

Prehistoric Archaeology The Dead of Tormarton

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The Dead of Tormarton

Bronze Age
Combat Victims?



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As bronze may be much beautified

By lying in the dark damp soil,

*So men who fade in dust of warfare fade
Fairer, and sorrow blooms their soul.*

Wilfred Owen

In 1968 a gas pipeline was cut into the Jurassic Limestone in West Littleton Down, Tormarton, South Gloucestershire. What was uncovered remains one of the most intriguing Bronze Age discoveries in the British Isles

Local farmer Dick Knight had been following the progress of the pipeline with his family, keeping a careful lookout for archaeological finds. His watchfulness was rewarded by the finding of a number of human remains in the disturbed soil east of Wallsend Lane (ST 76737667).

Initially thought to be the bones of two individuals dumped without ceremony into a ditch or pit, later palaeopathological work revealed that at least three individuals, all young males, were represented. The remains were studied and then placed at Bristol City Museum where they are now on display.

What made this archaeological discovery so significant was the presence of dramatic weapons injuries suffered by the unfortunate

victims. The oldest individual had twice been speared from behind - a lozenge shaped hole perforated one side of the pelvis, and an even more vicious wound was visible on the other side of this pelvis. Here the spear had been stabbed in and twisted so that it broke off remaining within the bone.

Another of the men had suffered wounds that are shocking to anyone who sees them. He had been speared, again from behind, with force great enough to pierce the lumbar vertebrae and sever the spinal cord - an act that would immediately have rendered him paralysed. As with the other victim, this spear also broke off. A circular perforation in his skull was inflicted at the same time or soon after - perhaps representing the



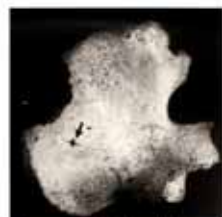
Spear through spinal cord

"coup-de-grace" of the encounter.

This latter spear seemed to be of a type found in the Middle Bronze Age (and of an alloy of metals that had perhaps originated in Austria or Switzerland) - with ps on the side of the spearhead that would have been used to haft it to the spear shaft. To back up this theory, a sample of bone from the leg of the person that had suffered the spine and head wound was sent for radiocarbon analysis, a date of 3158 ± 37 bp (around c.1400BC) was obtained. This fits well with a date of the Middle

Bronze Age in the British Isles. A brief report on the finds was made in the Transactions of the Bristol & Gloucester Archaeological Society (1972).

This report mentioned that not all of the skeletal material had been recovered (Knight et al op cit.,14) and thus small-scale excavations were undertaken by Oxford University and the BBC from 1998 - 2000 to establish whether further remains were indeed present, and exactly what the circumstances of their deposition were.



Spear perforation in the pelvis of adult male



Skull embedded in pelvic

Initial Investigation

Preliminary work took place in 1998 with the permission of the farmer, Mr George Gent. Field-walking in the region only revealed a couple of flint flakes and quite a large quantity of clay pigeon was present. Other studies were thus undertaken - this included both a magnetometer and also a resistivity survey. The resistivity survey results were confused and revealed little whilst the magnetometer survey simply showed the line of the gas pipe. The signal

from this pipeline was so strong that no other archaeological features were discernible. Some distance from the line of the gas pipe, further magnetometer work by Strathscan revealed the presence of a large linear feature, ending, more or less, by the gas pipe itself.

Aerial photographs of the field in which the site is present clearly show the line of the gas pipe, whilst a series of prehistoric field systems are located in the vicinity along with several features possibly representing trackways.

The Excavations

A week of excavation with a small team took place in August 1999, and a further week in 2000. Under the supervision of representatives of Transco (the firm responsible for gas pipelines in the UK), grid squares were mechanically stripped of topsoil by JCB to reveal the line of the



Puncture wound through skull - perhaps the killing wound



The Ditch

pipe. Extensions were made in either direction (E and W) along the pipe to reveal any archaeological features. The initial clearing revealed the top of the linear feature present in the magnetometer survey, running, roughly, N-S. Further cuttings across this feature were made in 2000.

The Ditch

The only archaeological feature in all of the trenches of 1999-2000, proved to be a large V-shaped ditch. This was truncated by the gas pipeline and lay exactly on the grid reference of the previous discoveries. Quite steep-sided and c.1.4m deep, this feature had, in part, been deliberately filled with limestone slabs. The cuttings were all of similar fill cycles either side of the pipeline. Three cuttings to the south of the ditch had no archaeological artefacts and were fully

excavated by hand to define the profile and fill of the ditch.

The cutting immediately to the north of the pipeline (Cutting 2) was machine excavated to the level of the limestone rubble (Layer 6) and then the ditch was excavated by hand. The next layer (Layer 7) contained large quantities of human bone, much of which was in a fairly poor condition; not as well preserved as the bone recovered in 1968.

Excavation proved difficult as the sticky soil matrix adhered to the bone making successful cleaning tricky. Fragments of human skull were present alongside vertebrae, jaws and limb-bones.

A trench across the northern terminal of the ditch, several metres from the finds of bone in 1968 and 1999, was cut in 2000. The terminal was cut through solid bedrock but contained no material whatsoever - perhaps

unsurprising if there were no settlements nearby. All of the human bone from the excavations was added to the material found in 1968 and sent to a palaeopathologist for analysis. Dr Joy Langston of Newcastle University concluded that there were now at least four and

probably five individuals in the ditch. The identifiable remains were all male and their ages ranged from around 11 years of age to the late 30s. As we have seen, two of the males display savage wounds and it seems likely that the others in the ditch also suffered a similar fate though their end left no visible trace on their skeleton. The adult with the spear in his spine was around mid 20s in age, and was the tallest in the group at 178 cm (5ft 11"). Many of the bones showed traces of "Schmorl's Nodes", indicating that these males had had a physical lifestyle - perhaps farming.

The Environment

Snails are very particular about their habitat, as a result of this the specialist can often determine the environment of an archaeological site at a particular time. Several samples were taken in the 1999 and 2000 excavation seasons



Skeleton of the male with the most visible wounds



acyclobus cellarius - a carnivorous snail

for the recovery of molluscs and these were processed by hand at the University Museum, Oxford. By analysing the molluscs, Dr Mark Robinson has discovered that the bodies at Tormarton were thrown into the ditch which was cut through recently cleared woodland. The ditch had not been left open for very long when it was filled in. Substantial numbers of carnivorous molluscs also present - these had fed on the brains of the human victims that lay in the ditch, a phenomenon often occurring in bodies held in the chamber tombs of the Neolithic.

The British Middle Bronze Age was a time of much change in terms of agricultural practice. Spelt wheat was increasingly grown, in some regions replacing emmer wheat as the staple crop. Field systems too are increasingly common in the agricultural record, most famously with the "reaves" system on Dartmoor, and

those present on the aerial photographs of Tormarton may reflect this. Indeed, many such prehistoric field systems are located in close proximity to lengths of linear ditch - perhaps the latter demarcated territories which enclosed parcels of land. Thus it might appear strange that no plant remains were found in any of the samples taken from the excavation, but this may be explainable if the ditch was a) only open for a short period of time or b) there was in fact no major agriculture close to the ditch. After all, the molluscs reflect a mainly woodland fauna.



Tormarton Skull

Significance of the site

The finds made in 1968 and the excavations of 1999 and 2000 established a number of important facts about the site of Tormarton:

- At least 4 and probably 5 human individuals were killed and cast into a large V-shaped linear ditch.
- The bodies were thrown in without ceremony
- The burials were covered in a single phase by casting in large limestone slabs - perhaps slighting defences in the process.
- The ditch had been cut in a landscape of recently cleared woodland.
- The condition of the bones in the ditch had deteriorated significantly in the last 30 years.

As concluded in the report of 1972, the bodies were buried without ceremony. Dumped into a linear ditch, they were then covered with large limestone slabs which were, on excavation, seen to be surrounded by

voids. These slabs perhaps represent the upcast material excavated initially to create the ditch, and used subsequently as an internal bank. One possibility is that the ditch is part of a demarcated tract of land, an element of the later Bronze Age divisions of landscape, which was attacked. If the covering material over the bodies was part of a bank inside the ditch, then this might indicate that the victims were those that dug the ditch and laid claims to the land. As the feature was slighted in covering the bodies, this would be an act one probably wouldn't have undertaken if one had invested large amounts of effort and energy in digging it. One might also be witnessing a deliberate attempt to deprive the victims of an afterlife - their method of burial differing conspicuously from the norm and, as has been remarked, hardly smacking of the actions of grieving relatives!



The Middle Bronze Age spearhead found in the vertebrae of one of the bodies

A further possibility is that the ditch is part of a ritual complex and the bodies represent victims of some type of votive practice, perhaps in the same style as the many bodies at Velim in Bohemia. Prehistoric linear ditches are often known to have special deposits close to or in their terminals so this might fit. However, there is a clear lack of ceremony in the manner of the deposition of the bodies and there are no accompanying deposits, unless one counts the embedded spears themselves.

The bodies have been speared from behind whether on the ground or not. They may have been humiliated as part of their death as shown by the spearing of the buttocks of the oldest male. Whatever is the case, it is clear that they were killed in a savage encounter leading one to feel that there is at least some validity to Thomas

Hobbes' claim that early life was "nasty, brutish and short". Some of the skeletal material appeared to be more disarticulated than others. Were some of the body parts exposed by the ditch as a warning to others - in much the same way that the heads of traitors were displayed in the Medieval period? Were parts scattered around by scavengers prior to the ditch being filled? These are questions that must remain unanswered at this point in time.



BBC television crew filming work at Tormarton for "Meet the Ancestors"

Site Parallels

Within the Middle and Late Bronze Age of the British Isles skeletons are rare, individuals with weapons injuries rarer still. Only one other later Bronze Age skeleton with wounds exists in Britain, from Dorchester on Thames in Oxfordshire. This pelvis of this body had been pierced by, and retained, a triangular-bladed basal-looped spearhead, an accelerator date was obtained for this body from the Oxford University AMS laboratory. The date was 2900 ± 40bp (1260 - 990 BC) - firmly in the Late Bronze Age of the British Isles.

There are examples of other bodies of Middle Bronze Age date that show evidence for combat trauma on the mainland of Europe. Perhaps most dramatic is the mass grave at Wassenaar in the Netherlands. Here some of the twelve bodies were seen to have suffered blade

wounds and projectile injuries. However, as of yet, the Tormarton victims remain the only tangible example of British Middle Bronze Age violence - perhaps an example of a skirmish. We will, of course never know exactly how many people were involved in the encounter but can postulate that the bodies represent a failed attempt to make a territorial claim by the digging of a large boundary ditch. This claim was refuted in the most final of manners; with the killing of those that had made it.

Further Reading

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Acknowledgements

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All excavation was undertaken with Julian Richards, Bill Locke and a BBC crew as part of a possible TV series; their exertions were also much appreciated. The British

Academy provided a grant essential to the funding of the post excavation side of the project.

Gail Boyle and Bristol Museum must be thanked for their assistance with the project.

Dick Knight, Charles Browne and their families made the initial discoveries and report and also helped with the excavations of 2000, without their efforts we would have lost a most important piece of the understanding of life in the Bronze Age.

Richard Osgood

Photographs by Ian Cartwright except 'molluscs' and 'ditch' by Richard Osgood