

Saved from the grave: Neolithic to Saxon discoveries at Spring Road Municipal Cemetery, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 1990–2000

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Summary

Excavations and salvage recording carried out within the Spring Gardens municipal cemetery over the last fifty years have revealed evidence of archaeological activity from the Mesolithic to the Saxon period. Situated on a gravel rise alongside the Larkhill Stream, occasional struck flints indicate that the site was visited by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, and a few sherds of early Neolithic pottery show that the first farmers also visited. The location apparently became more important in the middle and late Neolithic periods, as shown by a Peterborough Ware vessel and a Grooved Ware pit, and by an early Beaker burial accompanied by a copper awl. Sherds of early Bronze Age pottery suggest that the site continued to be significant to the local community during this period, and in the middle Bronze Age an arc of substantial postholes probably indicates the construction of a timber circle, one of very few of this date in southern Britain. This was accompanied by various pits or postholes, and a scattering of similar features was also present in the late Bronze Age.

The early to middle Iron Age saw the erection of a substantial timber roundhouse, at whose centre was

a pit, and within whose circumference a group of three middle Iron Age crouched burials was found, formally deposited in purpose-dug graves. Other undated crouched burials were present across the site, possibly indicating a dispersed cemetery. There was otherwise little evidence of middle or late Iron Age activity, but in the Roman period ditched or fenced enclosures were laid out and the site was used for domestic occupation in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The site was reoccupied in the 6th century AD, when a variety of Saxon features including sunken-featured buildings and ditches were dug, but it is unclear whether the occupation continued into the 7th century AD. In the 13th century the east side of the site was used for gravel extraction, possibly relating to the construction of a chapel and cemetery at the adjacent road junction, but thereafter the area became part of the arable fields of Abingdon. At the turn of the 19th–20th centuries the area again became a gravel pit, and this extended into the north-east corner of the site. The quarry was short-lived, and the site reverted to open ground used for pasture until taken over for burials in 1940.

Zusammenfassung

Aus- und Notgrabungen, die auf dem Gelände des Gemeindefriedhofs von Spring Gardens in den letzten fünfzig Jahren durchgeführt wurden, enthüllten archäologische Zeugnisse, welche vom Mesolithikum bis hin in die Sachsenzeit reichen.

Auf einer Kiesanhebung entlang des Flusses Larkhill gelegen, deuten gelegentliche Flintabschläge darauf hin, dass die Stelle von mesolithischen Jägern und Sammlern besucht wurde. Des weiteren geben Funde einiger Neolithischer Keramikscherben darauf Aufschluss, dass auch die ersten Ackerbauern den Standort aufsuchten. Vermutlich stieg die Bedeutung der Fundstelle im mittleren und späten Neolithikum, was durch Peterborough Ware Gefäßfunde, einer Grooved Ware Grube und frühen Beaker Bestattungen denen Pfriemen beigegeben waren unterstrichen wird.

Frühbronzezeitliche Tonscherben deuten darauf hin, dass der Fundplatz auch während dieser Zeitperiode eine wichtige Rolle für die kommunale Gemeinschaft gewesen sein muss. Aus der mittleren Bronzezeit ist eine bogenförmige Anreihung großer Pfostenlöcher bekannt, die scheinbar auf die Konstruktion eines Holzkreises hindeutet, einem von nur sehr wenigen, welche aus dieser Zeit in Britannien

bekannt sind. Der Kreis wurde begleitet von verschiedenen Gruben und Pfostenlöchern, eine ähnliche Ansammlung solcher Befunde ist auch aus der späten Bronzezeit bekannt.

Die frühe bis mittlere Bronzezeit sah die Errichtung eines enormen Rundhauses, in dessen Mittelpunkt eine Grube plazierte war. In ihrer Peripherie wurde eine Gruppe von drei Hockerbestattungen gefunden. Diese Gräber wurden zweifelsohne formell und einzig für den Zweck der Bestattung ausgehoben.

Weitere undatierte Hockerbestattungen wurden überall auf dem Gelände verzeichnet, diese könnten möglicherweise auf ein weit zerstreutes Gräberfeld hinweisen. Ansonsten gab es nur wenige Indizien auf mittlere- oder späteisenzeitliche Aktivitäten.

In der Römerzeit, im 2. und 3. nachchristlichen Jahrhundert, wurden Bereiche der Fundstelle durch Gräben und Zäune eingegrenzt und es ist von einem häuslichen Gebrauch der Fläche auszugehen.

Im 6. Jahrhundert kommt es zu einer Wiederbewohnung und eine Auswahl sächsischer Befunde, unter anderem abgesenkte Gebäude und Gräben, konnten nachgewiesen werden. Es bleibt jedoch unklar, ob die Besiedlung sich bis in das 7. Jahrhundert fortsetzte.

Im 13. Jahrhundert wurde die Ostseite der Fläche als Kiesgrube genutzt, eventuell in Verbindung mit dem Bau einer Kapelle und eines Friedhofs bei der benachbarten Straßenkreuzung. Nach dieser Zeit wurde die Grabungsfläche Teil der landwirtschaftlich genutzten Felder von Abingdon.

Am Übergang vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert wurde das Land erneut als Kiesgrube genutzt, diesmal jedoch einschließlich der nordöstlichen Ecke. Die Abbau-grube wurde nach kurzer Zeit geschlossen und von da an wurde das Gelände als Viehweide verwendet, bis es schließlich 1940 zum Gemeindefriedhof wurde.

Markus Dylewski

Résumé

Au cours des cinquante dernières années, les opérations d'archéologie préventives effectuées dans le cimetière municipal de Spring Gardens ont révélé l'existence de vestiges remontant du Mésolithique à la période Saxonne.

La découverte sporadique de silex en amont de la gravière qui jouxte la rivière Larkhill y atteste la présence de chasseurs-cueilleurs au Mésolithique et celle de tessons de poteries, l'installation d'une communauté agricole au Néolithique Ancien. Le site semble toutefois avoir pris une véritable importance à partir du Néolithique Moyen et Final, ce dont témoignent un récipient de type *Peterborough ware* et une fosse où l'on a découvert de la céramique de type *Grooved ware* (typiques du Néolithique Tardif britannique) et une sépulture du Campaniforme Ancien renfermant, entre autres, une alêne en cuivre. D'autres tessons de céramiques confirment l'occupation du site jusqu'au Bronze Moyen. Par ailleurs, la mise au jour d'un ensemble de trous de poteaux contemporains de ces tessons démontre l'existence d'un enclos circulaire, un des rares du genre pour cette période dans le sud de l'Angleterre. L'édifice jouxte vraisemblablement d'autres constructions comme le laissent supposer une série de fosses variées, de trous de poteaux ainsi qu'un ensemble épars de faits similaires datés entre le Bronze Moyen et le Bronze Récent. Entre le

Premier et le Deuxième Age du Fer, ce site accueille un édifice circulaire renfermant en son centre une fosse à triple inhumation d'accroupis directement creusée dans le sol. La découverte d'autres sépultures de même type, non datées, confirme la vocation funéraire du site. Toutefois, seuls quelques vestiges épars semblent attester une activité sur le site à l'Age du Fer Récent. La période romaine, elle, se caractérise par l'érection d'enclos, en fossés ou en palissades. Aux II et III^e siècles, le site a une vocation clairement domestique. Au VI^e siècle, il est à nouveau occupé. Les divers vestiges de la période saxonne qui y ont été exhumés consistent notamment en des fosses et en édifices construits à un niveau inférieur à celui du sol naturel. Il n'est en revanche pas certain que cette occupation perdure au-delà du VII^e siècle.

Au XIII^e siècle, la portion Est du site sert à l'extraction du gravier. Cette exploitation est très certainement liée à la construction de la chapelle et du cimetière, situés à la jonction de routes adjacente. Par la suite, l'ensemble du site est exploité à des fins agricoles et devient une partie des terres arables d'Abingdon. Au tournant des XIX et XX^e siècles, on y extrait à nouveau le gravier, de l'est au nord-est. La carrière n'a pas subsisté, le site ayant une fois encore été transformé en terres agricoles. Ce n'est qu'à partir de 1940 qu'il a de nouveau servi de cimetière.

Magali Bailliot
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