Outcast? A dated roadside burial

Bob Clarke



Figure 1. *Location of burial, showing extent of erosion.*

A single, unaccompanied burial, located at cross-roads at Broad Town, North Wiltshire has recently been radiocarbon dated. Its excavation forms part of the ongoing investigation, by the University of Bath in Swindon, into settlement patterns in Kingsbridge Hundred, North Wiltshire. The results open up the possibilities of a very early date both for the practice of cross-roads burial and also of burying criminals at dominant locations on boundaries.

The individual was buried in the topsoil as the grave was only c. 25 cm deep. Alignment of the burial was head to the south-west. The body lay supine, legs straight, arms flexed with hands on pelvis. Around 40% of the burial had been lost to erosion including, unfortunately, the skull and left arm. The smaller bones were also in a poor condition, primarily due to the shallowness of the grave. Only residual Late Iron Age and Roman pottery was recovered from the grave matrix (Seager Smith *pers comm*).



Figure 2. *Close-up of burial as discovered.*

The subject was estimated as being between 35 - 45 years old, 1.705 metres (c.5' 7") tall, and male. The spinal column shows the beginnings of osteoarthritis with slight lipping evident on the lumbar vertebrae and first three thoracic vertebrae. Slight bone nodules on the rear of the iliac crest and a pronounced linea aspersa on both left and right femur suggested the individual may have spent a lot of time riding. Muscular damage to

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one bone in the left hand and one in the left foot were also evident (McKinley *pers comm*). A radiocarbon determination was obtained from the right femur of 1430+-45 BP (OxA 11173) which calibrates to possible calendar date ranges of 595-665 cal AD at 68% probability or 540-680 cal AD at 95.4% probability.



Figure 3. *The burial after excavation.*

The position of the Broad Town burial is important for a number of reasons. The site is very prominent, visible from a wide area. It is situated just a few hundred metres north of the boundary between the Kingsbridge and Selkley Hundreds, while the spur of land that contained the burial is the result of two hollow ways crossing at that point. These factors suggest deliberate burial at a place which is both elevated and inter-visible between a number of routes, coupled with interment in un-consecrated ground (although the burial could well be pre-conversion) at the geographical limits of the local territories. No evidence of fatal trauma was found on the skeletal remains, but due to the incompleteness of the individual that cannot be ruled out.

Andrew Reynolds has demonstrated that at least one of the cross-roads tracks is of mid-Saxon date (Pollard and Reynolds 2002: 225) and this may well be the case for the other. If this is so and the burial is purposely situated on the cross-roads it makes, on later analogy the possibility of execution all the more likely.

The burial mirrors traits found in other Wessex sites, most notably that at Stonehenge. There an executed male in his early 30s was found, probably supine, in a shallow grave with no finds (Pitts et al, 2002,134). This burial also benefits from a radiocarbon determination of 1359+-38 BP (OxA-9361) & 1490+-60 BP (OxA-9921), a weighted mean calibrates to a possible calendar date range of 600-690 cal AD (Bayliss, in Pitts et al 2002: 134). The grave is again situated at a prominent place, the Stonehenge monument, which lies very close to the Hundred boundaries of Amesbury and Underditch (Reynolds and Semple, in Pitts et al 2002: 142). Another pertinent site is known at Tan Hill, overlooking the Vale of Pewsey, where a single unaccompanied burial was discovered in a prehistoric ditch. It was suggested that the hands were tied

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behind the back but again no dating evidence was present (Anon 1951: 228). This site is situated on a parish boundary, again in a very prominent position, and may well be Saxon in date (Pollard and Reynolds 2002: 175).



Figure 4. *The extent of erosion damage to upper torso.*



Figure 5. *View north from the burial site demonstrating its prominent position.*

Counties other than Wiltshire are beginning to present similar evidence, Reynolds has demonstrated that all known sites in Hampshire lie on Hundred Boundaries (1999: 108-9). Martin Carver's work at Sutton Hoo has shown that prominent sites of an earlier age are also the focus of execution, especially through 'Christian Kingship' (1998: 142). The close dates of two of the burials described suggests a trend in seventh century Wessex. This would appear to underpin the evidence from Sutton Hoo where the execution sites also seem to have started in the seventh century (Carver 1998: 142).

It seems likely that burials such as these performed a number of functions. The sites at Broad Town and Tan Hill are visible from c. 10 km. and Stonehenge stands out as a substantial landscape feature. All three places also lay on tracks. Exclusion from settlement would also appear to have been a major aspect as was the role played by emerging Christianity. A programme of dating for similar 'location' burials is now needed.

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