

Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Oxon. 1976

By MICHAEL PARRINGTON

SUMMARY

Excavations on the site of barrow 2 took place on the line of the proposed Abingdon peripheral relief road. Four sections were cut through the barrow ditches and an eleven metre wide segment of the interior was examined. Several linear features underlying the barrow were excavated and a secondary, probably Saxon, burial cut into the barrow ditch was recorded. Trial excavations to the north and south of the barrow found nothing of archaeological interest.

INTRODUCTION

THE Barrow Hills site is situated on the Summertown-Radley terrace of the Thames at SU 515983, one mile north-east of central Abingdon. The place name of Barrow Hills has existed since at least the sixteenth century¹ but as no evidence of the mounds suggested by the name survives it was not until the 1930s that the site was discovered by aerial photography.² Since then eleven of the nineteen or so barrows known from their cropmarks, including barrow 2, have had some degree of archaeological attention, mostly precipitated by the threat of gravel extraction.³ Barrow 2 is part of a large complex of archaeological remains known from aerial photography and excavation which will be discussed fully in the forthcoming excavation report on the Barton Court Farm site.⁴ Consequently in this report the archaeological landscape around the barrows is discussed only briefly and attention is concentrated on the Bronze Age aspects of the excavated site.

The excavations were carried out by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit. I am grateful to Alison Allden who was responsible for recording the site during the excavations and who drew the publication plans, and to the small team of diggers who worked on the site in somewhat damp conditions. John Hazelden kindly visited the site and made comments on the soils which have been incorporated in the text and I am grateful to Bob Wilson, Mark Robinson and Mary Harman for their specialist reports, to Robin Spey who drew the small finds, to Richard Bradley for his advice on the flints, and to David Brown for discussing the knife with me. The site owners, Royco Ltd., have been most helpful in arranging access to the site and allowing the excavation. The N.M.R. have kindly allowed us to publish an aerial photograph of the site (PL. III).

The Bronze Age barrows are aligned in two rows with twelve known barrows in the northern row, five in the southern row and two outliers to the north (FIG. 1). The two rows form an 'avenue' which appears to be aligned upon the earlier

¹ M. Gelling, *The Place Names of Berkshire Part 2* (1974), 456.

² D. Benson, D. Miles *et al.*, *The Upper Thames Valley, An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1974), 87.

³ For reference to previous reports see R. J. C. Atkinson, 'Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Berks. 1944-45', *Oxoniensia*, xvii-xviii (1952/3), 14-35, footnote 1, 14.

⁴ D. Miles, *Excavations at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon* (forthcoming).



FIG. 1
Barrow Hills location plan and cropmark plan.

Neolithic causewayed camp⁵ to the west of the barrow cemetery. The cropmarks of other presumed archaeological features abound at the west end of the 'avenue' of barrows and the excavated multi-period cropmark site of Barton Court Farm⁶ lies to the south-west of the site with the medieval earthworks of Daisy Bank intervening between the two areas. Barrow 2 is located at the west end of the northern row of barrows and as its numbering suggests is the second barrow in the row. The western part of the site is covered with linear ridges up to 25–30 cm. high and c. 18 m. apart which are presumably the result of agricultural activity.

Barrow 2 was previously excavated in 1944⁷ when it was thought that the site was to be destroyed by gravel extraction. In the event the gravel pits ceased to be worked and the site was preserved from destruction. The excavators cut a 4 ft. wide trench through the centre of the barrow and located a central cremation pit (shown hatched on FIG. 3) containing the remains of what was probably a young adult male. Three metal objects were found with the cremation; a bronze awl (Ash. Mus. 1945.111) and two halves of a gold bead cover (Ash. Mus. 1945.110).

⁵ H. Case, 'The Neolithic Causewayed Camp at Abingdon, Berks.', *Antiq. J.*, 36 (1956), 11–30.

⁶ *Op. cit.* note 4.

⁷ Atkinson, *op. cit.* note 3.

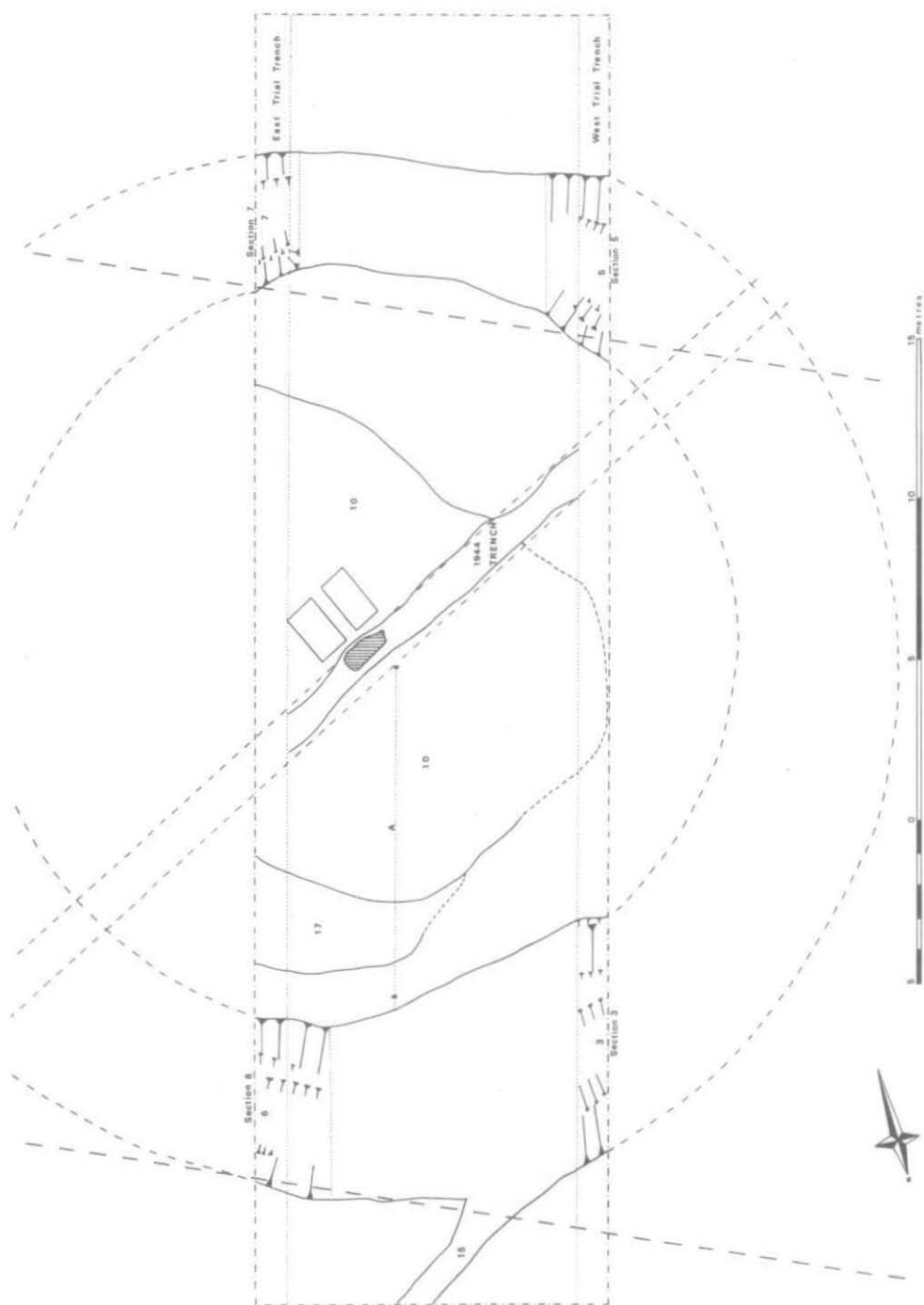


FIG. 2
Barrow 2 excavation plan.

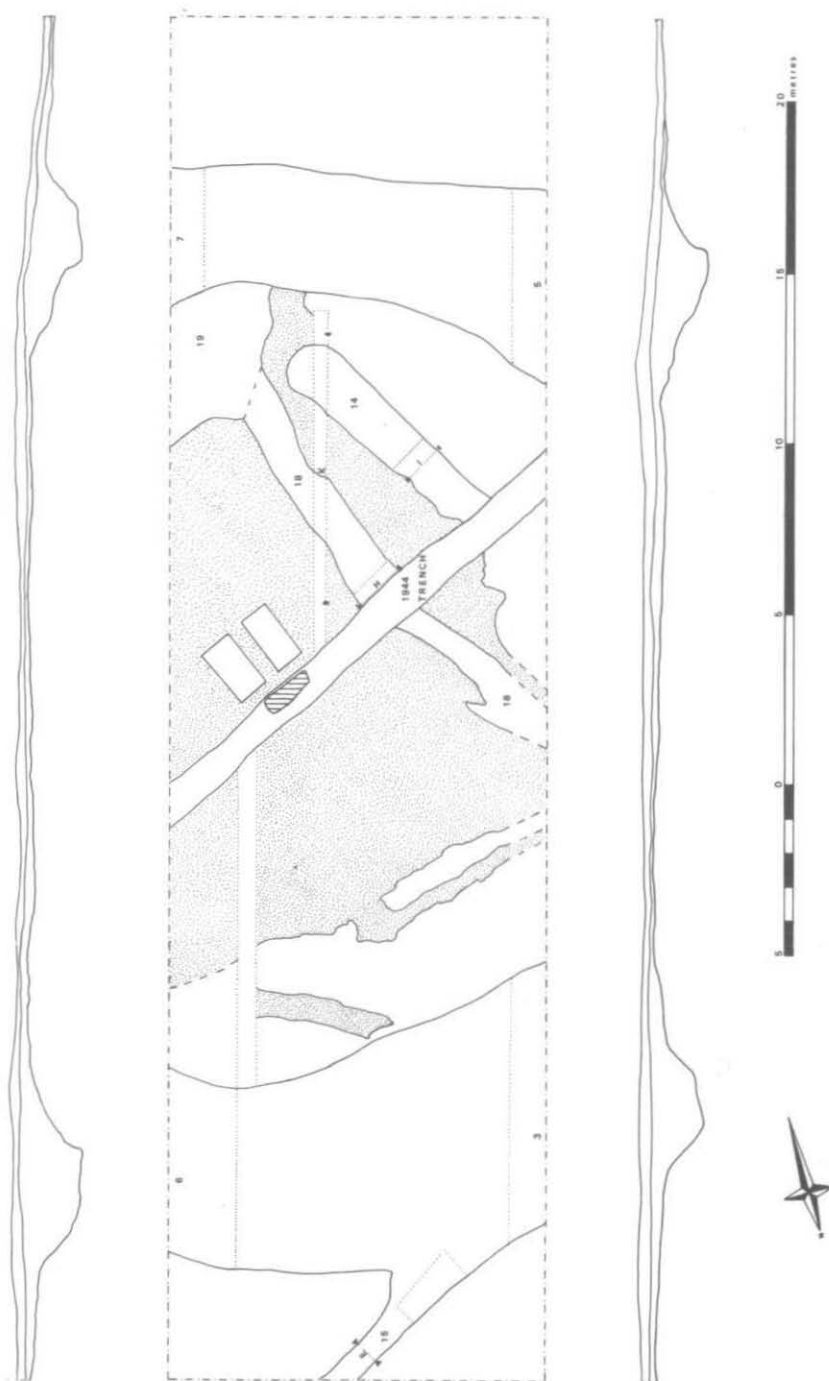


FIG. 3
Barrow 2 base plan.

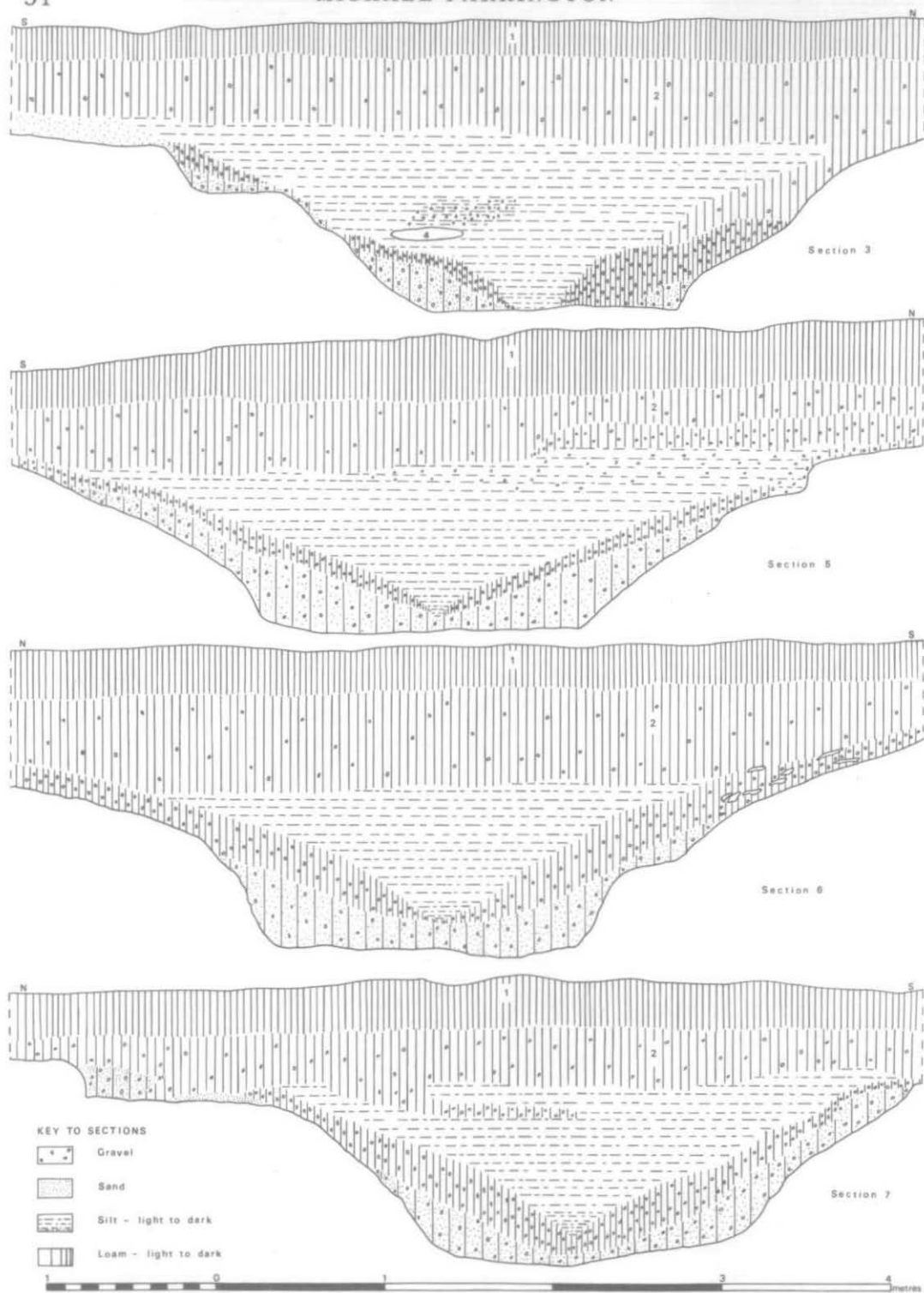


FIG. 4
Ditch sections.

The profiles of the barrow ditches were recorded as consisting of a wide round-bottomed 'V', with an inner ledge. Two further small trenches were excavated to the south of the central cremation but no features were discovered in them. The only finds from the site other than the 'grave goods' were a few animal bone fragments and a sherd of Roman pottery found 2 ft. down in the barrow ditch.

The excavation of the adjacent barrows 3 and 7 and the examination of a small Roman cemetery which lay c. 174 m. north of barrow 2 are also described in the excavation report.

THE 1976 EXCAVATIONS

The excavations took place from late September for a period of five weeks with an average work-force of six. The initial work on the site consisted of two trial trenches 40 m. x 1 m. which were aligned along the corridor of the road line 9 m. apart (FIG. 2). These two trenches, which were excavated by hand, were designed to locate the barrow ditches and to assess the nature of the archaeological deposits on the site. The ditches were located on each side of the barrow and sectioned (FIG. 4). In the western trial trench the ditches were 30.5 m. apart (measured to the outer lip of the ditch) and in the eastern trial trench 32 m. apart. The trial trenches showed similar stratigraphy, in each a layer of grey loamy plough-soil (layer 1) which was between 20 and 30 cm. in depth overlay a layer of red gravelly loam which was c. 20 cm. deep over most of the trench except where it dipped down into the ditch fills and was up to 50 cm. deep (FIGS. 4 and 5).

Layers 1 and 2 were present over the whole of the trench and a few finds of recent date from layer 2 indicated that it had been subjected to modern disturbances. In the central area of the barrow layers 1 and 2 were removed by hand in order to avoid disturbing the layers beneath and over the remainder of the trench which now measured 40 m. x 11 m. they were removed by machine.

In the central area of the barrow there was an oval spread of dark brown stone-free loam (layer 10) averaging 10–15 cm. in depth (FIG. 2). This layer petered out c. 4 m. from the inner lip of the northern ditch and c. 4 m. from the inner lip of the southern ditch. At the northern end of the barrow layer 10 was overlain by a layer of red, stone-free, clayey loam (layer 17, FIG. 5). Layer 17 was up to 15 cm. thick and petered out c. 2 m. from the inner lip of the ditch and c. 6 m. from the east side of the trench (FIG. 2).

The 1944 trenches were recognised at the level of layer 10 and were re-excavated. Layers 10 and 17 were then removed by trowelling down to the level of natural. A linear feature was identified below layer 10 which cut into the natural (feature 18, FIGS. 3 and 6). Feature 18 was c. 1 m. wide and up to 10 cm. deep with a fairly flat base and a fill of brown stone-free loam. At its south end the feature ran into a disturbed area by the edge of the trench (feature 19) and was not traced further. On the north side of the 1944 trench the feature changed its alignment and became narrower and shallower. A similar feature was located 1.5 m. to the south of feature 18 and below layer 2 (feature 14), up to 1.5 m. wide and up to 15 cm. deep with an irregular base (FIGS. 3 and 6). The fill of feature 14 was red gravelly loam similar to layer 2, cut into natural, and ending c. 3.5 m. from the east edge of the trench, running into the section on the west side of the trench. A further linear feature was identified at the northern end of the trench outside the barrow ditch (feature 15, FIG. 2). This feature was up to 80 cm. wide and had the appearance of being recut twice. There was no distinction in the section between the recuts, the western recut being the most substantial at 20 cm. deep whilst the other two were c. 10 cm. deep (FIG. 6). The fill of the feature was red gravelly loam and the relationship between feature 15 and the ditch silts was unclear because of the similarity of their fills where they impinged. Features 14 and 15 were cut into the natural gravel but feature 18 was cut into a layer of gravel rock or conglomerate which occupied an area of the centre of the barrow similar to that occupied by layer 10 (FIG. 3).

Feature 19 consisted of a shallow irregular expanse of red clayey loam adjacent to

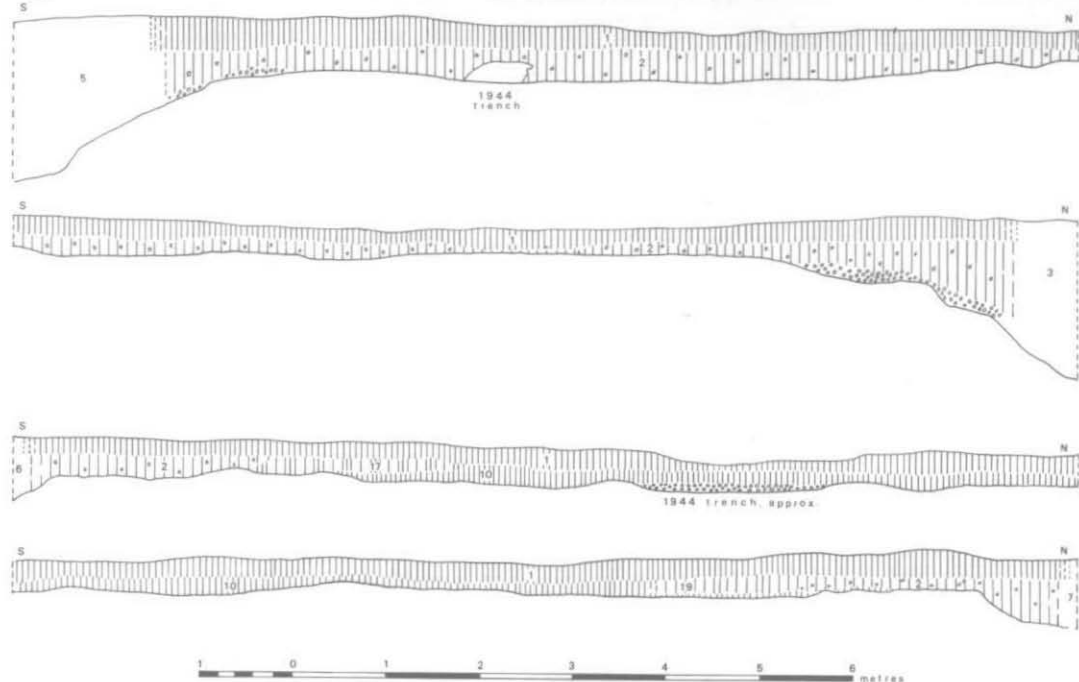


FIG. 5
Trial trench sections.

ditch section 7 and below layer 2. A few sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the feature.

The only one of the three linear features to contain finds was 14 which contained a small quantity of worked flint (FIG. 7) and animal bone. A few tiny scraps of pottery too small to illustrate were recovered from layers 10 and 17. This material was very friable grey sandy ware with brown surfaces; some of the sherds had a rusticated decoration and several appeared to be grass-tempered.

The Ditches

The barrow ditches were sectioned in four places along the line of the trial trenches (FIG. 2). The two sections in the west trial trench were numbered 3 and 5 and the two in the east trial trench 6 and 7 (FIG. 4). The ditches' average width was 5.5 m. and they averaged 1.7 m. deep from the level of the modern ground surface. They all had similar profiles of sloping sides, a broad flat base and an inner ledge. The ditch fills were also similar consisting of layer 1, the modern plough-soil, layer 2, the red gravelly loam which overlay most of the site and which dipped down into the ditch fills, and below this a layer of grey stone-free loam up to 80 cm. thick which overlay a thin layer of brown gravelly loam which in turn overlay brown sandy gravel up to 30 cm. thick.

Roman pottery and animal bone were found in all the ditch sections except 7. The pottery consisted of grey ware and some sherds of 'Oxfordshire Ware' colour coat and was found mostly in the grey stone-free loam layer. On the base of section 5 below the brown sandy gravel there was a patchy spread of charcoal. This charcoal was the only material found in the primary silt of the ditch sections, all the other sections being barren of finds.

The Trial Trench Sections (FIG. 5)

The section of the eastern trial trench showed a layer of brown stone-free loam (layer 10) overlain by plough-soil (layer 1), with layer 10 petering out some distance from the

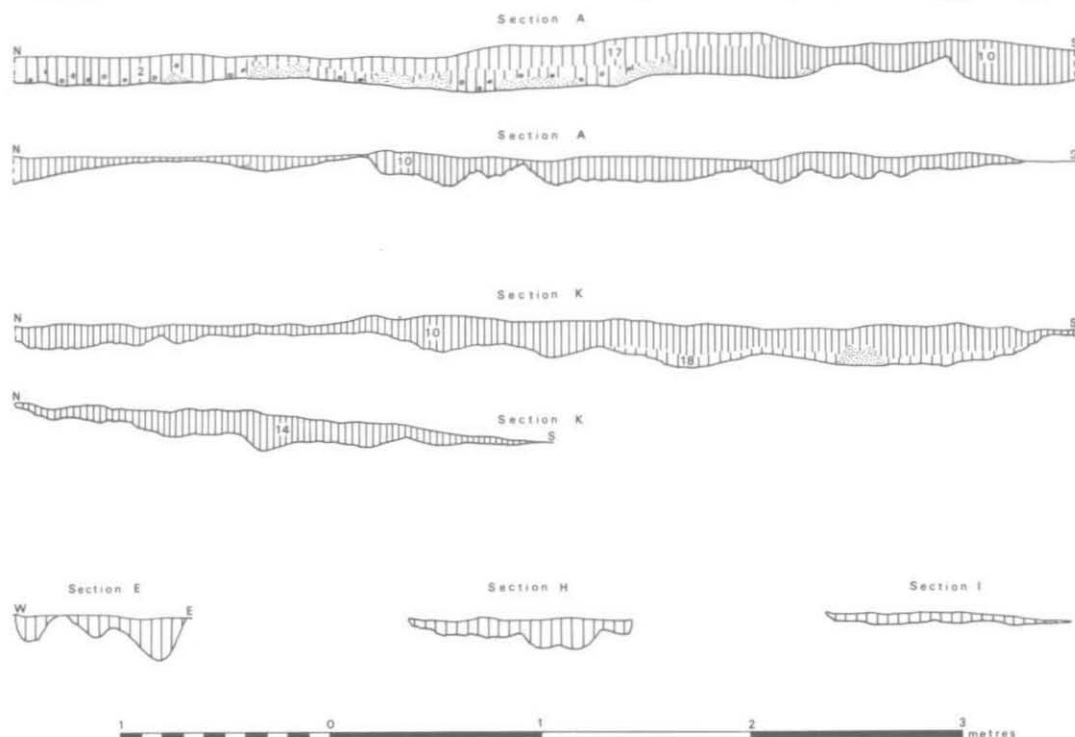


FIG. 6
Sections A, E, H, I and K.

edge of the ditch, and the berm of the ditch occupied by red gravelly loam (layer 2). In addition in the northern part of the section there was a layer of red clayey loam (layer 17) which overlay layer 10 and in turn was overlain by layer 2. At the southern end of the section a similar sequence was evident with a layer of red clayey loam (layer 19) overlying layer 10. Layer 19 appeared to be more disturbed than its equivalent layer at the northern end of the trench and its relationship with layer 2 was unclear.

In the western trial trench section only two layers were discernible, the plough-soil (layer 1) and the red gravelly loam (layer 2). The only other feature which showed in the section was a slight disturbance which marked the position of the 1944 trench. The 1944 trench did not show in the eastern trial trench because of the similarity of the back-filled material to the sides of the trench.

The Secondary Burial (FIG. 4)

One other feature was excavated on the site, an inhumation burial in the fill of ditch 3 (feature 4). The skeleton was laid on its back on a north-south alignment with the head to the south and tilted to the east. The right arm was across the stomach with the hand on the left hip; the left arm was flexed with the hand near the left shoulder. The only grave find was an iron knife (FIG. 7, no. 2) which was buried near the left hip. The burial was cut into layer 3 and there were slight differences in the ditch fill above the burial but no obvious cut line, indicating that the burial was cut in from the top of layer 3 (FIG. 4). The skeleton is reported on below by Mary Harman.

INTERPRETATION

Of the three linear features which appear to predate the barrow only one (feature 14) contained any finds. These consisted of an animal bone fragment and

three worked flints, one of which, a barbed and tanged arrowhead (FIG. 7, no. 1), indicates a Beaker date for the feature. The other two features may be of similar date; feature 18 was below the level of the pre-barrow surface (layer 10) and so pre-dates the barrow construction, and feature 15 is unlikely to have been dug through the barrow ditch without leaving some evidence in the ditch fill and so that too must pre-date the barrow.

Features 14 and 15 can be seen on the aerial photograph of the site (PL. III) as can the line of the 1944 excavation trench. Feature 14 appears to start where the 1944 excavation trench bisects the barrow, stops near the barrow ditch on the south side and then continues outside for some distance before turning slightly and running south into the next field where it appears to meander on for a considerable distance. Feature 15 can be seen on the north side of the barrow and continues for some distance before petering out by barrow 3. These features are presumably the remains of field systems, and other ditches which appear on the aerial photograph (PL. III) to the west of barrow 2 may be part of the same system.

The previous excavator of barrow 2 interpreted the site as a bell-barrow with a central mound separated from the ditch by a berm⁸ and this interpretation is borne out by the 1976 excavation. The stripping of a large area of the interior of the barrow showed that the natural conglomerate had been removed over most of the berm of the ditch, presumably to create a mound. Little trace of this mound had survived except for layer 17 and possibly layer 19. These two layers overlay layer 10 which is interpreted as the Bronze Age ground surface and the equivalent of the brown stoneless soil shown in the 1944 section through the barrow.⁹

The composition of layers 17 and 19 was very similar to the natural reddish clay or cover loam which overlies the gravels in various areas of the Thames Valley. The relationship of these layers to layer 10, however, indicates that the cover loam is redeposited and it may be that it was deliberately introduced to the site to stabilise the perimeter of the barrow mound. No cover loam was identified *in situ* within the area of the formal excavation but the material was common in the trial trenches to the south of barrow 2 and may have been brought from there.

Although the cover loam may originally have been around the whole circumference of the barrow no evidence of it was observed during the 1944 excavations.¹⁰ In the two areas where it was observed during the 1976 excavation it was protected from plough erosion by cultivation ridges (FIG. 1). These ridges are aligned east-west over the whole of the field, and the greater depth of soil where they exist would seem to have protected the remains of layer 17 from the plough. The 1944 excavations sectioned the barrow outside the area of protection afforded by the cultivation ridges, which probably explains why no evidence of cover loam was observed then. The western trial trench was located near the edge of the barrow within the area stripped for the berm so no evidence of a pre-barrow surface or superstructure survived there (FIG. 5).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Fig. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Fig. 10.

The Ditches

The four sections through the barrow ditches all show similar silting patterns. In each section a layer of virtually clean gravel represents the primary silt accumulating on the sides and bottom of the ditch, presumably after the first winter in which the ditches were open. The gravelly layer above must represent a more gradual weathering process with red clay and brown loam being washed in as well as gravel from the sides. The first two layers would seem to be the extent of the weathering in the Bronze Age as the fine brown silty loam layer above them contained Roman pottery. Presumably the ditch fill stabilised after the deposition of the first two layers until the Roman period, when some kind of activity, perhaps ploughing, encouraged the final silting up of the ditches. That this process was a gradual one would seem to be indicated by the burial in section 3 (see below) which was cut into the fine brown silt layer from within the layer, indicating that silting continued after the burial was made. The remaining layer in the ditch fills was layer 2 which had slumped down into the top of the ditches.

As was noted above, a Roman cemetery was excavated to the north of Barrow 2 in 1945¹¹ and although the burial in section 3 is on a similar orientation to these burials the evidence of the iron knife (FIG. 7) indicates a seventh-century Saxon date for the burial. Similar knives have been found with burials at Beacon Hill, near Lewknor¹² and at Appleford.¹³ Secondary burials were found in the north-west quadrant of barrow 5 during excavations in 1944 and the suggestion made by the excavator that they were Saxon in date¹⁴ seems likely despite the lack of dating evidence. The most logical explanation for the presence of the secondary burials is that the ancient sanctity of the Barrow Hills area was recognized.

DISCUSSION

Although little in the way of finds was recovered, and material which might have shed light on the Bronze Age environment was lacking from the site the excavations have added a little to our scant knowledge of Bronze Age and pre-Bronze Age field systems. The evidence for linear ditches of this early date in the Thames Valley has recently been summarised¹⁵ and consists of linear features excavated at Long Wittenham,¹⁶ Dorchester¹⁷ and Abingdon.¹⁸ The possibility of a natural explanation for the Radley ditches has been considered but in view of the presence of finds in one of them and the re-cutting of ditch 15 it seems certain that they represent

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32-35.

¹² R. A. Chambers, 'A Cemetery Site at Beacon Hill, near Lewknor', *Oxoniensia*, xxxviii (1973), 138-45, Fig. 2. For a re-appraisal of this site and a revised mid-late Saxon date for the cemetery, see R. A. Chambers, 'The Cemetery Site at Beacon Hill, near Lewknor: An Inventory of the Inhumations and a Re-appraisal', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 77-85.

¹³ J. Hinchliffe, *Excavations at Appleford, Oxon.* (forthcoming).

¹⁴ A. Williams, 'Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Berks. in 1944', *Oxoniensia*, xiii (1948), 9, Fig. 4.

¹⁵ C. Balkwill, 'The Ashville Ring-ditches and their Neighbourhood', in M. Parrington *et al.*, *The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement, Bronze Age Ring-ditches and Roman Features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon, Oxfordshire 1974-76*. C.B.A. Monograph (forthcoming).

¹⁶ M. Gray, 'Excavations at Northfield Farm, Long Wittenham, Berks.', *Oxoniensia*, xxxv (1970), 107-9. See also this volume.

¹⁷ R. J. C. Atkinson, C. M. Piggott and N. K. Sanders, *Excavations at Dorchester, Oxon.* (1951).

¹⁸ *Op. cit.* note 15.

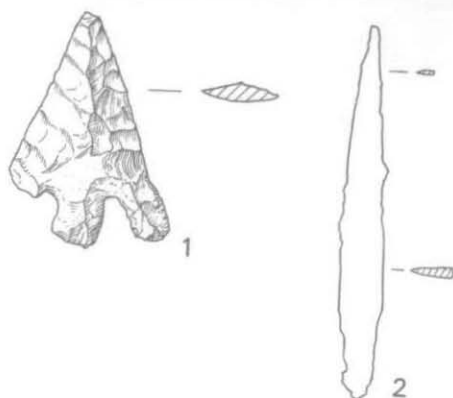


FIG. 7

Small finds; scales 1 = 1/1; 2 = 1/2.

early field boundaries. Further excavation to the west of barrow 2 is necessary to define the nature and extent of the linear ditches before the evidence is destroyed by the plough.

The excavation indicates something of the techniques used to build the barrow. The berm was stripped as indicated by the absence of the conglomerate from the inside of the ditch. The base of the mound was stabilised by the use of cover loam around the perimeter of the barrow and then presumably the less stable gravel from the barrow ditches was piled up over the central cremation which was cut into the gravel.

It may be that the stabilising effect of the cover loam was responsible for the barrow ditches remaining open into the Roman period but another possible explanation is that the ditches were periodically cleaned out. Funerary use of the site occurred again in the Roman period, as is demonstrated by the Roman cemetery to the north of barrow 2¹⁹ and by a possible Roman cemetery identified from aerial photographs to the south-west of it.²⁰ The Saxon burials discussed above may have continued or renewed the tradition. That earlier respect for the area involved maintaining the barrows in their original condition by periodically cleaning out the ditches is a possibility to be entertained.

THE FINDS

THE FLINTS

A small number of worked flints was recovered during the excavation, most of which came from a residual context. The only stratified flints came from ditch 14 and consisted of a barbed and tanged arrowhead (FIG. 7, no. 1), a well worked core, and a flake. The barbed and tanged arrowhead indicates a Beaker date for the ditch and the only other flint of note, an end scraper from the Roman silting of the barrow ditch, may also be Beaker in date. The remaining flints consist of various flakes, some of which show evidence of secondary working but none of which are typologically dateable. All the flint from the site appears to be 'gravel flint'.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* note 11.

²⁰ J. K. S. St. Joseph, 'Air Reconnaissance: Recent Results 3', *Antiquity*, xxxix (1965), 60-63, Pl. XIII.

IRON

Various small iron fragments were found in layers 1 and 2, including two small iron rings and a number of nails. The remains of a brass and iron compass was also found which may be a legacy of the 1944 excavation! Illustrated is Fig. 7, no. 2:- Straight backed iron knife, length 100 mm. Discussed above, p. 38.

THE HUMAN REMAINS. By MARY HARMAN

The skeleton from Section 3, which was very well preserved, was complete except for the left leg and the lower right leg.

While some of the epiphyses and the components of the innominate were fused, the epiphyses at the proximal end of the humerus, both ends of the radius and the distal end of the ulna, and both ends of the femur, were not fused, and this, combined with the light wear on the teeth and the partially complete eruption of the lower third molars, suggests an age of between seventeen and nineteen years, based on the criteria published by Brothwell.²¹

The size and conformation of the bones suggests that this may have been a male but there can be no certainty as to the sex of the individual.

Dental health was excellent; all the teeth were present at the time of death, and though ten have since fallen out, none of those remaining have caries and there is no sign of abscessing in the jaws.

An unusual feature is the presence of two wormian bones in the sagittal suture; this would not have affected the individual in any way during life.

MOLLUSCS. By MARK ROBINSON

A single 5 lb. soil sample was analysed from the primary silt of section 7. It only contained a modern seed of parsley piert (*Aphanes arvensis* agg.), eight specimens of the burrowing snail *Cecilioides acicula*, and a single specimen of the snail *Pupilla musconum*. As there was no reason for presuming that any of the other Bronze Age layers from the site contained useful numbers of molluscs no further work was undertaken. It is quite common for soils and sediments in this area derived from the gravels to have very low molluscan numbers despite being calcareous.

THE ANIMAL BONES. By BOB WILSON

One hundred and seventeen fragments were recorded in a highly eroded and newly broken state. The identified reunited fragments amounted to 17% of this total. 87% of the unidentified material was newly broken. One cattle or possible horse fragment occurred in the Beaker feature (F14) and the identified fragments from the ditch sections which are probably of Roman date are as follows: cattle 9, sheep 5, pig 2, dog 2, and hare 2 (matching pelvises). At least three individuals are represented by the cattle bones.

The Society acknowledges gratefully a publication grant from the Department of the Environment for this paper.

²¹ D. R. Brothwell, *Digging up Bones* (1965), 59-60.



Air photograph of Barrow Hills from the north-west.

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OXONIENSIA, XLII (1977)

BARROW HILLS