

A Beaker-Culture Barrow at North Stoke, Oxon.

By H. W. CATLING

EARLY in 1954 it became known that a circular crop mark in arable land on the east bank of the River Thames, some half a mile to the south of the village of North Stoke, Oxfordshire, was threatened with destruction by the extension of a privately owned gravel-pit close to the road between North Stoke and South Stoke.¹ The site was one of a large group of crop marks in this area (PL. 1), first identified from the air by Major G. W. G. Allen.² In September 1954, the writer was invited by Dr. D. B. Harden, Keeper of the Department of Antiquities of the Ashmolean Museum, to conduct a short rescue excavation on the threatened site.³ A generous financial grant was provided by H.M. Ministry of Works.

In the writer's continued absence from England Mr. H. J. Case has most generously undertaken to write the section dealing with the finds, in addition to having given invaluable help and advice before and during the fieldwork, for all of which the writer is greatly indebted to him. Thanks are due to the proprietors of North Stoke Farms Ltd. for kindly permitting the excavation to take place on their land, and for presenting the finds to the Ashmolean Museum. Dr. D. B. Harden gave every possible assistance, particularly in the smoothing out of administrative difficulties. During the excavation, Mr. A. G. Hunter gave much valuable help, as, too, on several occasions, did Mr. A. G. Fenwick. Mrs. E. A. Catling helped in many ways, particularly in the survey of the site. Miss Moore, of the Crossways, Ipsden, loaned equipment and assisted in other ways.

The site consisted of the filled-up quarry-ditch of a small barrow which had covered the body of a child between 11 and 12 years old (FIGS. 1 and 2). The body, which was buried in a contracted position, was accompanied by an A-Beaker (FIG. 4). Cultivation had obliterated the mound itself.⁴ Interpretation of the stratification suggests that in addition to the turf and gravel

¹ National Grid: 41/611856.

² One of the crop marks was excavated by the late E. T. Leeds in 1933 and others by Mr. H. J. Case in 1950, 1951 and 1952—*Oxoniensia*, I (1936), 16-18; xv (1950), 107; xvi (1951), 81-2; xvii/xviii (1952/3), 218.

³ A preliminary report appeared in *Oxoniensia*, xix (1954), 118. (The National Grid reference given is slightly incorrect.)

⁴ Not all of the North Stoke mounds have been totally eliminated. The prominent ring on the west side of the Cursus, opposite this Beaker barrow (PL. 1) encloses an easily distinguishable mound.

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mound over the burial, a circular bank of gravel lay outside the ditch around its edge.

METHOD OF EXCAVATION

A preliminary examination, in April 1954, seemed to show that the south side of the quarry-ditch had already been damaged by gravel digging. In the exposed section on the north side of the gravel-pit, two artificially formed heads of soil could be seen whose relative positions were consistent with an oblique cut having been made across the ditch by the gravel-diggers. On this assumption, a square base line was laid out to enclose the site. An estimate was made of the diameter of the monument from a study of several of Major Allen's air photographs. Account was taken of the supposed cut on the south side of the ditch, and an approximate centre calculated. Four trenches were then cut, intersecting at this 'centre'. On the exposure of the uppermost filling of the ditch in these trenches, it became apparent that the real centre lay well north of the estimated centre. A fresh study of the air photographs and of the exposed gravel-pit section resolved the difficulty. Just to the south of the site, two small dark spots appear on more than one photograph; they evidently represent filled-up pits, and it was these pits, and not the quarry-ditch which had been cut by the gravel-pit. Fresh east-west trenches had to be cut, but fortunately the north-south trenches were found to be correctly aligned on the true centre.

In addition to the four sections cut across the quarry-ditch, the central area was cleared, yielding the burial group. Markings on some air-photographs appeared to show an inner ring of post- or stake-holes. Careful search was made for such holes, but with negative results. Part of the south-west quadrant was stripped to the surface of the ditch-filling. No outer ring of post- or stake-holes was found in this area.

Unlike the great majority of the Thames gravel terraces above and below Oxford, the North Stoke deposit provides considerable difficulties for the excavator. The deposit includes an overlay of outwash gravel brought down by glacial action from the surrounding chalk formations. Below a shallow layer of plough-soil this outwash gravel has weathered for some 1 ft. 6 in., and looks very much like made ground, since it is permeated by soil of a texture and colour very similar to that in the plough-soil. Beneath the outwash gravel is an easily recognized unweathered white gravel. In clearing a ditch cut into this subsoil, great difficulty can be experienced in distinguishing its profile in the weathered (but undisturbed) gravel, particularly when slides of flint ballast from destroyed structures cover the ditch face. The transition between plough-soil and the undisturbed weathered gravel can also be

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difficult, since the former carries virtually as heavy a mixture of intact or shattered flint nodules as the latter, and colour difference is slight. The greatest care, in fact, was needed to prevent either over- or under-cutting of the ditch profile within the weathered gravel horizon.⁵

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MONUMENT (FIGS. 1 AND 3)

No trace of the mound or its quarry-ditch remained above ground at the time of the excavation, and the suggested reconstruction rests solely on evidence gathered in the course of excavation.

No grave pit was dug for the child's body. In the absence of an old turf-line beneath the stump of the mound (see below, p. 6) it seems possible that the whole area within the quarry-ditch was stripped of its turf before the corpse was deposited. The comparatively stoneless patch of soil⁶ in the region of the burial suggests that it was first laid on a bed, and then covered by a small mound, both of sods, the material for which came from this suggested stripping of the surface.

The quarry-ditch was laid out and cut in a very erratic manner, so much so that the diameter of the area enclosed fluctuates by as much as 6 ft.⁷ The greatest overall diameter of the site, from ditch-lip to ditch-lip, was 53 ft. The width of the ditch—12 ft. at its greatest—varied by as much as 3 ft. from point to point. Its depth—maximum 5 ft.—was almost equally erratic. Both the ditch-profile and the gradient of its sides varied considerably from place to place. While much of the irregularity of the cutting of the ditch can probably be ascribed to the perversity of the subsoil, the lack of symmetry in its plan must have been due to a somewhat haphazard method of laying out.

Most of the ballast from the ditch was piled into a mound over the burial, already covered by its pile of sods. If the latter indeed came from stripping the turf from the area within the ditch, the turf from the ditch was perhaps used as a capping for the complete mound.

From the stratification in the ditch, it seems clear that a low bank was constructed around the outside of the monument; this is the most probable explanation of the substantial slide of stony material found everywhere on the outer side of the ditch (see below, p. 6). This bank was the first part of the monument to disappear.

⁵ Cf. E. T. Leeds, *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), 18, where he draws attention to this difficulty; he, indeed, maintained that it was impossible to distinguish between ditch-edge and ditch-filling. The excavator, fortunately, had had previous experience of these conditions, and was to some extent prepared for the difficulties. But the workmen could not always be brought to see the distinction, and there was some overcutting in consequence.

⁶ Cf. FIG. 3, Layer 7 of the Layers of the Mound Stump.

⁷ Thus, on the north-south line, it measured 33 ft. 7 in., but only 27 ft. 7 in. on the east-west.

NORTH STOKE

BEAKER BURIAL

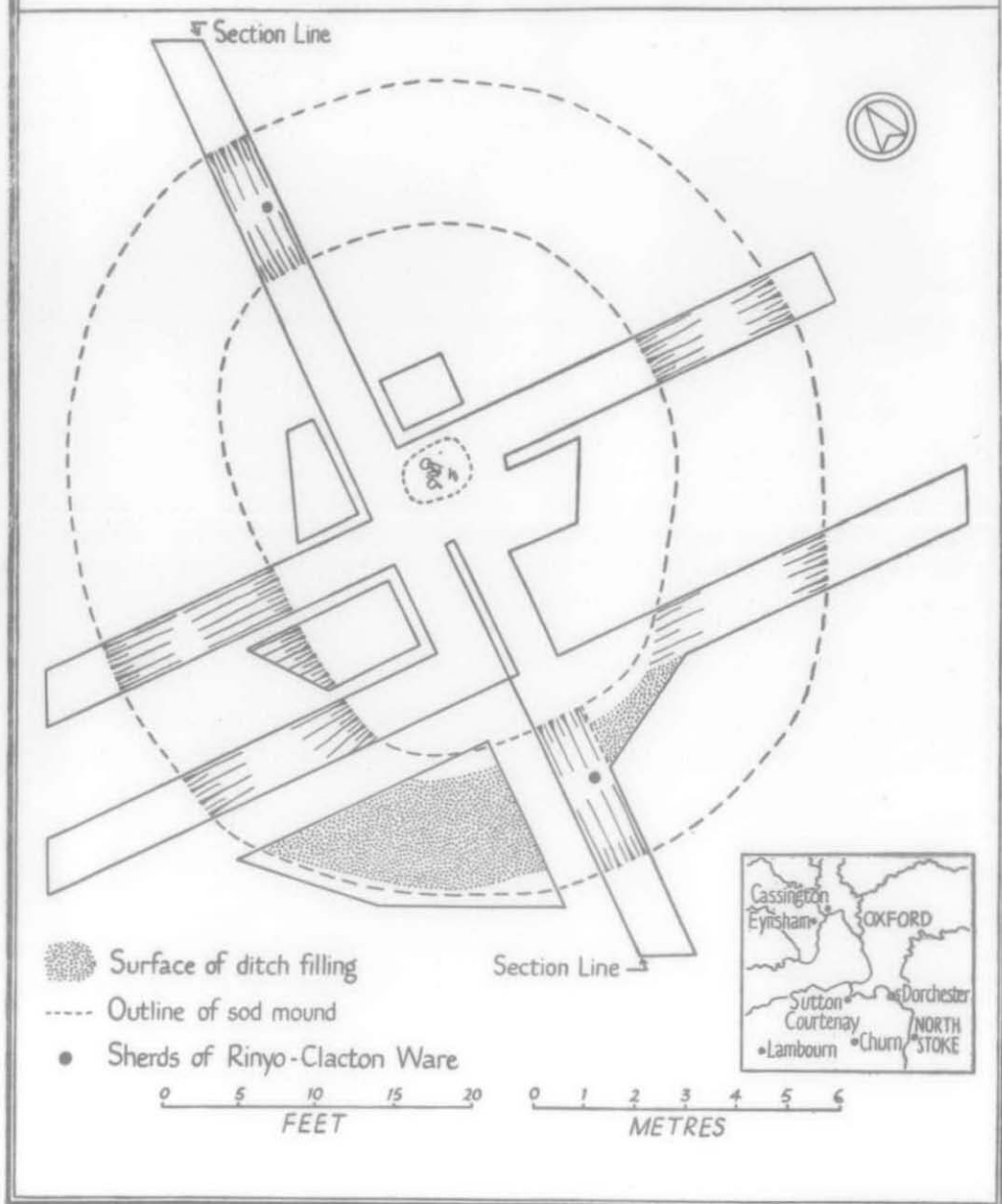


FIG. 1

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THE BURIAL (FIG. 2)

The very poorly preserved skeleton was submitted to Dr. J. F. Roberts of the Oxford University Department of Human Anatomy, who reported as follows:⁸

‘Skeleton very fragmentary. The remains are those of a child, sex indeterminate, age about 11-12.’

The child was buried on its left side, oriented to the east. It was in a fully contracted position, the arms folded tightly in front of the chest, with the hands probably originally at shoulder-level. The beaker had been placed at the small of the back; when found, it was on its side, with the mouth nearest the body.

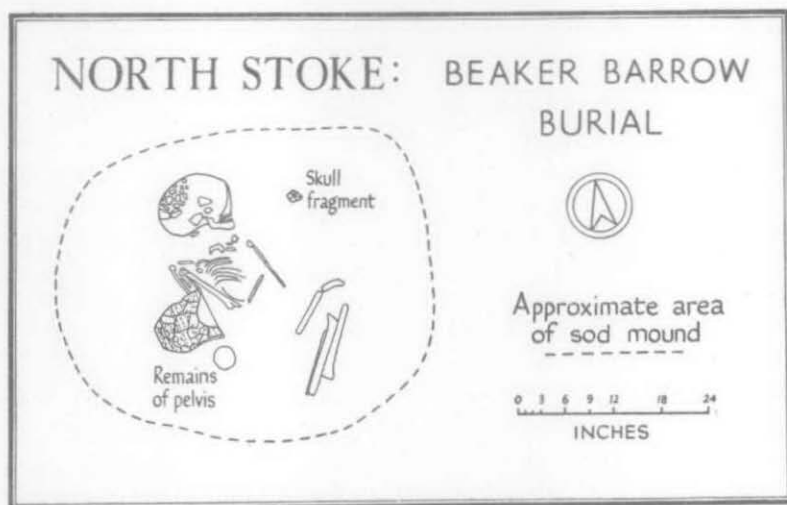


FIG. 2

Both the skeleton and the beaker had suffered severely from the manner of their burial. The weight of the covering mound had crushed both considerably; the cranium was virtually flat, and the beaker in little better shape. After the disappearance of the mound, the burial, without the protection of a grave-pit, was so near the surface that it was inevitably damaged by cultivation. The hands and feet, most of the spinal column, a large part of the pelvic girdle and most of the epiphyses were wanting. The right side of the cranium was largely missing, though scraps of it were found up to 1 ft. 6 in. away, at the same depth. Part of the mouth of the beaker on the exposed side was

⁸ The writer's sincere thanks are due to Dr. Roberts for his examination of the skeleton.

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missing. Under the circumstances, however, it is remarkable that the burial had survived at all, for a plough set only 2 in. deeper than the 9 in. customarily used on this land would have obliterated it.

DETAILED STRATIGRAPHY OF THE MONUMENT (FIG. 3)

Within the area enclosed by the ditch, and in immediate association with the burial, was a concentration of brown soil with only a slight mixture of flints (Layer 7), representing the heap of sods on which the corpse was laid, and by which it was subsequently covered. Surrounding this was a layer of flint nodules of varying size, mixed with a little brown soil (Layer 2a), evidently the remains of a gravel mound piled over the burial.⁹ It could be distinguished from the equivalent level outside the ditch by its much heavier concentration of flint-nodules.

The first silting to be deposited in the ditch (in the south cutting) was a sterile mixture of small pebbles and light brown soil (Layer 6), produced by the erosion of the very friable unweathered gravel, on the outer side. This was followed by a slide of large flint nodules mixed with brown soil (Layer 5) which must represent a very early stage in the collapse of the bank surrounding the ditch. In the north cutting, layers 5 and 6 were similar, but their relative positions were reversed.

Thereafter, the superimposed layers corresponded in the two cuttings. Layer 4 was a fine, almost black soil mixed with relatively few flint nodules, and was probably deposited slowly. In it was found a small pocket of pulverized sherds of Rinyo-Clacton ware (see below, p. 11). The position of this layer against the outer side of the ditch suggests that it was an accumulation of wind- and water-borne silt into which material from the outer bank periodically collapsed. The dark colour was perhaps due to a combination of regular water-logging of the ditch bottom and rich weed growth.¹⁰ Meanwhile the mound had begun to disintegrate, its ballast sliding into the ditch to form a heavy layer of flint nodules and brown soil against the inner face (Layer 2). The bank also continued to collapse, producing a substantial slide of smallish flint nodules and brown soil (Layer 3) against the upper, outer face. In the south cutting, two stages in this process could be seen, for the main slide was overlaid by the upper part of the slow black silt (Layer 4), which, in its turn, was partly overlaid by more material from the outer bank, including a small seam of reddish sand (Layer 3a of the south Cutting).

⁹ The depth of the remains of the gravel mound, in relation to what is interpreted as the bed of sods on which the corpse was laid, seems to exclude the possibility that this feature should in fact be interpreted as a shallow grave dug into an otherwise undisturbed deposit.

¹⁰ This is more probable than the supposition that the soil was derived from a context with a very high humic content, e.g. highly cultivated land in the immediate vicinity of the monument.

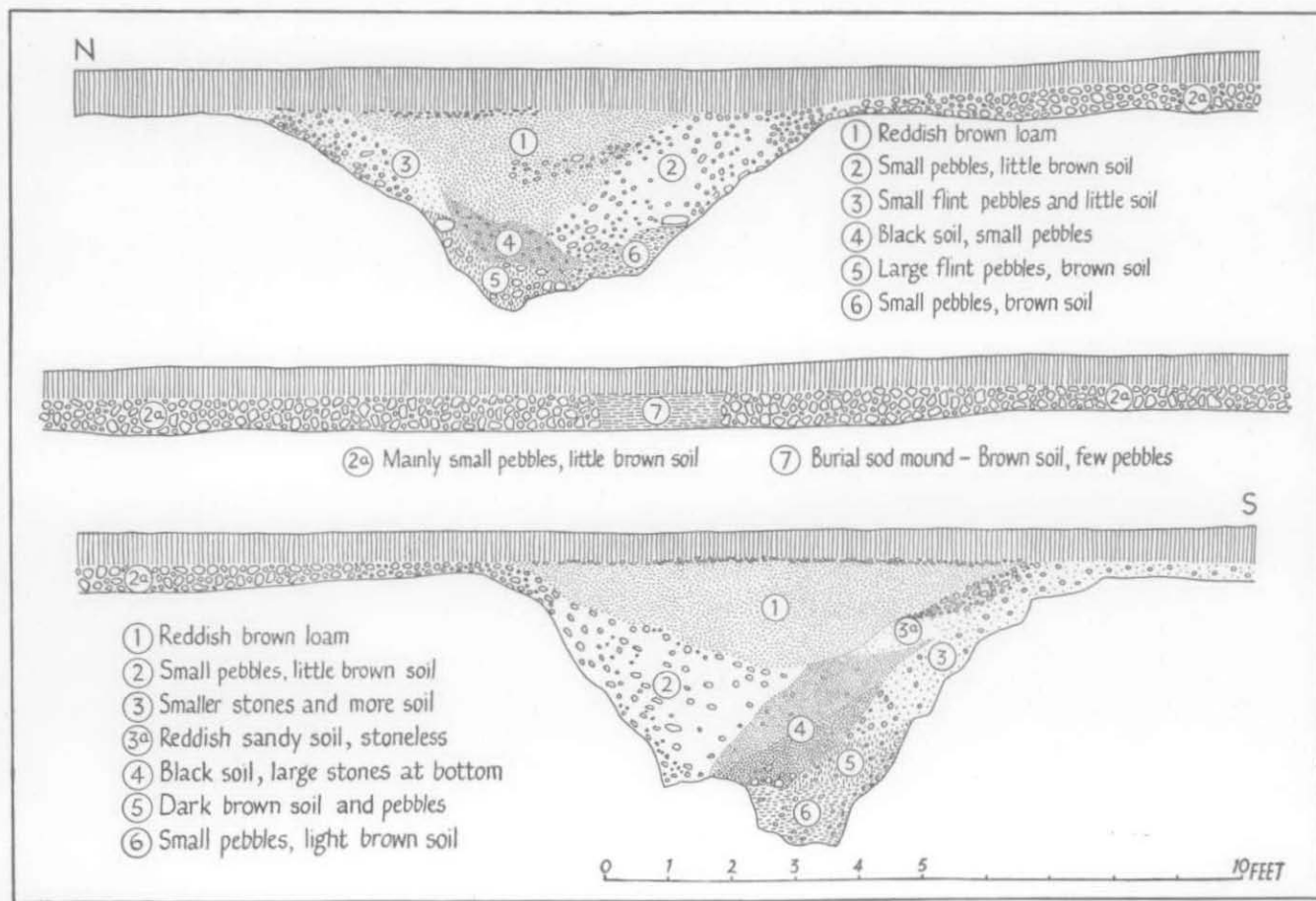


FIG. 3

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By this stage, the outer bank had probably wholly disappeared, the mound had been largely obliterated, and the ditch was three parts filled. Later, the rest of the ditch was filled with a fine, almost stoneless rusty-reddish loam (Layer 1), the product of slow wind- and water-borne silting. A small sherd of Rinyo-Clacton ware was found in this layer, in the north cutting (see below, p. 11). The last detectable stage in the elimination of the mound was a thin horizontal seam of flints on the top of the reddish silt. Finally, perhaps in comparatively recent times, the whole monument was reduced to a common level, and the uppermost filling of the quarry-ditch was masked by the shallow, uniform layer of plough-soil by which the site was covered at the time of excavation.

SUMMARY

A burial in a sod mound was capped by a tumulus of flint ballast derived from the ditch, itself enclosed by a bank of similar ballast. This bank collapsed into the ditch, covering or covered by quick silting from the friable lower ditch face. Slow silting then accumulated, its high humic content probably due to waterlogging and rich weed growth. Into this silting the mound began to collapse, while the outer bank was completely destroyed. What was left of the ditch then filled slowly with stoneless silt, and the monument was finally obliterated by cultivation.

NOTES ON THE MONUMENT AND FINDS

By HUMPHREY CASE

THE MONUMENT

I QUOTED Mr. Catling's excavation, in a recent review of beaker pottery found near Oxford, as contributing to the regional evidence that users of beakers (whether of type A, B, or C) were not, as generally believed, builders of large barrows.¹¹ A rough calculation of the material produced by the quarry-ditches at North Stoke, and the subtraction from it of enough for the outer bank postulated by Mr. Catling shows that the inner mound can hardly have been raised a foot higher than the present surface. The monument thus originally consisted of a slightly raised central platform, surrounded by the quarry-ditch and outer bank.

¹¹ *Oxoniensia*, XXI (1956), 20-1. The North Stoke barrow should be compared with Lambourn 17 and not Lambourn 31 (*loc. cit.* 12). I had not yet seen Mr. Catling's sections.

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This type of monument has been termed a saucer-barrow by Mr. Grinsell.¹² Listing excavated examples, he quoted Bishop's Cannings 54, Wilts., with a primary burial with an A-beaker, but later concluded that the barrow had been wrongly identified by Goddard.¹³ Recently, however, Lambourn 17, Berks., has been shown to have had a primary burial with a C-beaker;¹⁴ and a monument at Cassington, Oxon., with a burial with a B-beaker primary to one with an A-beaker, was probably of the same type.¹⁵

One can scarce doubt now that this type of barrow belonged to users of A-beakers and the earlier C-beakers; possibly to users of one of the earliest types of B-beaker.¹⁶ It may have been their innovation. On the other hand, it may have been derived from an earlier native type of earthwork. Sites IV, V, and VI at Dorchester, Oxon., may have been no earlier and apparently differ in having causeways,¹⁷ but Barrows I and II at Rathjordan, Limerick, seem to have been exactly similar and yielded typical Neolithic shouldered ware.¹⁸

Catling has added some interesting evidence to our conception of the Beaker cultures. And these small saucer-barrows can be placed in the line of derivation of the spectacular Disc and Bell-disc barrows of the later Bronze Age.

THE FINDS

1. Beaker of Abercromby's type A (FIG. 4), from the central burial. Ashmolean Museum: 1957.110. Well-made and fairly complete but decoration rather careless. Polished surfaces, interior fairly well-preserved, exterior mostly weathered. Base in similar preservation to rest. Paste: fine but with a fair number of grits including flints up to 5 mm., but mostly minute. Ware: Fairly hard. Firing: Red exterior especially on neck but tending to brown on belly, red interior, tending to brown towards base, black core. Decoration: Linear impressions by a notched stamp, with various numbers of teeth employed.

I discussed this beaker recently with some others found near Oxford which have the upper part of the neck convex and lack any moulding below the rim.¹⁹ This shape is widespread and undifferentiated, and found throughout Britain and in Ireland.

The motives of its decoration (hatched triangles and lozenges standing on

¹² *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, VII (1941), 88-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 89; *V.C.H. Wilts.*, I, pt. 1. (1957), 158, under "Bishops Cannings, 53".

¹⁴ *Berks. Arch. J.*, LV (1956-7), 23-5.

¹⁵ *Oxoniensia*, XVI (1951), 1-4.

¹⁶ In view of the similarly deep grave at Lambourn, it is more likely that the bank and ditch at Cassington were associated with the B-beaker, but one cannot be certain.

¹⁷ Atkinson and others, *Excavations at Dorchester, Oxon.* (1951), 43-59, 67.

¹⁸ *J. Cork Hist. & Arch. Soc.*, LII (1947), 1-4; LIII (1948), 20-2.

¹⁹ *Loc. cit.* in note 11, pp. 10, 18.

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their long or short axes) are also common on A-beakers, especially of this shape. They are not rare on the continent, especially on beakers found in Bohemia and Moravia and in the Veluwe district of the Netherlands. Nor-

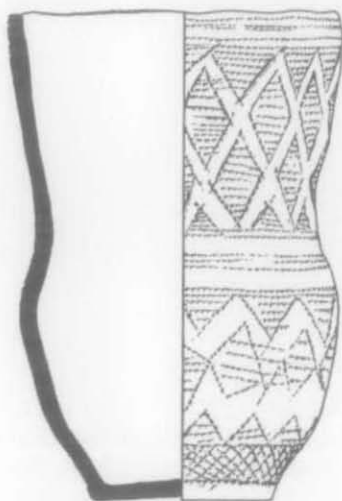


FIG. 4
Beaker from Central burial. Scale: $\frac{1}{2}$.

mally these motives are attached to a band of ornament encircling the whole vessel, like the triangles of our beaker, or are attached to one another to form their own band like the lozenges on the belly.

In contrast the lozenges of the upper central row on the neck are unattached to any part of the design; they float free. This trick of floating ornament with hexagons or lozenges, can be seen on three other beakers found near or in Oxford, of the same shape as our own,²⁰ and on one of hybrid shape from Cassington.²¹ It is quite in contrast to the continuous zonal or panelled schemes typical of beakers throughout Europe, and is characteristically English. I do not know of a Continental example. Abercromby illustrated fourteen examples from the main areas of nineteenth century excavation, from Wiltshire, the Peak District of Derbyshire and Staffordshire and the Yorkshire Wolds, also one each from Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire.²² Recently

²⁰ Cassington, Oxon.; Smith's No. II pit; *Oxon.*, 36; *loc. cit.* in note 11, fig. 1. Eynsham, Oxon.; Beaker-Culture cemetery; *Oxon.* 42; *Ibid.*, fig. 2. Oxford, Polstead Rd.; *Oxon.*, 23; *Oxoniensia*, III (1938), 29 and Abercromby, *Bronze Age Pottery*, I (1912), no. 64.

²¹ Beaker-culture cemetery, grave 5; *Oxon.*, 4; *Oxoniensia*, III (1938), 27 and *Antiq. J.*, xiv (1934), pl. xxxiii, no. 1.

²² Abercromby, *op. cit.* in note 20, *passim*.

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found examples tend to be easterly.²³ I do not know of one from Wales,²⁴ but Margaret Mitchell illustrated one from Scotland.²⁵

This motive appears to have been an addition by native Englishmen to the techniques of potting brought in by the immigrant users of B- and C-beakers from the Lower Rhine. It goes back to Mesolithic times or earlier,²⁶ and is one more illustration of the fascinating variety of our Beaker-Cultures once thought to be so uniform.

2. Sherd of a vessel of Rinyo-Clacton ware (FIG. 5, no. 2), with an applied cordon and decorated with paired finger-nail impressions. From Layer 1. Ashmolean Museum: 1959.251. Paste: Fine with few and minute grits, 2 mm. or less, ?quartzite. Ware: Medium-hard, smooth especially interior. Firing: Red exterior, black interior, brown core.

3. 3 oz. of very comminuted sherds of a vessel of Rinyo-Clacton ware (FIG. 5, no. 3), with probably fairly straight walls and decorated with finger-nail impressions on the body and with two lines drawn and impressed with the finger-nail around the flat of the rim. From Layer 4. Ashmolean Museum: 1959.252. Paste: Fine, with fairly frequent flint grits mostly 1-2 mm. but exceptionally—5 mm. Ware: Friable, smoothed inside and out. Firing: Surfaces brown or black with a black core.



FIG. 5

Sherds of Rinyo-Clacton ware. Scale: $\frac{1}{2}$.

Rinyo-Clacton ware has been defined by Piggott.²⁷ Neither of the finds described above can be placed in the local groups discussed by Thomas.²⁸ But such individualistic pottery is bound to elude classification sometimes.

Sherd no. 2 probably came from a vessel similar to one found beneath the bank at Woodhenge, near Durrington, Wilts.; sherds with paired finger-nail impressions came from an identical position.²⁹ Sherds no. 3 are very similar

²³ E.g. Lakenheath, Suffolk; *Proc. Cambs. Arch. Soc.*, XLII (1949), 104, fig. 9. Chippenham, Cambs.; *Id.* XXXIX (1938/9), 55, fig. 17, no. 21. Risby Warren, Lincs.; *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, XXIII (1957) pl. ix, no. 1, f.p. 42. There are probably many more.

²⁴ *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* XXIII (1957), 57-90 for references.

²⁵ Glenluce Sands, Wigtownshire. *Proc. Soc. Ant. Soc.*, LXVIII (1934), 170, no. 278.

²⁶ E.g. Clark, *Mesolithic Settlement of Northern Europe* (1936), 169-70, 179 and fig. 60, q.

²⁷ *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles* (1954), 321 ff.

²⁸ *Oxoniensis*, xx (1955), 23-8.

²⁹ Cunliffe, *Woodhenge* (1929), pl. 25, fig. 1; pl. 37. Cf. a cordoned vessel decorated with finger-nail impressions from Stanton Harcourt. *Loc. cit.* in note 28, p. 13, fig. 5.

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in ware to those from Sutton Courtenay, Berks., with the substitution of flint for shell grit.³⁰ Finger-nail impressions are common on southern Rinyo-Clacton ware, for instance on sherds from the mound of Barrow C on Churn Plain, near Blewbury, Berks.³¹

At North Stoke, the sherds found their way into the ditch during the collapse of the monument or its degradation by ploughing. Both may have been originally incorporated into the make-up of the central platform or the outer bank. Similar instances are known.³²

At Woodhenge, the use of Rinyo-Clacton ware preceded and overlapped the use of B-beakers, including corded vessels of early type.³³ At Circle I nearby, it was probably still in use when an A-beaker was buried in the central grave; it was found in pits adjoining the grave and at the bottom of one of the two concentric ditches.³⁴ The evidence from North Stoke tends to confirm the overlap of A-beakers and Rinyo-Clacton ware,³⁵ at a date which may approach the middle of the second millennium B.C. The overlap is implicit in the suggestion of Butler and Smith that features of Bronze Age urns are derived from Rinyo-Clacton ware.³⁶

³⁰ *Antiq. J.*, xiv (1934), pl. xxix, f.p. 265.

³¹ *Trans. Newbury Dist. F.C.*, vi. (1936), 170, fig. 35.

³² The mound of Barrow C on Churn Plain contained a surprising variety of sherds.

³³ *Loc. cit.* in note 28, p. 25. For views on the probably early date of some corded B-beakers, see *loc. cit.* in note 11, p. 13, and *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, xxv (1959), 43.

³⁴ *Op. cit.* in note 29, pp. 42-5.

³⁵ Piggott quotes additional evidence, *op. cit.* in note 27, p. 338.

³⁶ *Univ. London, Inst. of Archaeology, 12th Ann. Rep.* (1956), 44-5.



Aerial photograph taken by Major G. W. G. Allen in 1933, showing crop marks at North Stoke: seen from the West.