile apart. Their proximity is the more interesting since there is insufficient evidence (owing to partial destruction before scientific examination became possible) to prove that one antedated the other. If, however, such could be the case, the balance of evidence favours that nearer the modern village as the earlier.

Clearly the Saxons as well as their Iron Age forerunners were attracted to the site by the presence of the spring from which the farm derives its name, and it may have been they, appreciating the commanding outlook from the hill, who dubbed it Burgh-well.<sup>1</sup> Whether at their coming there was anything in the nature of a rampart enclosing the Iron Age settlement is conjectural. No trace of such remains at the present day.

Higher up the valley it is natural to find a cemetery like that of Chadlington on high ground, since it is there that the Saxons, as had Bronze Age and Iron Age man before them, found gravel-deposits, such as they preferred. But some indiscernible cause must lie behind their choice of the exposed position at Purwell, apart from the spring itself. One other instance of choice of a higher terrace-gravel occurs at Rumbold's Pit, Ewelme, 170 ft. above the site of the later village (320 ft. O.D. ; Oxford O.S. 6 in. 49 E).

2. *Brooches* (PL. VI). Two graves of women containing pairs of saucer-brooches and a third unassociated pair, establish the Saxon origin of the settlers, but above all the largest pair (grave VII, PL. VI, B), which, as proven by its distribution, is essentially West Saxon. In their decoration and size they, as others like them, bear witness to influences diffused from eastern Kent, but curiously the one feature lags behind the other. For, while the designs are based on jewellery of the latter half of the 6th century the size evidently reflects the splendid Kentish brooches of the 7th and it is to that century and probably not before the second quarter that the West Saxon pieces should be assigned.

3. *Purse-ring* (FIG. 15). For some time now it has been generally accepted that the large ivory rings, four or more inches in diameter, found near the forearm of female skeletons are not armlets, as indeed is improbable owing to their diameter, but the handles of bags or satchels. And this in spite of the fact that records exist of their having been found encircling the lower forearm. In the iron ring from Grave II we now have confirmation of this interpretation, since obviously this ring of flat, narrow metal, sharp at both edges, would be quite unsuited as an armlet.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. H. Minn has kindly drawn my attention to this form of the name in a 13th century charter.

4. *Celtic-pin* (FIG. 16, *b-d*). Celtic art throughout its early history was characterised by a spirit of adventure, as even this modest piece attests. Where exactly it stands in point of form in relation to the long series of hand-pins, ring-headed pins and other types is not easy to determine, but Mr. Oliver Davies has suggested that it recalls elements of the ring-headed type. A mere swelling at the butt-end, flattened on one side, is given a distinctive touch by a corresponding unilateral recession in the metal immediately below, further emphasized by the insertion of three narrow tongues of red enamel. Knob strictly speaking there is none, but the result is entirely satisfying, especially in the simplicity of the method by which the eye is at once attracted to the small field of decoration on the head allotted to an engraved and enamelled pelta-scroll flung haphazard on the surface.

This little piece adds one more to the growing list of examples of Celtic metal-work retrieved from Anglo-Saxon graves. I can here cite another in the hammer-headed pin from a well-known class of penannular brooch recently discovered at Nassington, Northants. One and all they strengthen the evidence for a lively, if short-lived, renaissance of Celtic art in England from the turn of the 5th century. We can only welcome the announcement (*Irish Times*, 13 Aug., 1942) of the discovery at Dereen, co. Clare, of a hanging-bowl of the class so familiar in Britain, as affording evidence of the part Ireland played in preserving unbroken the continuity of Celtic art and craftsmanship.

E.T.L.

PLATE V



A



B



C

CASSINGTON, OXON.

- A. Conical glass beaker from a grave in Smith's Pit II (p. 61). Sc.  $\frac{3}{4}$ .  
B. Radiate gilt bronze brooches from a grave in Smith's Pit II (p. 61). Sc.  $\frac{3}{4}$ .  
C. Saucer-brooches, gilt bronze, from grave II, Purwell Farm (p. 65). Sc.  $\frac{3}{4}$ .



A



B

PURWELL FARM, CASSINGTON, OXON.

- A. Saucer-brooches, gilt bronze, from grave VII (p. 67). Sc.  $\frac{1}{2}$ .  
B. Saucer-brooches, gilt bronze, and beads, from disturbed graves (p. 64). Sc.  $\frac{1}{2}$ .

*Phh. Ashmolean Museum*