

Late Bronze Age Ritual and Habitation on a Thames Eyot at Whitecross Farm, Wallingford

The Archaeology of the Wallingford Bypass, 1986–92

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Contents

List of Figures	viii
List of Plates	x
List of Tables	xi
Summary	xiii
Acknowledgements	xv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION *by Anne Marie Cromarty with Alistair Barclay*

Introduction	1
Geology, topography and environmental background	1
Archaeological background	1
Research objectives	4
Excavation objectives, 1991–2	5
Field survey: methods and results <i>by Anne Marie Cromarty with Cathy Capel-Davies</i>	6
Watching brief: methods and results	6
Structure of the report	6
Radiocarbon determinations	6
Bronze Age dates	6
Location of the archives	6
Accession numbers	7

CHAPTER 2: WHITECROSS FARM, CHOLSEY: A LATE BRONZE AGE WATERFRONT SITE

by Anne Marie Cromarty, Alistair Barclay, George Lambrick and Mark Robinson

Introduction <i>by George Lambrick and Anne Marie Cromarty</i>	9
Topographical context	9
The excavations	9
River channel survey	12
Magnetometer and surface collection	12
Bridge construction and preservation of <i>in situ</i> archaeological deposits <i>by George Lambrick with Anne Marie Cromarty</i>	12
The gravel eyot and the early channel fill: phase 1	15
Early occupation: phase 2	15
Structures in the channel and the palisade: phase 3	16
The wooden structure(s) in the channel	16
Discussion of pile-built structures	21
The palisade or revetment	23
Timber deposit and removal of the palisade: phase 4	25
The wood deposit	26
Removal of the palisade	31
Midden and occupation: phase 5	31
The midden	31
The occupation deposits	31
Silting of the channel: phase 6	32
Ploughing: phase 7	32
Alluvium and topsoil: phases 8 and 9	33
Alluvium: phase 8	33
Topsoil: phase 9	33

Discussion <i>by Anne Marie Cromarty and Alistair Barclay</i>	33
Why settle on an eyot?	33
Early use of the eyot	33
Late Bronze Age use of the eyot	34
The evidence for habitation on the eyot	34
The finds	35
Settlement on the eyot	36
Midden and occupation layer	37
Stratigraphy/vertical differentiation	37
Spatial patterning of finds	37
Mechanisms of deposition	44
Movement of refuse	44
Human remains	45
Other special deposits	46
The end of the late Bronze Age settlement and later use of the eyot	46
CHAPTER 3: WHITECROSS FARM: ARTEFACTUAL EVIDENCE	
Copper-alloy metalwork <i>by J Peter Northover</i>	47
Introduction	47
Methods	47
Catalogue of metalwork of confirmed Bronze Age date	47
Catalogue of metalwork of uncertain date	47
Catalogue of waste	55
Discussion	56
Conclusions	57
Ferrous metalwork <i>by Leigh Allen</i>	57
Glass bead <i>by Angela Boyle and Julian Henderson</i>	57
Catalogue	57
Worked flint <i>by Andrew Brown and Philippa Bradley</i>	58
Introduction	58
Approach	58
Summary quantification	58
Use-wear data	60
Use of retouch	62
Technological aspects	62
Spatial aspects	63
Discussion	66
Catalogue of worked flint	67
Worked and burnt stone <i>by Fiona Roe and Alistair Barclay</i>	71
Discussion	71
Burnt stone	71
Angular white quartz/quartzite	71
Catalogue of worked stone	71
Worked bone <i>by Adrienne Powell and Kate M Clark</i>	72
Late Bronze Age pottery <i>by Alistair Barclay with a report on the ceramic petrology by Chris Doherty</i>	72
Introduction	72
Condition and preservation of the assemblage	73
Methods	73
Fabrics	74
Petrographic analysis <i>by Chris Doherty</i>	75
Forms	77
Vessel forms	78
Form analysis	79
Manufacture and surface treatment	79
Decoration	79
Function and use	81

Contents

Repair and reuse	81
Discussion of the context groups	82
The ceramic sequence	93
Spatial patterns	94
Regional comparisons	95
Catalogue of late Bronze Age pottery	97
Iron Age and Roman pottery <i>by Paul Booth</i>	102
Post-Roman pottery <i>by Lucy Whittingham</i>	102
Fired clay <i>by Alistair Barclay</i>	102
Introduction and methods	102
Fabrics	103
Objects	103
Structural clay	103
Amorphous fragments	103
Discussion	103

CHAPTER 4: WHITECROSS FARM: ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE

Animal bone <i>by Adrienne Powell and Kate M Clark</i>	105
Introduction	105
Main species	105
Dog	109
Other species	109
Pathology	109
Carcass utilisation	109
Discussion	110
Macroscopic plant and invertebrate remains <i>by Mark Robinson</i>	110
Introduction	110
Sampling strategy and the samples	110
Methods and results	112
Noteworthy species records	112
Analysis of the data	112
The origin of the island	133
The late Bronze Age aquatic and waterside environment	133
The wider late Bronze Age terrestrial environment	136
Other aspects of the landscape	138
Conditions and activities on the island in the late Bronze Age	138
The post-abandonment environmental sequence	140
The wider implications of the results	140
Pollen analysis <i>by Frank Chambers and E W Botterill</i>	142
Introduction	142
Laboratory methods	142
Results and discussion	142
Waterlogged wood <i>by Maisie Taylor, Rowena Gale and George Lambrick</i>	142
Introduction	142
Wood	142
Dimensions	142
Species identified	144
Roundwood	144
Woodworking	149
Charring	151
Tool marks	151
Coppicing and hedging	151
Discussion	152
Catalogue of wood	153
Shell <i>by Greg Campbell</i>	155

CHAPTER 5: GRIM'S DITCH by Anne Marie Cromarty with Alistair Barclay and George Lambrick

Introduction	157
Geology, topography and soils	157
Archaeological background	157
Excavation methods and recording	161
Archaeological description	162
Phase 0: earlier prehistoric activity	162
Phase 1: cultivation, clearance and settlement in the Bronze Age	163
Phase 2: late Iron Age cultivation	167
Phases 3–4: the Grim's Ditch earthwork	169
Phases 5–7: medieval and later activity	172
Artefactual evidence	180
Worked flint by Philippa Bradley	180
Catalogue of worked flint	184
Worked and burnt stone by Alistair Barclay and Fiona Roe	185
Earlier prehistoric pottery by Alistair Barclay	185
Iron Age and Roman pottery by Paul Booth	188
Medieval pottery by Lucy Whittingham	190
Tile by Kate Atherton	192
Miscellaneous finds	192
Environmental evidence	192
Animal bone by Adrienne Powell and Kate M Clark	192
Charred plant remains and molluscs by Mark Robinson	193
Soil micromorphology by Helen Lewis and Charles A I French	194
Discussion by Alistair Barclay, Anne Marie Cromarty and George Lambrick	196
Earlier prehistoric activity	196
The earliest cultivation	196
Tree clearance	197
Late Bronze Age activity	197
Late Iron Age cultivation	197
South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch earthwork	199

CHAPTER 6: A MULTI-PERIOD SETTLEMENT AT BRADFORD'S BROOK, CHOLSEY

by Angela Boyle and Anne Marie Cromarty

Introduction	201
Background	201
Excavation methods and recording	201
Archaeological description	201
General stratigraphy and early deposits	201
The later Bronze Age	201
Iron Age	207
Roman	207
Saxon	209
Undated features	209
Artefactual evidence	209
Glass bead by Angela Boyle	209
Catalogue	209
Worked flint by Philippa Bradley	209
Catalogue of worked flint	210
Prehistoric pottery by Alistair Barclay	210
Catalogue of prehistoric pottery	211
Iron Age and Roman pottery by Paul Booth	212
Catalogue of Roman pottery	214
Medieval pottery by Lucy Whittingham	214
Fired clay by Alistair Barclay	216

Contents

Tile <i>by Kate Atherton and Nick Mitchell</i>	216
Nails <i>by Leigh Allen</i>	216
Environmental evidence	216
Animal bone <i>by Adrienne Powell</i>	216
Macroscopic plant and invertebrate remains <i>by Mark Robinson</i>	216
Waterlogged wood <i>by Maisie Taylor</i>	222
Catalogue of wood	222
Discussion	222
Earlier prehistoric activity	222
The later Bronze Age	222
Iron Age activity	223
Roman and later activity	224
CHAPTER 7: SYNTHESIS: THE WIDER REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT <i>by Alistair Barclay, Anne Marie Cromarty, George Lambrick and Mark Robinson</i>	
The earlier prehistoric landscape	225
The place of Wallingford within its wider context	225
Grim's Ditch and the development of the historic landscape	233
The Roman landscape	235
The Post-Roman earthwork	236
APPENDIX 1: RADIOCARBON DATING <i>by Alex Bayliss, Alistair Barclay, Anne Marie Cromarty and George Lambrick</i>	237
APPENDIX 2: LEAD ISOTOPE ANALYSIS OF THE STOP-RIDGE FLANGED AXE <i>by S Stos-Gale</i>	239
APPENDIX 3: LIST OF ANIMAL BONE MEASUREMENTS FROM WHITECROSS FARM <i>by Adrienne Powell and Kate M Clark</i>	239
APPENDIX 4: LATE BRONZE AGE POTTERY: PETROGRAPHIC ANALYSIS <i>by Chris Doherty</i>	242
BIBLIOGRAPHY	247
INDEX	257

Figures

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.1	Location of site	2
Figure 1.2	Geology and site locations along the Wallingford Bypass	3

CHAPTER 2

Figure 2.1	Trench location and eyot	10
Figure 2.2	Composite section through palaeochannel and the late Bronze Age eyot	13
Figure 2.3	Detailed section of main trench (XXIV) showing stratigraphy and column sample.	16–17
Figure 2.4	Trench XXIV plan with schematic section	18
Figure 2.5	Structures and deposits	20
Figure 2.6	Radiocarbon determinations from Bronze Age timber waterfront sites in the Thames Valley	22
Figure 2.7	Charred wood	27
Figure 2.8	Wood species	28
Figure 2.9	Worked and driftwood	29
Figure 2.10	Finds distributions: a–d: pottery, e: other finds, f–i: flint, j: fired clay	39–43

CHAPTER 3

Figure 3.1	Metalwork from Whitecross Farm and riverbank: pin, razor, tanged chisel, awl	50
Figure 3.2	Metalwork from riverbank and river dredging: socketed spearhead, sickle blade, sickle socket, stop-ridge flanged axe, basal-looped spearhead, socketed knife	53
Figure 3.3	Glass bead	57
Figures 3.4–6	Worked flint	68–70
Figure 3.7	Worked stone	72
Figures 3.8–17	Late Bronze Age pottery	83–93

CHAPTER 4

Figure 4.1	Distribution of species – %NISP	106
Figure 4.2	Relative proportions of cattle, sheep and pig – trench XXIV	107
Figure 4.3	Relative proportions of cattle, sheep and pig – all trenches	107
Figure 4.4	Sheep/goat mortality	108
Figure 4.5	Species groups of Coleoptera	130
Figure 4.6	Molluscan sample column and summary of results	131
Figures 4.7–11	Worked wood	145–9
Figure 4.12	Roundwood diameters	150
Figure 4.13	Tool marks	151

CHAPTER 5

Figure 5.1	Grim’s Ditch earthwork	158
Figure 5.2	Trench location plan	159
Figure 5.3	Plan and section of Mongewell 1988 trench 2	160
Figure 5.4	Pre-bank arding, tree clearance and settlement	164
Figure 5.5	Phase 1 pits and postholes: showing Structure A and suggesting possible structure within Cluster B	165
Figure 5.6	Structure A sections	166
Figure 5.7	Phase 2: areas of surviving pre-bank cultivation	168

Figures

Figure 5.8	Phase 4 post-bank ploughing	169
Figure 5.9a	Sections 1 and 2 through Grim's Ditch	173
Figure 5.9b	Sections 3 and 4 through Grim's Ditch	174
Figure 5.10	Grim's Ditch bank, ditch and immediate post-bank ploughing	175
Figure 5.11	Medieval and post-medieval features	177
Figure 5.12	Plan and sections of stone building	178
Figures 5.13–14	Worked flint	182–3
Figure 5.15	Neolithic Peterborough Ware	185

CHAPTER 6

Figure 6.1	Trench location plan	202
Figure 6.2	Trench plans (1 and 2)	204
Figure 6.3	Sections 1–3	205
Figure 6.4	Composite plan of area around trench 6	206
Figure 6.5	Composite plan of area around trench 4	208
Figure 6.6	Worked flint	210
Figure 6.7	Prehistoric pottery	212
Figure 6.8	Roman pottery	215
Figure 6.9	Cylindrical loomweight	216
Figure 6.10	Species groups of Coleoptera from Bradford's Brook	217

CHAPTER 7

Figure 7.1	Metalwork, settlement and funerary distributions: a: middle Bronze Age, b: late Bronze Age, c: ?late Bronze Age/early Iron Age	228–29
Figure 7.2	The development and sequence of pottery styles, metalwork and selected settlements in the Upper and Middle Thames Valley and the Lower Kennet Valley	231
Figure 7.3	a: Late Iron Age earthworks, b: Distribution of Cunobelin, Dobunnic, Durotrigan and Atrebatian coins	234

APPENDIX 1

Figure A1.1	Radiocarbon age determinations	238
-------------	--------------------------------	-----

Plates

CHAPTER 2

Plate 2.1	A general view, looking north, of the 1984 trenches and test pits dug to determine the extent of the occupation layer	11
Plate 2.2	Winterbrook Bridge from the air looking north towards Wallingford	14
Plate 2.3	The south-facing section of the early ditch 2413 in trench XXIV, showing overlying plough-disturbed late Bronze Age occupation layer	19
Plate 2.4	The palisade trench 2422 within trench XXIV, partially excavated with its profile sealed by the dark layer of the phase 5 midden clearly visible in the background	24
Plate 2.5	Trench XXIV, as excavated, looking east towards the modern river channel over the gravel eyot from the early palaeochannel	26
Plate 2.6	Detail of part of the wood deposit	30

CHAPTER 3

Plate 3.1	Metalwork recovered from the riverbank in 1949	51
Plate 3.2	The glass bead	57

CHAPTER 5

Plate 5.1	General view of site during excavation (1992)	161
Plate 5.2	Structure A	167
Plate 5.3	Phase 2 cultivation ridges	170
Plate 5.4	Phase 4 post-bank ploughing	171
Plate 5.5	East section of Area A showing post-bank ploughing	172
Plate 5.6	Grim's Ditch Area C	176
Plate 5.7	Medieval stone structure	179

APPENDIX 4

Plates A4.1–7	Thin-sections	242–5
---------------	-------------------------	-------

Tables

CHAPTER 2

Table 2.1	Piles forming possible Structure A	21
Table 2.2	Summary of the stratigraphic sequence in the main excavation trenches across the Whitecross Farm eyot	38

CHAPTER 3

Table 3.1	Copper-alloy metalwork from Wallingford	48
Table 3.2	Analysis of copper-alloy metalwork from Wallingford	49
Table 3.3	Summary of flint composition by trench	59
Table 3.4	Flint assemblage composition by phase	60
Table 3.5	Summary of use-damage	60
Table 3.6	Summary of use-damage by phase	61
Table 3.7	Retouched forms by phase	61
Table 3.8	1985–6 and 1991 assemblages: proportions of artefacts as a percentage of the total struck assemblage	63
Table 3.9	Comparison of flint from layers within trench XXIV	64
Table 3.10	Details of flint nodules from trench XXIV, layer 2405	65
Table 3.11	Indicators of activities from occupation layers compared across trenches	65
Table 3.12	A breakdown and quantification of fabrics by temper group	73
Table 3.13	Thin-section samples	75
Table 3.14	Rim forms by fabric	77
Table 3.15	A breakdown of rim forms by trench	78
Table 3.16	A breakdown of vessel forms by fabric	79
Table 3.17	A breakdown of vessel forms by trench	79
Table 3.18	Summary of all decorated sherds by context	81
Table 3.19	Summary of all fired clay	103

CHAPTER 4

Table 4.1	Number of identified specimens (NISP) from late Bronze Age features	105
Table 4.2	Incidence of gnawed, butchered and burnt bone in different areas (%)	106
Table 4.3	Minimum number of elements (MNE)	107
Table 4.4	Tooth eruption and wear age groups	108
Table 4.5	Epiphyseal fusion: a: Cattle, b: Sheep/goat, c: Pig	108
Table 4.6	Sample details	111
Table 4.7	Waterlogged seeds	113–6
Table 4.8	Other waterlogged plant remains (excluding wood)	117
Table 4.9	Waterlogged wood	117
Table 4.10	Charred plant remains (excluding charcoal)	118–9
Table 4.11	Charcoal	119
Table 4.12	Coleoptera	120–5
Table 4.13	Other insects	126
Table 4.14	Mollusca (column 4)	127–8
Table 4.15	Mollusca (other samples)	129
Table 4.16	Waterlogged seeds from sample 60	130
Table 4.17	Runnymede Bridge: catchment areas for different types of environmental data	132
Table 4.18	Non-aquatic host-specific Coleoptera	134
Table 4.19	Plants indicative of more permanent bankside environment	135

Table 4.20	Wood- and tree-dependent host-specific Coleoptera	136
Table 4.21	Summary of trees and shrubs represented by seeds or wood	136
Table 4.22	Seeds of potential grassland plants	137
Table 4.23	Phytophagous insects of perennial waste ground vegetation from column 1 and sample 21	138
Table 4.24	Pollen spectra in samples analysed	143–4

CHAPTER 5

Table 5.1	Grim's Ditch phasing	162
Table 5.2	Structure A: details of postholes	166
Table 5.3	Summary of flint assemblage	181
Table 5.4	Core typology	181
Table 5.5	Retouched forms	181
Table 5.6	Summary of flint from context groups 40, 47 and 50	181
Table 5.7	Quantification by context and fabric of the Peterborough Ware from the Mongewell 1988 evaluation trench	186
Table 5.8	Quantification by context and fabric (sherd number, weight) of the total prehistoric assemblage recovered from the Grim's Ditch earthwork	187
Table 5.9	Middle Iron Age fabric groups	188
Table 5.10	Ware groups for late Iron Age and Romano-British pottery	189
Table 5.11	Summary of medieval fabric types in MGD87	190
Table 5.12	Summary of medieval fabric types in MGD92	191
Table 5.13	Number of identified specimens (NISP) from Grim's Ditch	193
Table 5.14	Dog mandibular measurements from Grim's Ditch	193
Table 5.15	Charred plant remains: context 133, sample 18	194
Table 5.16	Terrestrial molluscs from the ditch	194
Table 5.17	Contexts sampled for soil micromorphological analysis	194
Table 5.18	Summary of profiles as seen in thin-section	195
Table 5.19	Summary of micromorphological descriptions	194–5

CHAPTER 6

Table 6.1	Detail of excavated postholes (contexts 28–34)	207
Table 6.2	Detail of other postholes	209
Table 6.3	Flint summary composition	210
Table 6.4	Prehistoric pottery: a breakdown of fabrics by context	211
Table 6.5	Late Iron Age and Roman wares from Bradford's Brook	213
Table 6.6	Roman pottery: correlation of vessel form and fabric	213
Table 6.7	Animal bone: number of identified specimens (NISP)	217
Table 6.8	Waterlogged seeds	218
Table 6.9	Other waterlogged plant remains	219
Table 6.10	Charred plant remains (excluding charcoal)	219
Table 6.11	Charcoal	219
Table 6.12	Coleoptera	220
Table 6.13	Other insects	221
Table 6.14	Mollusca	221

APPENDICES

Table A1.1	Radiocarbon age determinations	237
Table A2.1	Lead isotope analysis	239
Table A3.1	Animal bone measurements from Whitecross Farm	240–1

Summary

This report presents the results of a series of excavations along the proposed route of the Wallingford Bypass which are of particular interest for three aspects: excavation of a high-status late Bronze Age settlement on an island (eyot) in the Thames; confirmation of the existence of cord-rig cultivation in southern England; and dating of the south Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch, which places it within a major sequence of earthwork construction in the late Iron Age and early Roman period in the Upper Thames region.

The proposal to construct a bypass to the south and west of Wallingford prompted a series of archaeological investigations between 1985–92. Excavations were carried out where the route crossed part of Mongewell Grim's Ditch, as well as at the known Bronze Age riverside site near Whitecross Farm and a new site at Bradford's Brook further west that was revealed by fieldwalking.

The site at Whitecross Farm was located on a former eyot in the river, with a broad palaeochannel to the west. Initial evaluation of the site enabled the bypass bridge to be designed to minimise its impact on the surviving archaeology. Thus only areas that would be directly affected by the bridge construction were fully excavated. The results of these and earlier limited excavations are presented, together with metalwork recovered from the river nearby. Bringing all this evidence together has allowed the site to be more fully characterised than previously.

The site, including timber structures located on the edge of the eyot, and a substantial midden and occupation deposit, has been securely radiocarbon-dated to the late Bronze Age. The late Bronze Age artefact assemblages are suggestive of a high-status site, with a range of domestic and ritual activities represented.

The bank of the Grim's Ditch earthwork was found to have preserved evidence of earlier settlement, dating to the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and a sequence of cultivation, including ard marks and 'cord-rig' cultivation ridges. Pottery and radiocarbon analysis dated the earthwork to the end of the late Iron Age or the early Roman period.

A multi-period settlement, consisting of pits, a waterhole, postholes, gullies and field systems, was identified at Bradford's Brook, Cholsey. The main periods represented are late Bronze Age and Romano-British, while a small quantity of Saxon pottery indicates limited Saxon activity. A large pit containing late Bronze Age pottery, a cattle skull, waterlogged wood and plant remains, a complete loomweight and flint flakes has been interpreted as a waterhole. A series of radiocarbon dates were obtained for deposits within this feature.

All three sites are discussed individually as well as within their local, regional and national contexts. Chapter 7 provides an overall discussion of later Bronze Age themes that have arisen through the excavation and analysis of these sites.

Résumé

Ce rapport présente les résultats d'une série de fouilles réalisées le long du tracé de la bretelle de contournement de Wallingford, dont l'intérêt particulier repose sur trois aspects. Le premier est la fouille d'un site d'habitation de statut élevé de la fin de l'âge du Bronze sur une île de la Tamise. Le deuxième est la confirmation de l'existence de culture cord-rig dans le sud de l'Angleterre. Finalement le dernier aspect est la datation du fossé de Grim's Ditch, au sud de l'Oxfordshire, qui le situe dans une séquence majeure de construction d'ouvrages de terre à la fin de l'âge du Fer et au début de l'époque romaine dans la région de la haute Tamise.

Le projet de construction d'une bretelle de contournement au sud et à l'ouest de Wallingford entraîna une série d'investigations archéologiques entre 1985 et 1992. Les fouilles furent entreprises au carrefour entre le tracé de la route et d'une partie de Mongewell Grim's Ditch, mais aussi au site bien

connu de l'âge du Bronze situé au bord de la rivière près de Whitecross Farm et au nouveau site découvert par prospection un peu plus à l'ouest, à Bradford's Brook.

Le site de Whitecross Farm était situé sur un ancien îlot de la rivière, avec l'ancien lit comblé d'un large cours d'eau à l'ouest. L'évaluation initiale du site permit au pont de déviation d'être conçu en vue de minimiser son impact sur l'archéologie subsistante. Par conséquent, uniquement les zones directement affectées par la construction du pont furent fouillées entièrement. Les résultats de ces dernières et des précédentes fouilles restreintes sont exposés conjointement avec les découvertes de mobilier métallique provenant de la rivière voisine. Rassembler toutes ces preuves ensemble a permis de caractériser le site de manière plus complète que précédemment. Le site, y compris les structures sur poutres situées à la limite de l'île, une quantité importante de déchets

domestiques et un dépôt d'occupation, a été daté avec certitude à la fin de l'âge du Bronze par radiocarbone. L'ensemble d'artefacts de la fin de l'âge du Bronze suggère un site de statut élevé, avec un éventail varié d'activités domestiques et rituelles représentées.

Le talus de l'ouvrage de terre de Grim's Ditch s'avéra avoir préservé des indices de site d'occupation de date antérieure, du Néolithique et de l'âge du Bronze, et une succession de cultures, y compris des marques d'anciens sillons et des billons de cultures à cord-rig. L'étude céramique et l'analyse radiocarbone ont daté l'ouvrage de terre à la fin de l'âge du Fer ou au début de l'époque romaine.

Un site d'occupation s'étendant sur plusieurs époques, composé de fosses, de points d'eau, de trous de poteaux, de petits fossés et de systèmes

agraires, a été identifié à Bradford's Brook, Cholsey. Les principales époques représentées sont la fin de l'âge du Bronze et la période romaine, tandis qu'une petite quantité de poterie saxonne indique une activité saxonne limitée. Une large fosse, interprétée comme étant un point d'eau, contenait de la poterie de la fin de l'âge du Bronze, un crâne de bovin, du bois et des restes botaniques imprégnés d'eau, un poids à tisser entier et des éclats de silex. Une série de datation au radiocarbone a été obtenue pour certains des dépôts contenus dans ce fait archéologique.

Les trois sites sont examinés individuellement aussi bien dans leur contexte local et régional que national. Le chapitre 7 fournit une discussion générale des thèmes de la fin de l'âge du Bronze qui ont émergé à l'issue de la fouille et de l'analyse de ces sites.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Bericht enthält die Ergebnisse einer Serie von Ausgrabungen entlang des vorgesehenen Verlaufs der Umgehungsstraße von Wallingford. Die Grabungen sind besonders in Bezug auf drei Aspekte von besonderem Interesse: der Ausgrabung einer hochrangigen spätbronzezeitlichen Siedlung auf einer kleinen Themseinsel, dem Existenzbeleg besonderer Ackerbaustrukturen ("cord-rig") in Südengland und der Datierung des Grim's Ditch in Süd-Oxfordshire, wodurch die Anlage mit dem Bau mehrerer Erdwerke in eine Reihe gestellt wurde, die in der späten Eisen- und frühen Römerzeit im oberen Themsegebiet entstanden.

Der Plan zum Bau einer Umgehungsstraße südlich und westlich von Wallingford führte zwischen 1985 und 1992 zu einer Reihe archäologischer Untersuchungen. Dort, wo die Route einen Teil des Mongewell Grim's Ditch überquert, wurden ebenso Ausgrabungen vorgenommen wie an einer bereits bekannten bronzezeitlichen Stätte am Fluss nahe der Whitecross Farm und an einer neu identifizierten Stätte weiter westlich am Bradford's Brook, die bei einer Feldbegehung auffiel.

Die Stätte an der Whitecross Farm lag auf einer kleinen früheren Flussinsel mit einem breiten Paläokanal im Westen. Nach einer ersten Evaluation der Stätte konnte beim Entwurf der neuen Straßenbrücke deren Einfluss auf die vorhandenen archäologischen Reste minimiert werden. Aus diesem Grund wurden nur die vom Brückenbau direkt betroffenen Bereiche komplett ausgegraben. Neben den Resultaten dieser und früherer, eingeschränkter Ausgrabungen werden auch die Metallgegenstände, die aus dem nahe gelegenen Fluss geborgen wurden, präsentiert. Durch die Zusammenfügung all dieser Funde war es möglich, die Stätte weit genauer zu beschreiben

als zuvor. Mithilfe von Radiokarbonuntersuchungen, darunter von Holzstrukturen am Rand der Insel und von umfangreichen Abfall- und Siedlungsablagerungen, konnte die Stätte eindeutig auf die späte Bronzezeit datiert werden. Das Artefaktinventar aus der späten Bronzezeit weist auf eine hochrangige Stätte hin, für die ein breites Spektrum häuslicher und ritueller Tätigkeiten nachgewiesen wurde.

Der Wall der Grim's-Ditch-Erdanlage enthielt Belege einer früheren Besiedlung aus der Jungsteinzeit und Bronzezeit sowie eine Abfolge von Anbauspuren, darunter Merkmale von Furchstöcken und besonderer Wölbäcker ("cord-rig"). Mithilfe von Töpferware und Radiokarbonanalysen konnte das Erdwerk auf die späte Eisen- oder frühe Römerzeit datiert werden.

Am Bradford's Brook, Cholsey, wurde eine mehrere Perioden umfassende Siedlung identifiziert, die Gruben, ein Wasserloch, Pfostenlöcher, Abzugskanäle und Flursysteme aufwies. Die wichtigsten vertretenen Perioden sind die späte Bronze- und die Römerzeit, dazu weist eine geringe Menge angelsächsischer Töpferware auch auf begrenzte Aktivitäten in jener Zeit hin. Eine große Grube mit spätbronzezeitlicher Töpferware, einem Rinderschädel, vernässten Holz- und Pflanzenresten, einem kompletten Webgewicht und Feuersteinabschlägen wurde als Wasserloch interpretiert. An mehreren Gegenständen aus der Grube wurden Radiokarbonmessungen durchgeführt.

Alle drei Stätten werden einzeln sowie in ihrem lokalen, regionalen und nationalen Kontext diskutiert. Kapitel 7 liefert eine Gesamterörterung der durch die Ausgrabung angestoßenen spätbronzezeitlichen Thematik und eine Analyse der dazugehörigen

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